

Submitted to: Professor Jagoe

Submitted by: Ava Torres

Class: COL5072

Date: Thursday, April 16th, 2014

Flirting with Disaster: Our Love Affair with the Zombie Genre

The fear of impending doom, the disintegration of society, and the rise of a dangerous force has haunted society since the biblical times. The cause of these apocalyptic visions has manifested in various ways: through the failure of technology, an environmental disaster, invasions from alien life forms, pandemics and contagions, and even nuclear wars. However, one of the causes of the apocalypse that has grown in popularity in recent years is the rise of the zombie infection. Since 2001, there has been an exponential production of zombie films, books, video games and even a television series. Such a spike in popularity has captured the attention of sociologists, film and literature academics alike.

It is known that the apocalyptic genre translate our fears into the fictional world; yet, what is particularly interesting is not only how this genre translates our fears onscreen, but also the peculiar oscillation between seduction and fear that this genre insights in its audience. Furthermore, and equally as important, Lois Parkinson Zamora notes that:

“The term apocalypse has come to be commonly used “as a synonym for ‘disaster’ or cataclysm,” discarding the fact that “the myth comprehends both cataclysm and millennium, tribulation and triumph, chaos and order...” The word itself is derived from the Greek apokalyptein meaning “to uncover” or “to reveal,”
(4)

Thus, taking into consideration the meaning of the term “apocalypse” brings forth a larger question: What does the zombie apocalypse *reveal* in terms of the genre itself, and the relation the audience has with it? This is an important question to address considering that Global Warming, for example, is a major concern in the 21st century, yet the amount of environmental disaster films pale in comparison to the amount produced in the zombie genre. Therefore, the perfect case study for the 21st century zombie revival is the popular AMC zombie television series, *The Walking Dead*. The television series, which is loosely based on Robert Kirkman’s comic book series of the same name, is the marker of the height of the popularity in long filmic tradition, but also one that is inspired by the Godfather of the dead, George A. Romero’s zombies.

In order to understand the zombie genre, and the audiences’ relationship with it, is pertinent to outline the origin of the genre, and its evolution to its current state. The original zombie is quite different from the zombies we are familiar with today. Zombies entered American popular culture due to the military occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934 (Todd K Platts 549). The origin of the zombie, or “spirit of the dead”, comes from the Haitian Voodoo culture. Voodoo priests believed that through black magic they could resurrect the deceased and it was commonly practiced with family members who were difficult. Once awakened, the person has no recollection of their previous lives, and is transformed into mindless slave of the Bokor, or priest. This particular practice captured the attention of Americans, and as a result a series of sensationalist travelogues were produced during the military occupation in Haiti (Platts, 549). By 1932, the sensationalized voodoo folklore seeped into popular culture with the first feature-length motion picture *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin). *White Zombie*, just like the travelogues

that were published, adopted the concept of the zombie and shaped it to its convenience. As Kyle Bishop explains, the zombie genre of the 1930s revealed that: “The true horror in these movies lies in the prospect of a westerner becoming dominated, subjugated, and effectively “colonized” by a native pagan” (Kyle Bishop 142). The 1930s and 1940s produced an array of zombie film including, but it wasn’t until the 1960s when the zombie would shift into the zombies that we are familiar with today, leaving its voodoo past behind.

George A. Romero, the “Godfather of the Dead”, transformed the zombie genre with his first film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Now, the genre broke from its voodoo origin, and oriented itself towards a lethal zombie, one that was a re-animated, contagious, and cannibalistic being. Romero’s “Dead Series”, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), all parallel social concerns of their respective decades. *Night of the Living Dead* confronts Cold War politics, and the disillusionment with the government; *Dawn of the Dead* brings forth the critique of consumerism, which was beginning to grow in the United States around this time period; *Day of the Dead*, Romero describes his film as a "tragedy about how a lack of human communication causes chaos and collapse even in this small little pie slice of society" (Romero philosophynow.org).

