

HBO's *The Last of Us*: With humans like this, who needs zombies?

Ed Hightower
27 March 2023

HBO's adaptation of the hit video game *The Last of Us* has earned a wide viewership and critical acclaim. The *Guardian* called it "one of the finest TV shows you will see this year." NPR gushed that the post-apocalyptic zombie drama was "a hopeful show about the end of humanity [!]*—*one that manages to find, and nurture, moments of grace amid the ruins."

In reality, this series marks something of a new high-water mark for savage violence and self-assured misanthropy in the entertainment industry.

The Last of Us begins with a fictional 1968 television interview with two scientists debating the nature of a possible pandemic. A *virus* could wreak havoc, but one of the scientists poses an eerie alternative scenario where *fungus**—*already capable of producing psychoactive and antibacterial chemicals*—*evolves the ability to take control of human beings, preserving them for its own ends.

The premise has an interesting basis. The fungal genus *Cordyceps* actually has hundreds of species that infect insects, taking control of their nervous systems, ordering them to climb up to a suitable height where the fungus will sprout a spore-bearing structure to disseminate the next generation of insect-controlling offspring.

In *The Last of Us*, a species of *Cordyceps* evolves along the lines predicted by the scientist in the show's opening scene. An outbreak occurs at a flour mill in Jakarta, quickly contaminating the global food supply. In a single weekend in September 2003, civilization collapses. The first episode depicts the transformation of humans into zombies and the military response, which includes the shooting of the central protagonist's teen-aged daughter.

The fungal interpretation of zombies makes for a frightening, well-executed nemesis of humanity. The

Cordyceps zombies are the most interesting aspect of the show, although they largely disappear by the second half of the season.

The viewer learns in episode three that the US military executed countless people for whom there was no space in quarantine zones. Killing them, and bombing urban centers, was the government's response to the pandemic. "They had to slow the spread somehow," as protagonist Joel (Pedro Pascal, *The Mandalorian*) tells his young companion, Ellie (Bella Ramsey, *Game of Thrones*). Ellie's body has developed an immunity to *Cordyceps* infection and represents humanity's best chance of beating the zombies.

The WSWS reviewed the second installment of the video game on which the series is based. Replying to the creator Neil Druckmann's claim that the game offered a critical attitude toward "cycles of violence," we wrote,

A work whose aim is to inspire empathy and understanding may be said to be well-intentioned. However, a work must be judged on what it accomplished, not what it intended to accomplish. By this measure, *The Last of Us Part II* is a thoroughly miserable experience; nasty, gratuitously violent and misanthropic.

This assessment applies to the HBO series in spades.

Regarding the term "violent"*—*there is not simply a shootout here or there, the killing of monsters and the like. There's plenty of that, but piled atop this is the frequent shooting of prisoners, and people trying to surrender, at point-blank range, even begging for

mercy. There is torture, which helps Joel relocate Ellie at a critical juncture. Add to that unspeakable cruelty even *within* most of the contending groups of survivors, and some cannibalism, and you have most of the plot of *The Last of Us*.

Between bloodbaths, the show's dialogue barely rises above the level of grunts and barks. As the hardened and handsome Joel transports the young and feisty Ellie from the Boston quarantine zone toward a rebel base in Utah, the former laconically lectures the latter along the lines of his individualist, "down-to-earth" outlook.

So, Joel says of his brother, a former "Firefly" rebel now living in Wyoming: "He's a joiner. He wants to save the world, same mistake he made when he joined the Army at 18, delusional." Why does Joel bother trying to find him? "You keep going for family."

That means *his* family, of course, as he disparages any hint of altruism for most of the show.

The Last of Us centers on the relationship between Joel and Ellie, but it is unconvincing and cliched. Nearly every one of Ellie's remarks feels scripted and unnatural. She is generally unfazed by killing. One might expect that a youth raised in these conditions would exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, but Ellie's brutality is not at all explained in this way.

At the rebel base, Joel kills the surgeon who is trying to operate on Ellie to uncover the basis of her immunity. The operation would kill her, but might save humanity. There is reason to think that Ellie would be willing to sacrifice herself for this goal, but no one—not Joel, not the rebel "Fireflies"—thinks to ask her. After the escape, Joel lies to Ellie, asserting that the Firefly scientists had concluded the operation was not worth it.

A word about the Fireflies. They are a terrorist network "fighting a military dictatorship [FEDRA] to restore democracy and freedom," according to their leader, the bullying and foul-mouthed Marlene. Apart from graffiti and their corny slogan about "looking for the light," they make no appeal to the population living under FEDRA's brutal regime.

One rubs one's eyes at the "restore democracy and freedom" line, occurring as it does in 2003! That is, five years after the Clinton impeachment, three years after the stolen election and *Gore v. Bush* decision, and in the year of the destruction of Iraqi society by that very same unelected president. One can ask, "restore what, exactly?" Presumably such a restoration would

not challenge the broader social processes that are actually, *presently* leading to disaster: wealth concentration, militarism, the vicious rightward trajectory of politics, not to mention the pollution of cultural life.

The Fireflies closely resemble the rebels in the *Hunger Games* films, whose message is that the *good guys* are just as bad as the *bad guys*. This theme also helps shape the films *Snowpiercer* and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, to name two more.

The weak aesthetic results in *The Last of Us* reveal, if you will, that the series has been *infected* by the pessimistic and *unrealistic* outlook of its creators and the film and television world generally. Artistic creation is a serious and conscious undertaking. An artist is obliged to know his or her subject matter (in this case, the social order and its various elements) and to bring out its innermost characteristics.

The makers of *The Last of Us* are not responsible for the stagnant (and worse) climate of their milieu. Nonetheless, one has to say that a dishonest, shallow or evasive approach to reality, one that conceals the nature of social life this severely, has an influence on the artist's internal life and abilities. In this case, it makes the images, drama and dialogue emerge in a particularly false and murky fashion.

The hopelessness is lazy and wrong-headed. The present situation contains not only the most horrible possibilities, but if acted upon in a *social revolutionary* manner, the most promising and liberating.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact