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"I'm pissed off, and I'm angry, and we need your permission to kill someone":

Frustrated Masculinities in Charlie Brooker's *Dead Set* (2008).

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At the turn of the twenty-first century, psychiatrist Anthony Clare was moved to proclaim, 'it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that men are in serious trouble… Serious commentators declare that men are redundant, that women do not need them and children would be better off without them' (Clare, 2000, 3). Clare used predominantly British examples of male delinquency, violence and poor mental health to support his thesis, surmising that these social problems were the result of traditional masculine roles being 'under siege' (7). The end of the twentieth century had indeed been a challenging time for British male identity. As Linnie Blake argues, the constant renegotiation of the concept of masculinity throughout Thatcherite, and later Blairite, Britain resulted in an awkward hybridisation of hyper-masculinity and the idealised figure of the family man (Blake in Allmer *et. al*, 2012, 79). Forms of traditional masculinity and patriarchal authority were under threat, and it stands to reason that mediated representation of men would work to reflect and renegotiate concepts of masculinity as the new century and millennium unfolded. Bearing in mind the concept of masculinity 'under siege', this chapter looks towards the television mini-series *Dead Set* (Demange, 2008) to interrogate its use of the notion of apocalypse, and how it facilitates a discussion regarding the frustration of outmoded and **ineffective** forms of masculinity.

In explaining his affinity with **the** zombie antagonist, Charlie Brooker claims that '[z]ombies are the misanthrope's monster of choice. They represent fear and disgust of our fellow man'

(Brooker, 2008, 3). This misanthropic perspective, which Brooker prizes so highly in the zombie narrative, is certainly echoed in the desperately unlikeable characters that he has created and placed at the centre of the apocalypse in *Dead Set*; a mini-series that ponders what would happen should the apocalypse coincide with a live broadcast of reality television show *Big Brother* (2000-). The series' characters inspire revulsion and disdain in all manner of ways: they are unfaithful, violent, abusive and rage-filled, and that is before they are turned into the living dead. *Dead Set* follows the trail blazed by zombie pioneer George A. Romero, whose main body of work focused on utilising the zombie, and the steady approach of death that it engenders, to scrutinise the failings and flaws of the living (see Means [2011] for **further discussion of Romero's work**). Broadcast in the U.K. in 2008, *Dead Set* was just one of a growing catalogue of film and television texts encouraging critics to hail a 'zombie renaissance', making use of the undead to tackle all manner of social, philosophical and political questions posed by the dramatically shifting landscape of the early 21st century (**see** Manning, Hubner, and Leaning [2014] for various perspectives on the popularity of the zombie in the 21st **century**).

Whilst the series is most directly satirising popular entertainment and the particularly toxic celebrity culture perpetuated by reality television programming (see Moran [2008] and Abbott [2017]) for brief accounts of *Dead Set* as a critique on popular entertainment and contemporary values), this chapter argues that *Dead Set* also offers a timely portrait of British masculinity on the brink of crisis. Seen here as a multi-faceted, but none the less failing, concept, British masculinity occupies a central space in the narrative. Despite a female lead protagonist, much of the series' plot progression hinges on the decisions and behaviour of men, while the series' visceral aesthetic is predominantly concerned with the torture and destruction of the male body. In order to explore this assertion, the chapter will focus on the series' representation of several dominant male characters, in order to put forward a case for

Dead Set as an important study of contemporary masculinity in crisis. Brooker's emphasis on 'fellow *man*' in his account of developing the series holds far greater importance than has previously been acknowledged; the men of *Dead Set* provide a site upon which obsolete notions of masculinity and maleness are tested, renegotiated and found wanting.

The first episode opens with a behind-the-scenes look at *Big Brother*, as the studio prepares for a live eviction broadcast. Glimpses of the contestants give the viewer a revealing first impression regarding the gendered performativity encouraged by their awareness of twenty-four hour surveillance. In his work on the zombie narrative, Jeffrey Sconce observes: 'as the zombie has seemingly renounced all claims to subjectivity, it opens itself up for all manner of righteous and hilarious abuse' (Sconce in Hunt 2014, 102), which suggests that the zombie has *willingly* sacrificed its previous human individuality and identity. If this is the case, a comparable observation could be made of *Dead Set*'s contestants, who have voluntarily relinquished all relationships, employment, interests and knowledge which attributed subjectivity, inviting both 'righteous and hilarious' abuses from their audience. Therefore, the parallels between the role of the housemate and the role of the zombie can be clearly understood from the outset of the narrative, creating a symbiosis between the decline of one objectified group (the housemates) and the ascendancy of another (the zombie). However, even in the ultimate objectified state, the housemates are still holding tightly to a performative identity; similarly, the zombies are seen on several occasions adhering to performative practices of the living (watching television, in particular).