Despite Romero’s tremendous influence on the genre, it waned in popularity in the film industry and among the audience by the 1980s and 1990s, and the zombie genre was relegated to video games, and comic books (Platts 534). Kyle William Bishop speculates that this could be stemmed from the age of complacency due to seeming stability at the time. The Cold War ended, the Berlin Wall had fallen, and George W.

Bush Gulf War appeared to be resolved (15). Yet, what appeared to be a stable period would soon be over and awaken the zombie back from the dead in the 21st century.

By the early 2000s the resurgence was unexpected, and many have coined the term “zombie renaissance” to mark this revival period. According to David Oakes’ *Zombie Movie Data-Base* website reveals a swell in zombie cinema over the past ten years with 41 titles just in 2008 alone (zmd.org). According the Murali Balaji, the late 1990s video-gaming industry generated more than \$1 billion with zombie themed video games, thus affirming its commercial viability in the film industry (231); this is particularly true, according to Balaji, with the release of the game-turned-movie *Resident Evil* (231) —however, this is a rather shallow investigation due to the disregard to the *sociological cause* for its popularity and marketability altogether, and placing emphasis on solely the *economical cause* when they work hand in hand. Moreover, the film industry considers video game adaptations—despite the commercial success of the game itself—a gamble. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West 2001), *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* are video games that were adapted and experienced financial success, yet they are rare exceptions. For the most part they end up making a marginal profit or lose money at the box office such as the films *Final Fantasy: Spirits Within* (2001), *House of the Dead* (Uwe Boll 2003), *Max Payne* (John Moore 2008), *Street Fighter: The Legend of Chun-Li* (Andrzej Bartkowiak 2009), *Silent Hill: Revelation 3D* (Michael J. Bassett 2012), ----just to name a few (“Video Game Adaptations” Box Office Mojo).

In contrast to Balaji, many academics and in particular, Peter Dendel, attribute the revival of the genre to the fear instilled by the attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11th (7-8). This, however, is a broad generalization as Todd K. Platts notes

some films that were released post September 11th, such as *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle 2002), and *Resident Evil* (W.S Anderson 2002) were in production before the events of 9/11 transpired (553). Furthermore, *28 Days Later* is considered one of the very first films in the 21st century that revived the genre, and some of its inspiration stemmed from the “killing fields” in Cambodia during and after the reign of Pol Pot, and a devastating earthquake that occurred in China (Kyle William Bishop 26). Hence, it may be tempting to attribute the high production of zombie films to post-9/11 as a response to such an event, yet this is an oversimplification of a much larger picture.

The United States has witnessed an array of events in the 21st century that would make anyone question the stability of society: the economic crisis of 2008, high unemployment rates, the rising concern of the cost of health care and education, escalating mass shootings, global warming, natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq, widespread viruses such as SARS, avian influenza and H1N1 flu ---all of which resonate strongly and contribute to a collective unease. Even Bishop in his text, *American Gothic Zombie*, proclaims the attacks of 9/11 spurred the zombie genre, but pages later contradicts himself by citing multiple factors other than the attack on the World Trade Centre, including viruses, natural disasters and terror acts to the surging fear (26). Peter Dendel, as mentioned beforehand, cites the attacks of 9/11 to be a large influence on the zombie genre----yet he as well underscores in an interview how it is difficult to discern what is truly the root of our renewed interest:

“Sorting out whether the movies really are doing something different in the post-9/11 world, or whether it’s simply that audiences can’t help but see them differently now.” (30)

As Dendel explains, targeting the root cause for the revival of the genre or even

interpreting the 21st century zombie genre is complex due to the inability to remove oneself from our current historical perspective; consequently, this further reveals the complicated nature of the renewed interest in the zombie apocalypse.

