

The Walking Hat

Based on the comics by Robert Kirkman, *The Walking Dead* was turned into a TV series and originally aired on AMC in 2010. With *The Walking Dead*, “[t]he network boasts the most-watched drama series in basic cable history and the number one show on television among adults 18-49” (amctv.com). Like AMC’s outstanding original drama series *Mad Men* (since 2007) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *The Walking Dead* (since 2010) also features a male protagonist, Rick Grimes. In the fictional world of *The Walking Dead*, he leads a group of people on their journey to survive in a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by zombies.

Although the three aforementioned series could not be more different, there is one specific characteristic that the shows’ protagonists Don Draper, Walter White and Rick Grimes have in common: they all wear a hat. What appears to be trivial at first turns out to be an important factor when analyzing the cultural semiotics of clothes. With the underlying premise that clothes are laden with meaning and thus can be decoded and interpreted, Staton claims that

for this TV trio [Don, Walt and Rick] the power of the hat is so all encompassing, that no room exists for negotiation of its meaning. The power of the hat is transformative (clothes make the man) and that is beyond question—it is the authority of the male. (2013: 86)

Yet Staton limits the power of the hat only to what he defines as proper hats: “hats have brims that extend all the way around and generally have shaped crowns. Symbolically, this can be read as offering full protection or shelter to the wearer.” (2013: 88). In the case of Rick Grimes, it is a typical lawman’s hat that represents his status as sheriff. Staton goes even one step further and argues that “[t]hese men [who wear proper hats] are in charge and they’d prefer it stay that way. When they’re not in charge—hatless—things (can and often do) go awry” (2013: 87).

Since Staton does not prove his hypothesis in a detailed analysis of the shows he mentions (only a few scenes of single episodes are analyzed), I was curious to find out whether his hypothesis could be verified in the case of Rick Grimes. Thus, I decided to

analyze the first season of *The Walking Dead* (consisting of six episodes) according to situations that could possibly go awry, meaning that people either get hurt or that Rick Grimes fails to complete his mission when he is (not) wearing his hat. Since *The Walking Dead* is by now in its fifth season, the following analysis should be understood as a case study only.

Instead of writing a term paper and describing each scene I included in my analysis of the first season, I created a board game, so that the reader, now turns a player, has the chance to find out in a playful way whether the underlying hypothesis can be confirmed by evaluating situations that could possibly go awry. The following assumptions offer a strategic approach to the game: If Staton’s hypothesis is true, it will be very easy to win the game. If it is not, you will be the first player to lose the game. Hence, after having played the game, the player is able to decide whether Staton’s hypothesis is true or not.

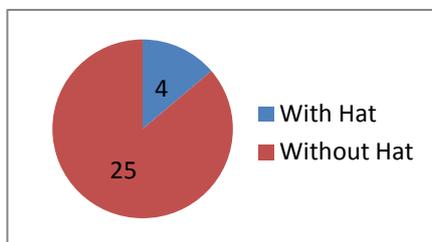


Figure 1: Rick with and without his hat

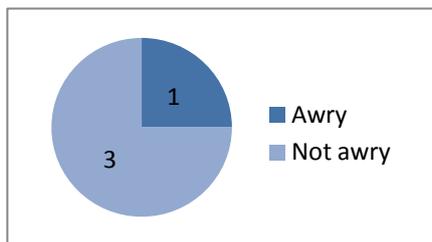


Figure 2: Rick wearing his hat

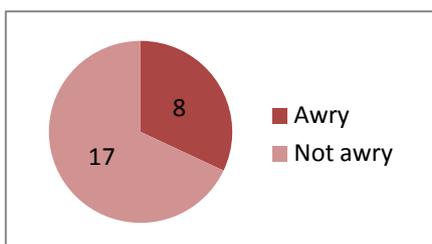


Figure 3: Rick not wearing his hat

As the results of my analysis will show, it is advisable to be rather critical of Staton’s hypothesis if you intend to win the game. Throughout the six episodes of the first season, there are 29 situations that could possibly go awry. In 25 out of these situations, Rick Grimes is not wearing his hat. Only in 4 of them does he wear his hat (see figure 1). In 3 out of the 4 situations in which Rick is wearing his hat, there is a greater likelihood that the situation will not go awry. Thus, in the case of Rick wearing his hat, Staton’s hypothesis can be confirmed (see figure 2). However, when Rick is not wearing his hat, Staton’s hypothesis cannot be proven: in only 8 out of the 25 situations do things go awry, while in two-thirds of the situations they do not (see figure 3). All in all, it is more likely that the hatless Rick will keep the situation under control and not lose his authority.¹ Consequently, Staton’s

claim that “the hat is so all encompassing” cannot be validated for the first season of *The Walking Dead*.

Since “*The Walking Hat*” was only a case study for the first season, it might be interesting to see whether the results would be different for seasons 2-5 of *The Walking Dead*, especially because Rick gives his hat to his son in season 2.

¹ See appendix (p. 4-5) for detailed information about the analyzed situations, and the cards of the game for the context of each situation.

Works Cited

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Pictures

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