The performances of masculinity within the series are particularly striking, and the immediacy with which the first episode begins articulating these performances implies an awareness of masculinity in crisis. Each male housemate seems to express a different facet of this phenomenon. Joplin, an intellectual and self-important older man, lectures Pippa on the concepts of entertainment and celebrity, in a **condescending** manner that would now be

recognised as 'mansplaining' **(see Rothman [2012] for a brief explanation of this term and its connotations)**. Clearly intelligent, Joplin nonetheless struggles to communicate or assimilate with the others. His superior intellect has little currency in the house, and his musings fall on deaf ears. The rejection of Joplin and the intellect he represents is a thinly-veiled criticism of a devaluing of the human (male) mind in favour of the more physically performative masculinity represented by Joplin's peers. That being said, his intellectualism also suggests that he stands to lose the most when the apocalypse hits, and his critically active brain becomes deadened to all but the basest of human instincts. His de-evolution begins before the process of literal zombification begins, as he satiates his sexual desire through 'peeping tom' behaviours, culminating in his watching Veronica showering through one of the house's two-way mirrors. This scene directly mimics an earlier scene, in which a lone zombie, stuck in the camera run, watches the group argue through a similar mirror, and throws into suspicion the currency and legitimacy of Joplin's supposedly superior intellect. Despite his pretensions to superiority, then, Joplin is perhaps the closest to zombification, **from the outset**, of all *Dead Set*'s characters. His eventual zombification symbolises the denial of human complexity that Sconce **recognises in** the zombie: '[t]hus they defy even the biological-materialist fantasy that the body (and thus the self) is a complex machine of interrelated systems… instead, the zombie's residual, frequently twisted human form mocks both the human mind and body' (101). Furthermore, in consideration of the mockery Sconce identifies, Joplin's eventual fate suggests an inevitable slide from the performativity of complex, advanced thought to the irresistible urge to surrender to animalistic tendencies. Joplin no longer has the faculties to advance the **contrived** illusion of complexity and intelligence, **and instead reverts to primal, atavistic behaviours which come naturally to his zombified brain.**

The group's alpha, Marky, **represents an equally problematic and disingenuous masculine performance**; he **is first seen antagonising** Grayson, his **flamboyant**, cross-dressing housemate**.** Marky's regressive response to Grayson's gender-fluid performance infers a discomfort with non-normative masculine identities, suggesting that Marky is operating under a reactionary, homophobic concept of masculinity. Resembling a return to the attitude identified by Claire Monk in male **media** representation**s** of the 1990s, Marky characterises a 'resurgence of masculinism and misogyny' (Monk in Murphy, 2000, 157), in response to increasing sexual freedoms, represented here by Grayson, and a resurgence in feminism, both of which stand in direct opposition to masculine dominance and authority. The obsolescence of Marky's particular brand of masculinity is revealed in Grayson's earlier outburst in the 'Diary Room': 'I'm pissed off, I'm angry, and we need your permission to kill someone'. The 'someone' Grayson is referring to is Marky, and the idea that he and his brand of masculinity need extinguishing re-emphasises the perception that despite its millennial resurgence, the masculine performance Marky is peddling is irrelevant and redundant. Grayson's words also betray a frustration that seems to 'infect' each male character in his quest for meaning, dominance, fame or, ultimately, survival. The frustration which is evident in Joplin, in Marky and in Grayson seems to develop from a sense that they are not being taken seriously enough; they have not received the gratification they expected, and perhaps think they deserve, for their performance. Moreover, the reality television environment seems to amplify the rivalry between them, placing each brand of masculinity in direct competition with the others. The figurative battle has become one of survival, rather than dominance, even before the zombie hordes invade the compound. Once again this primal motivation betrays the pretensions to complexity that the zombie exposes and mocks. Marky and Grayson are up for elimination, and in direct, primal competition with one another for 'survival', a simplistic yet hugely meaningful concept to both of them.