Nevertheless, these postulations do bring up a very valid point: one element that is undeniably consistent despite the gradual evolution of the zombie genre, is whether it is the voodoo zombie, the Romero zombie, or even the 21st century renaissance zombie--- they are a vessel for the insecurities or anxieties of their corresponding time period. As Vivian Sobchack notes:

“The horror film, is primarily concerned with the individual in conflict with society or with some extension of himself, the film with society and its institutions in conflict with each other or with some alien other” (30)

If the horror film functions as an extension of oneself against society then it still does not address why the zombie genre is utilized as a form of expressing those fears. Even though the zombie is an appropriation of Haitian folklore, the zombie is uniquely an “American” creature. Unlike vampires, ghosts, werewolves and golems all of which are from European folklore, for example, the zombie is the only monster to originate in the New World (Platts 552). Additionally, the zombie genre is not only a marker of an exclusively New World monster, but also a modern monster, one that does not have a literary tradition, but a cinematic tradition (Platts 552). Therefore, it would only seem appropriate that the zombie is the monster of modern fear, and one that has such appeal to Hollywood considering its origin.

Also, in contrast to other monsters, the zombie is a collective creature that infects and multiplies; the fear is in the numbers and not in the individual. Nevertheless, the dichotomous nature of the creature and the genre is also the appeal:

“The zombie is both local and global, personal *and* depersonalized, symptom of moral chaos *and* cause of widespread social breakdown, gross- out consumer of flesh *and* spectacular destroyer of our intricately constructed social and technological fortifications” (Canavan 441)

The current trend is difficult to discern, and the multi-faceted nature of the monster allows the viewer to engage with the zombie on various levels. Whether it is a zombie from the past or present, the zombies’ ambivalent representation allows the viewer to shape it according to their own interpretations. That being said, the true mark of the escalating popularity of the zombie is not in the astronomical amount of movies, but rather the christening of the zombie television series, *The Walking Dead* (2010-), into basic cable television, baptizing the genre as a marketable and highly accessible.

The Walking Dead is a post-apocalyptic zombie television series that premiered on October 31st 2010 on the basic cable channel AMC Network. The show was an instant success and will be entering into its 5th season in 2014. *The Walking Dead* is a breakthrough in many spectrums: it is the most watched drama series on basic television, having a viewership of 16.1 million in the fourth season (Sara Bibel), but above all it is noteworthy that the least expected genre on cable television has the highest viewership when reality television, comedy, drama and science fiction shows dominate cable television. The zombie television series has been largely “de-horrorred” as Canavan would say (434), but it still keeps elements of the genre that George A. Romero set back in the 1960s---one of which is the sociological aspect.

The Walking Dead tells us the story of Rick Grimes, a Sheriff deputy before the zombie outbreak, awakes from a coma to discover the world he once knew to be destroyed. The series take place at first in Atlanta, and later on in the countryside of Northern Georgia where a small group led by Rick Grimes struggle to survive in a new

world, trying to hold on to what once was the norms of society, and adapting to a new world order. Throughout the series the group grows, shrinks, splits up, and migrate from one society to another.

According to Kyle Bishop, the difference between 21st century zombie and the “Romero-zombies” is that most twenty-first-century zombies are faster, more deadly, and symbolically more transparent” (24) ---*The Walking Dead* proves quiet the contrary to Kyle Bishop’s supposition. The television series, just like Romero’s zombie films focus on the question of human nature, the structure of society and political criticism. In the vein of the “Romero zombie” the creator of the comic, and executive producer of the series, Robert Kirkman, states in his first installment of *The Walking Dead* comic book series:

“To me the best zombie movies aren’t the splatter feasts of gore and violence with goofy characters and tongue in cheek antics. Good zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society...and our society’s station in the world.” (Days Gone By i)

Just like the comic, the television series draws focus on the conflict of new social order amidst chaos, and the internal conflict of the individual against the upheaval of the status quo. We observe what occurs when government, law enforcement, money, is removed from the equation what is left of humans. Canavan highlights that “the fear of “moral chaos” of the early outbreak will necessarily give way to “interest” in the way society changes in the wake of the zombie disaster” (435). The main character, Rick Grimes, is a former police officer that functions as a symbolic representation of the old social order and moral standards before the apocalypse. Since the first season up until the most recent he and his group encounter friction against contrasting ideologies: science versus religion, rural versus urban, democracy versus dictatorship. However, as they delve into

each society they undergo a perpetual cycle of conceptualizing the pillars of the new society, but as soon as they are comfortable they discover that each society is flawed and finite. For example, in the first two seasons discover that both urban and rural environments are dangerous to inhabit; they also seek science as a solution and encounter that neither science nor religion can salvage them from their despair.

