# MEDIA REVIEWS

## *The Last of Us*

### Lúcio Reis-Filho

*The Last of Us*. HBO, 2023.

*The Last of Us* is a TV adaptation of the eponymous 2013 video game by PlayStation Studio's Naughty Dog, which has garnered numerous awards and a massive fan base over the last decade. Its success culminated in an ambitious sequel in 2020 and in the TV series in 2023. The HBO adaptation follows the game's storyline and revolves around the hero Joel (Pedro Pascal), who navigates through a dystopic version of the United States escorting the young girl Ellie (Bella Ramsey), who holds the key to the future of humanity. As the only known person immune to the fungal illness that ravaged the world, Ellie is the pivotal character and a coveted asset in the search for a cure. Among the ruins, however, nature has had a rampant comeback, evidenced by the proliferation of green spaces that literally overgrow the urban areas. In many contemporary eco-dystopias, as Roland Hughes and Pat Wheeler suggests, "Technological progress means both a movement away from and simultaneously a movement into or towards nature" (1). This is certainly the case with *The Last of Us*.

The HBO adaptation delves deeper into the themes of horror and science fiction that were already present in the original game, which was notable for its immersive gameplay experience that seamlessly integrated action, adventure, and drama. The prologue of the series provides a global perspective on the fungal outbreak, which taps into the quintessential "what if?" question that characterizes apocalyptic fiction in general and has gained renewed relevance, since the game's plot has only become more gripping in the wake of COVID-19 pandemics. For instance, the prologue in episode 1 ("When You're Lost in the Darkness") reinforces the idea of a global outbreak, although the full-range scale of the event is not deepened throughout the series.

*The Last of Us* also draws from conventions once established by notable works of zombie fiction. Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), adapted for the screen three times, popularized the concept of "the last man on Earth," while George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) played a pivotal role in shaping the contemporary zombie. *Resident Evil* (1996) introduced viral epidemics and genetic mutations to the mix, and Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) gave rise to athletic, more vicious zombies that relentlessly pursue their prey. Similar to these works, T*he Last of Us* presents an unknown disease that spreads rapidly, ultimately leading to the collapse of society. As denizens succumb, they transform into monstrous beings that attack and bite others primarily to spread their condition, as is the case with the zombies in the *Resident Evil* franchise,

whose two first games are eventually referred to in the series. In episode 1, for instance, the camera angle and the close-up shot on the face of an infected elderly woman recreate the iconic scene of the first zombie ever seen in a *Resident Evil* game in 1996. Additionally, the explosion that separates Joel and his brother in the city streets echoes the prologue of *Resident Evil 2* (1998) when something quite similar happens, opening up two distinct narrative lines for Leon S. Kennedy and Claire Redfield. Like most zombie stories, the infected in *The Last of Us* are limping, mindless, and violent wanderers with tattered clothes and decaying figures. However, it is a fungal infection rather than a viral one that causes its condition to change. As a result, the infected show a distinctive appearance, with their bodies covered in mold and scaly polyps. By attributing the outbreak to the Cordyceps fungus, which has contaminated wheat and its byproducts, the series sheds light on present-day debates about sustainability, nature conservancy, and the dangers of pesticide poisoning in crops.

Another example on this subject is a noteworthy departure from the game counterpart. The idea of a fungal network and the ubiquitous link between the infected, as seen in the series, highlight the potential impact of human activity on the environment, since the contagion has spread to the soil, causing even minor contact with the fungus mycelium to attract an entire horde in a matter of seconds. Thus, rather than single individuals, the infected become a collective with swarm behavior and a "hive mind", a concept reminiscent of the zombies in *World War Z* and the Borg from the *Star Trek* franchise. In this sense, the infected may embody the revenge of nature, which attempts to restore itself after centuries of depletion by human hands. Although the series does not elaborate on this idea beyond episode 1, it significantly changes the zombies' character and further emphasizes the eco-criticism. According to Gerald Farca and Charlotte Ladevèze, *The Last of Us* goes in direct extrapolation from our times, since it shows "a marvelous place where nature has reclaimed the planet and where the old order of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism has literally corroded" (5). The sequence of giraffes wandering serene through the ruins is a poetic example of this.

Notably, the series expands beyond the first installment in the franchise, adding elements from the game's 2020 sequel, *The Last of Us Part II*, such as the city where Joel and Ellie arrive, introducing some of its characters. It also includes the DLC *Left Behind* (2014) in a one single episode quasi-literal adaptation of its main temporality, both a flashback of Ellie's teenage years and a coming-of-age drama. In episode 7 ("Left Behind"), Ellie and her friend Riley (Storm Reid) experience heartwarming moments at the core of an abandoned shopping mall. As the game does with their innocent and romantic interracial relationship, the series brings LGBTQIA+ representation to the screen. This debate appears earlier in episode 3 ("Long, long time"), which takes a hint the game merely implies to develop Bill's (Nick Offerman) character. The man, who lives barricaded or closeted in his home, ends up rescuing Frank (Murray Bartlett) with whom he bonds and starts sharing the same roof. Through their last-longing relationship, the series brings dignity to a homosexual romance on TV, even though this episode seems disjointed in comparison

to others as it distances itself from Joel and Ellie's journey. On the other hand, the series closely approaches the game's most memorable moments, with some occasional changes and omissions, for pace and rhythm. As an adaptation, however, *The Last of Us* stands out not only for its fidelity to the source material or the renewal of the zombie subgenre, but also for the eco-criticism and other pressing issues the series brings to screen.

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