In contrast **to the desperation implicit within the conflict between Marky, Joplin and Grayson**, housemate Space refuses to compete or engage with the frustrated performances of his housemates. He shows a sensitivity and self-awareness which separates him from the suggested ignorance of his male peers. Where Marky signifies a continuation of 'New Laddism' (Monk, 2000, 163), an almost hysterical reassertion of red-blooded masculine mythology revolving around the objectification of women and the championing of violence, Space more closely resembles Monk's 'New Man' (158) in his embrace of the emotional and nurturing characteristics traditionally associated with the feminine. Occupying a peripheral position in relation to the showboating of Grayson, Marky and Joplin, he complains that there are 'too many arguments' in the house, and refuses to be drawn into the over-wrought performances of his **male peers**, instead preferring private moments of reflection. His isolation from the group and its behaviours perhaps communicates some form of crisis in and of itself. Naming the character 'Space' passes an ironic comment on the apparent *lack of* space for his sensitivity and reflexivity, at least within the microcosm of the house, thereby questioning if and where space can be found for masculinity so sensitive, anxious and conflict-averse in wider society whilst traditional modes persist. Though the narrative seems to advocate for Space's masculinity (he is the first to notice that something has gone awry outside the house) as a more effective and sustainable apocalypse identity, Space is very often overruled or ignored when it comes to the group deciding on a course of action, and is ultimately no more successful in his quest for survival than his peers.

Not only are certain masculinities stifled and minimised within the series, but the process of doing so is quite clearly racialized. The continued peripheral positioning of Space, as a **multiracial** man, as well as the early demise of Grayson, who is British Indian, seem to suggest a similar pattern of '(White) Rage' to that recognised in Sarah Trimble's analysis of *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) (Trimble, 2010, 295). Trimble asserts that many apocalypse

narratives propagate a 'patriarchal survivalist fantasy' (296), which predicates itself on the "hyper-vulnerability of racialized and feminized others" (318), whilst elevating the white patriarch to status of protector, whose survival and determination to rebuild ensures the survival of oppressive patriarchal ideologies. **Certainly, the series does create several gory set-pieces which rely upon the fragmentation and brutalisation of racialised and feminised others, which seemingly leaves the demographic for survival highly restricted, and casts doubt upon a person of colour's ability to survive except through the intervention of a white patriarch**. **However, to argue Trimble's 'White Rage' thesis effectively, there has to exist a white male saviour figure—assuming that there is such a white patriarch to take up this mantle**. Where *Dead Set* arguably diverges from the pattern set out in *28 Days Later* is through its exposure of white patriarchy as incapable of sustaining anything, regardless of its erasure or ignorance of alternative modes of masculine identity. Nowhere is this made more explicit than in the characterisation of the show's producer, Patrick.

It is Patrick who truly and spectacularly exemplifies masculinity in crisis. Patrick is a textbook misanthrope, who resents, leers at and bullies his staff but saves his most vitriolic and misogynistic behaviour for the contestants themselves. Watching the contestants on monitors, Patrick consistently spews insults and profanity, and is defined by his mercilessly derogatory diatribes from his first appearance; he says one contestant has 'a face like a Manchester morgue' (a covert reference to a Brooker favourite: *The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue* (Grau, 1974)), and calls another 'sour flaps' within moments of appearing on screen. He guiltlessly manipulates footage from inside the house to bait public disdain and achieve higher ratings, confirming at best a complete disregard, and at worst an unmitigated hatred, for his 'fellow man'.