By the 3rd season the group seeks refuge, ironically, in a prison from the dangers of outside. However, the seemingly peaceful Woodbury soon endangers their “utopia”. Here, we encounter a juxtaposition of ideologies: on the one side the place least expected to be Utopic, the prison, practices democracy yet they struggle each day to find resources to live on; on the other side, Woodbury is a piece of the past, a traditional old American town run by a dictatorship. It is soon discovered that the few who control the town rape, pillage, torture the “outsiders” while manipulating their own kind to become dependent on their society.



Figure 1 &2: Would you rather risk your freedom to be safe in Woodbury (left) or risk your safety in the new world to be free (right)?

This grim circumstance in Woodbury harkens back to the very point that our notions of our former society can no longer function in this new world. Furthermore, the enigma that we fear is not the problem, human nature and what we are capable of doing is what is to be feared. In most zombie films, the human protagonists eventually establish unequal

hierarchies and begin to argue, with and even turn against one another (Bishop 24) and in some cases they discover the dark side of ideal power structures ie: the police, the military, science etc. As Dillard points out, “The living people are dangerous to each other, both because they are potentially living dead should they die and because they are human with all of the ordinary human failings” (37). Therefore, the tagline of the television series could not underline any better the theme of the show: “Fight the dead. Fear the living.”

The Walking Dead engages in a utopian envisioning of the future, a future where significant sociopolitical change is not only possible, but necessary for survival; it is a never-ending utopian cycle of “Try again. Fail again. Fail Better” as Samuel Beckett once wrote in *Worstward Ho* (1983). By the 4th season, for example, Rick’s group is off again being forced of their temporary Utopia and back into the New World, the zombie world. David Pagano, writer of “The Space of Apocalypse in Zombie Cinema” argues that the apocalyptic visions of zombie cinema are a reflection of the disillusionment we feel as subjects of (post) modernity. The scientist in season one, for example, reflects on societies lack of interest in sciences and renewable resources, finite energy sources hindering him from continuing his research for the cure to the zombie infection----all of which is very reminiscent of the current climate problems due to the lack of renewable resources.

Furthermore, not only do these finite societies within *The Walking Dead* perpetuate an infinite cycle of renewal, but also the very existence of the zombies underlines the notion of past, present and future. The zombie serves as a constant reminder of what the world was, what it has come to be--- and what you could turn into.

Thus, our fear is rooted at a personal level. We cannot conceive a solution yet we are also the problem at hand; the problem is then, just as Rick reveals and the end of the second season, “We are the walking dead”. Consequently, the lines between “good” and “bad”, infected and non-infected are blurred. The world now is confronted with questions without an authority to answer it for us: when is it alright to torture? Is it ever alright? Is killing acceptable? What is human nature? As Morgan declares in season 3, “the weak inherit the earth” (“Clear”). The zombie apocalypse allows the characters to reflect and make hard choices, “reminding us that the perfect moral community is difficult to achieve both externally and internally; the whole direction of the series” is to show that “to “start living” is to be forced to think” (Christopher Moreman, and Cory Rushton 5). Thus the series is demonstrating the transition of the characters from being “the walking dead” into the “alive again”.

Some have criticized the television series, and even George A. Romero laments the direction of the series stating that:

“Basically it’s just a soap opera with a zombie occasionally. I always used the zombie as a character for satire or a political criticism and I find that missing in what’s happening now.” (Romer zombieresearchsociety.com)

Yet that is the point exactly, the television series, just like his *own* zombie films draw back to commenting on the true nature of humans and the politics. Perhaps the zombies are not the central figure of the show in a literal sense, yet the people themselves are “the walking dead”; it is a commentary on the internal dissatisfaction that one has with the current state whether it is in social, political or economic terms which is why the television series resonates highly with the audience.

Just as the content within *The Walking Dead* is revelatory in terms of what society is in their perspective, the infatuation that the audience has with this genre is equally as revealing. *The Walking Dead* in only its 4 years on cable has spurred a television series for fans called the *The Talking Dead* (2011), two video games, and even a spin-off series rumoured to be aired in 2015 (Ryan Reed Rolling Stone Magazine). Audiences have undoubtedly been tremendously receptive and fostered a relationship with the show; however, what is truly intriguing is the engagement the audiences have with a show that shows the demise of our society and the gratification of violence. The show provides a form of both escapism and catharsis by recoding their anxieties into something tangible.

With the backdrop of high unemployment rates, cost of education and health care, the in the capitalist world the zombie apocalypse television series allows audiences to live vicariously through the series and experience as Dale from the series argues, “a great opportunity for a fresh start” (TS-19). Dale Knickerbocker, writer of “Apocalypse, Utopia and Distopia: Old Paradigms Meet a New Millenium”, contends that “the recoding by Kirkman of our very own very real human problems itself implies a utopian desire to overcome them” (352). The zombie apocalypse, then, is two-fold experience: hope a self-destruct button allows a rebirth, and the opportunity to reset a poorly structured society---- or even reset oneself. For example, in *The Walking Dead*, Glenn is no longer the nerdy pizza delivery boy and can get the “hot” girl from high school; Carol is not the abused house-wife of the pre-apocalypse rather a strong female figure; Daryl, the loner “white-trash” from the woods, is now an invaluable member of group. As a result, the unemployed recent graduate or the family who lost their home due to natural

disaster sees the possibility of transformation and experiences their desires of reinventing themselves through the characters onscreen.

Not only does the television series appeal to the audience as a form of living vicariously through the characters, but also serves as a form of catharsis through violence. Canavan proposes that the zombie genre depicts “total, unrestrained violence against absolute “Others” whose very existence is seen as anathema to our own, “Others” who are in essence living death.” (439). In *The Walking Dead*, for example, the violence that the zombies are subjected to are shocking for television standards---yet it is something that intrigues the viewers. On AMC’s *The Walking Dead* website they dedicate special clips for audiences to delve into the world behind the show.

The television series head of special effects---- and who has previously worked for George A. Romero---Greg Nicotero, reveals the process behind the gruesome, gratifying deaths and special effects emphasizing the process in making each death unique and memorable.

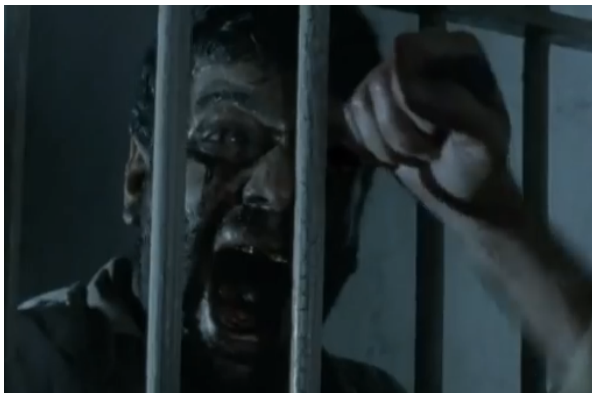


Figure 3+4: From a simple stab to the head to more gruesome deaths

Additionally, in various videos to promote the show not only do they market the “cool” deaths or forms of killing the zombies, but also there is always the emphasis on the number of deaths that will occur in the coming episodes. According to *The National Post* by the 4th season of the series there have already been 476 zombie deaths on-screen (Richard Johnson and Andrew Barr).

The appeal and justification of death is curiously paralleled in what Foucault mentions as the power dynamics in a bio-power system and the solution, which corresponds to the dynamics within the zombie genre, and specifically, *The Walking Dead*:

“In the bio-power system, in other words, killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable if its results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race...In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable.”