His exploitation of the bodies on-screen places him in an almost god-like position (in fact, the audio system that communicates with the contestants at Patrick's instruction is nicknamed 'voice of God'). He shapes the narratives that reach *Big Brother*'s millions of viewers, effectively dictating public perception and authoring the contestants' interactions. Considering this characterisation, Patrick is undoubtedly intended as the face of the established order which, unbeknownst to him, is already floundering outside the studio's compound gates. Indeed, despite his over-inflated sense of importance, there are suggestions that Patrick's authority is already waning before the apocalypse strikes; speaking to former contestant Aisling with a leering confidence, it becomes apparent that she is not aware of who he is or why he is there, having to ask for this information as he swaggers away. In the control room, certain staff members are paying more attention to their magazines and rumours of workplace romance than they are to Patrick's bluster. Moreover, Patrick's authority is facilitated by the existence of *Big Brother*, and as soon as the show ceases to air his apparent power and influence disappears with it. The ease and speed with which Patrick's authority collapses indicates the fragility of the masculine performance, and is reminiscent of Peter Lehman's assertion that '[n]either men nor women… can possess the phallus, and in this sense masculinity itself is a masquerade' (Lehman, 1993, 9). However, Patrick persists in the masquerade, regardless of the shifting balance in power from the living to the dead, from individual white men to indiscriminate, ravenous mass. **Where, in Trimble's thesis, Patrick would rise above the crisis to unite survivors under him, and therefore secure the continuation of white male authority, in actuality he cannot transcend his individualism, even to manipulate the survivors into restoring his authority. In fact, it is his inability to adjust to a new world order, which has made masculine performance and individualism redundant in all of its forms, and his failure to relinquish the masquerade which compromises survival for all.**

However, despite the dismantling of the white masculine order (**so integral to the 'White Rage' model**) that Patrick represents, *Dead Set* fails to fully realise the progressive vision **that** this **dismantling** promises. By refusing to cooperate with the other survivors and effectively assume the role of patriarch (as dictated in Trimble's thesis of the patriarchal survivalist fantasy), **Patrick dooms not only himself but the entire group of survivors**. **Therefore**, the narrative suggests that in order for anyone to survive **the apocalypse**, an alternative **or substitute** patriarchal structure must exist. By refusing to collaborate, Patrick denies the reformation of the **(dysfunctional) family unit, and this makes survival an impossibility, both for him and the feminised and racialized others awaiting salvation**. In this way, *Dead Set* fails to deliver any workable alternative to the oppressive and ultimately lethal masculine concepts that it deconstructs. That the series fails to imagine any alternative to regressive masculine practices is not only nihilistic, it effectively undoes the series' potential to critique the heteronormativity of dominant masculinities and their mediation. Kathryn A. Cady and Thomas Oates have observed similar failures in other contemporary zombie texts: 'despite significant subversive potential, zombie narratives offer private and heteronormative models of social order rather than public and countercultural ones' (Cady & Oates, 2016, 309.). Patrick's misogyny, arrogance and superior attitude all suggest a regressive, outdated brand of masculinity, one which is arguably punished in the graphic destruction of his body in the final minutes of the final episode. However, his determination to persist in his understanding of power and survival shows an unshakeable belief in the individualism, mistrust and prejudice that had previously privileged him and rendered him untouchable, delivering upon Donna Heiland's promise that, in the Gothic narrative, 'the patriarchal order will be perpetuated not by living women but by dead men' (Heiland, 2004, 14).

Compounding this apparent immortality of the phallic masquerade is Peter Hutchings'

suggestion that 'male submission to disempowerment, that is a willing subjection made by

someone who already has power, is merely a way of confirming that power' (Hutchings in

Kirkham & Thumim, 1993, 92). In Patrick's life, his adherence to heteronormative

expectations served him well, placing him in a position of authority at the studio, where he

made unilateral decisions and motivated (or intimidated) his crew to do his bidding,

supposedly to ensure the success of the live broadcasts. From his superior position, he is

providing, or at least representing, an agenda or message about the value of human life that

one can assume is shared by him and sanctioned by the studio itself. His particular need to

cultivate hatred towards the women and **people of colour** in the house indicates that Patrick

is intended as representative of the white male establishment, the privileges of whom have

been undermined by '[t]he historical confluence of feminist and multicultural challenges to

white male supremacy and neoliberal transformations of everyday practices' (Sugg, 2015,

797). This once again aligns with Trimble's notion of patriarchal survival fantasy, wherein

'bodily and social integrity are maintained through a compulsive conjuring and undoing of

the other' (Trimble, 318). Whilst survival is not possible for Patrick, nor any of the remaining

contestants, his attitude to impending death seems to imply a submission on his part which, as

Hutchings asserts, somewhat disempowers the violence committed against his body. Having

encouraged Joplin into a failed mutiny in order to attempt escape from the house, Patrick

finds himself trapped outside with the horde bearing down on him. Continuing to hurl

profanities and abuse, he treats the zombies with no more or less disdain than he did his staff

and subjects (the contestants), and continues to berate them as they tear him apart. His death

is by far the goriest and most protracted of any in the series, but given that his previous

actions have also compromised the security of the house, he has effectively sabotaged the

safety of all who have survived thus far, ensuring that no mode of masculinity supersedes his in the event of his demise.