Although *The Walking Dead* does not explicitly express solely racial anxiety but rather a plethora of anxieties such as religious, political and social; it is undeniable that the relation between viewer and the show is one of mirroring those apprehensions, and simultaneously providing catharsis for those emotions through violence. In other words, whatever the anxiety may be—social, racial, religious, or political---by displacing the unease towards something tangible, the destruction of that tangible force makes the catharsis that much greater. Therefore, for the viewer, there is a solution to the problem, and an easy one at that---“Just shoot them in the head” is the most common line you hear in any zombie genre, and the most reassuring. Thus, there is no longer a concern for investigating the root of the problem---all you need to do is to exterminate.

The zombie revival in recent times is unquestionably a repercussion of the collective anxieties of the 21st century. It is a creature that has a long tradition yet unique

identity due to it being the first monster of the New World. What started out as the controlled Voodoo zombie that terrified and mirrored the audiences racial and colonial anxieties, morphed into the horrifying, flesh eating, and infectious “Romero zombie” that multiplies and outnumbers the non-infected that we are familiar with today. Nevertheless, despite the difference ---whether it is a slow “Romero zombie”, or a 21st century “rager” zombie--- the constant is that it the zombie is the embodiment of the collective unease.

Yet the mark of the height of popularity of the genre is in the success of the television series *The Walking Dead*. It is the show that illustrates, as Murali Balaji states the “commercial viability of the once-niched zombie culture a phenomenon that has helped to cluster consumption through zombie series franchises, the maximizing inter-texts, and the mainstreaming of the undead into popular culture.” (228) Moreover, Robert Kirkman’s comic-turned-television-series resonates with audiences on various levels, it is a show that displaces the collective fear into a tangible force to oppose rather than fighting larger than life such as Global Warming, terror attacks---- and yet it is simultaneously a form of wish fulfillment. Most importantly, the zombie genre, and in particular *The Walking Dead*, allows both the characters and the audience to start anew. With the disintegration of society the dissatisfactions with their previous lives can be left behind, and allow them the chance to be brought back from the dead, a chance to be alive and start again.

Bibliography

- Balaji, Murali. "Eating the Dead: AMC's Use of Synergy to Cultivate Zombie Consumption." *Thinking Dead: What the Zombie Apocalypse Means*. By Murali Balaji. Plymouth: Lexington, 2013. 227-41. Print.
- Bibel, Saraiva Conteudo. "'The Walking Dead' Season 4 Premiere Is Highest Rated Episode Ever." *TVbytheNumbers*. N.p., 14 Oct. 2013. Web. 16 Mar. 2014.
- Bishop, Kyle William. *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. Print.
- Dendle, Peter. *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*. Tr. David Macey. New York: Picador, 1997. Print.
- Johnson, Richard, and Andrew Barr. "Graphic: Stopping the Dead - a Statistical Look Back at the Walking Dead Series so Far." *National Post News Graphic Stopping the Dead a Statistical Look Back at the Walking Dead Series Sofar Comments*. Web.
- Knickerbocker, Dale. "Apocalypse, Utopia, and Dystopia: Old Paradigms Meet a New Millennium." *Extrapolation* 51.3 (2010): 345-57. Print.
- Moreman, Christopher M., and Cory Rushton. *Zombies Are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011. Print.
- Platts, Todd K. "Locating Zombies in the Sociology of Popular Culture." *Sociology Compass* 7.7 (2013): 547-60. Print.
- Rogers, Martin. "Hybridity and Post-Human Anxiety in 28 Days Later." *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*. By Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2008. 119-35. Print.
- Reed, Ryan. "'Walking Dead' Spinoff Could Be Prequel: Report." *Rolling Stone*. N.p., 13 Nov. 2013. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.
- Sobchack, Vivian Carol., and Vivian Carol. Sobchack. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. New York: Ungar, 1987. Print.
- Stone, Peter. "Zombie Movie Morals (I)." *Philosophy Now*. N.p., Mar.-Apr. 2013. Web. 16 Mar. 2014.

Thompson, Kirsten Moana. *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*. Albany: State U of New York, 2007. Print.

"Video Game Adaptation." *Movies at the Box Office*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

"Zombie Media Database." *ZMDB* -. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Mar. 2014.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. Print.