It is revealing, however, that of all the male characters bitten during the zombie onslaught, Patrick is the only one whose body is dismantled so totally that he does not return from the dead. Barbara Creed argues that, in horror, 'transformation is represented as a regressive process in which the natural animal world takes over from the civilised, human domain as man regresses into an uncanny beast, familiar yet unfamiliar' (Creed, 2005, xiii). Perhaps we can infer from Patrick's inability to transform, both literally and figuratively, that he had already undergone this regressive process before the apocalypse, and that this transformation occurred during Patrick's ascendancy to power within the studio. Unable to regress any further, even a zombie invasion cannot overshadow the monstrosity and brutality of Patrick's brand of masculinity. Despite the emptiness of the male vessels left behind (Space, Joplin and Marky are all pictured zombified over the final credits), the alternative that Patrick offered or imposed seems much worse—symbolic of an oppressive order that has no place in this near-future world. Patrick's demise does not offer a catch-all solution for the peripheral, failing and frustrated masculinities represented by the other male characters. The narrative refuses to renegotiate concepts of masculinity by allowing the survival and ascendancy of either Marky or Space. That Joplin, Marky and Space are all transformed into the monstrous other by the end of the series proves just how fragile their masculine identity was—it takes just one bite to compromise the stability and efficacy of this carefully honed masculine ideal, nullifying any power it had previous afforded the subject.

The male monster, according to Creed, holds 'transgressive power', as it is through his existence that societal norms and the patriarchal order are challenged (15). That being said, the loss of subjectivity that one undergoes during the process of zombification replaces the toppled hierarchy of patriarchy with a corpus recognised for its distinct lack of meaning: a

nothingness. Creed continues: '[b]y his very existence, the male monster points to the fact that masculinity, as defined by the symbolic economy, is a fragile concept, one that rarely, if ever, is fulfilled' (2005, xvi); in *Dead Set*'s case, masculinity is not only fragile, but ceases to exist. The fate of the men does indeed transgress the patriarchal order; zombification is a fantastic leveller of social inequalities, offering the potential to 'refract spectacles of domination and helplessness, indict mainstream culture and… experiment with alternatives to the established reality' (Wadsworth, 2016, 563). The central problem with *Dead Set*'s narrative is that a human alternative to the established reality is seen as untenable in the absence of any kind of patriarchy-lite, which in turn appears to require the dominating presence of a Patrick-esque masculinity. Instead, the male monsters we are left with at the conclusion of the narrative transgress masculinity only by moving into a space where it does not, in any symbolic form, exist. The concept is refused renegotiation in a post-apocalyptic context, with the concluding scenes instead ruling masculinity problematic in all its forms, and beyond salvation through re-conceptualisation. The finality with which all sociological constructs are dismantled, along with the bodies carrying them, reveals the crux of the frustration implied by the performances of Patrick, Space, Joplin and Marky; the inefficacy and redundancy of all masculine identities reveals a fundamentally flawed concept for which there is no place in a rapidly transformed Britain.

Dead Set, through its articulation of frustrated masculinity, amplifies the magnitude of the post-millennium social shift in Britain, which saw traditional masculine forms double down in a reactionary resurgence of male violence and delinquency (Clare, 2000). Moreover, *Dead Set* observes that this resurgence created great difficulty for burgeoning forms of 'new' masculinity, represented here by Space and Grayson, which were attempting to evolve and grow in response to a changing social structure. **That new negates old effectively disavows the concept of masculinity altogether,** or so the series argues with its eventual destruction

of all gendered bodies and minds. That the series stops short of reaching its progressive

potential does not discredit its attempt to articulate the dangers it perceives in frustrated

masculinities left unchecked. Whilst its contemporary apocalypse narratives equally relish the

'spectacle of social disintegration' (Sconce, 2014, 99) arguably none offer so hopeless, nor so

damning, a representation of masculinity in crisis or a more compelling vision of the death of

gendered hierarchy.