

# Butch Orientations: Locating Queerness in Daryl

## Dixon from *The Walking Dead*

Sam Tabet

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## **Butch Orientations: Locating Queerness in Daryl Dixon of *The Walking Dead***

Sam Tabet

American post-apocalyptic horror series *The Walking Dead* (TWD, 2010-2022) has been accused of exploring a world that recreates fascist masculinity and heteropatriarchal gender roles.<sup>1</sup> This is primarily achieved by utilising male violence and female domesticity in a number of make-shift armies and communities. However, this article analyses my own identification of queer butchness on-screen with a presumably straight cisgender male character from the series, Daryl Dixon (Norman Reedus). I argue that this character presents an opportunity to disrupt the dichotomy of heterosexual/queer and sex/gender. Instead of divorcing butchness from the queer body, I explore how codes of masculinities provoke queer perception through movements and gestures.<sup>2</sup> There are four aspects of Daryl's storyline which provide salient points of queer recognition. These include the distrust of capitalist frameworks and the embracing of chosen family, to a specific queer butch recognition which is scripted onto Daryl's body and his ambiguously coded sexuality. The trajectory of my analysis follows a format of moving from a more expansive interpretation of queerness in the collective sense (society and family structures) to the specificity the queerness of the individual (exploring sex and gender) which allows for a more precise reading of queer butchness to flourish.

My investigation is informed by spatial orientations; both the lack of butch lesbian visibility on-screen and the relationships between the creators, the show itself, and viewers, who are collectively engaged in the "*perception of expression and the expression of perception.*"<sup>3</sup> This investigation is born from Vivian Sobchack's 'address of the eye' as well as Katharina Lindner's examination of

the ways in which identification with characters is possible through “various (cinematic) movements, gestures, textures, or rhythms.”<sup>4</sup> My argument is not solely inspired by my relationship with the text but also the ways in which the filmmaker, film, and spectator impart and perceive significance to objects onscreen. It is this mutual “embodied vision,” I argue, which is complicated by the space given for Daryl's dubious (hetero)sexuality to emerge.

*TWD* follows sheriff, Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln), as he searches for his family after awakening from a coma, where he finds himself amid a zombie apocalypse. Once Rick is reunited with his family, we are introduced to further survivors. This includes Daryl, who supports the group as a skilled hunter and tracker, and his white supremacist brother, Merle (Michael Rooker). The absence of any determined sexuality for Daryl allowed fan theories to circulate, the most prominent suggesting his possible asexuality or homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the feedback loop between creators and fans profoundly influenced the trajectory of Daryl's character, as he was denied any love interest for ten seasons.<sup>6</sup>

*TWD* suggests a queer narrative through its redirection from American capitalist societal structures and normative family units.<sup>7</sup> A queer reading of this redirection is in line with Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam's works which discuss the subversion of queerness's rejection of linearity, reproduction, and progression.<sup>8</sup> This narrative is poignant for Daryl, as he was raised in poverty and a survivor of abuse, he struggles to trust new societal structures, especially ones that replicate capitalist modes of gender and class oppression. This distrust alongside Daryl's role outside of a dominant gendered framework, give primacy to a queer anti-establishment positionality. As I will discuss in the second half of this article, the obscurity around hiding Daryl's body and the queer

film codes utilised in Daryl's singular love scene further aid my reading of queer butchness onto the character. Therefore, it is both the narrative and codes, textures, and gestures which contribute to this article's investigation of queer butchness from myself as a butch lesbian reader.

### **Burn it Down: Rescripting Society and Family**

Even in the most overarching definition of queerness as inherently anti-establishment and outside patriarchal hegemony, media dealing with the destruction and rebuilding of societies have an inherent queer potentiality. Throughout *TWD*, spaces, collectives, chosen families, and makeshift armies replace the complex and established network of larger societies which preceded the series' zombie apocalypse context. Kasandra J. DiSessa contextualises how *TWD* moves towards a subversion of the heteronormative nuclear family for LGBTQ+ characters in later seasons. However, throughout all the seasons, Daryl's trajectory towards chosen (non-biological) family is queered alongside his distrust of establishment structures, and presentation of masculinity outside of patriarchal oppression.<sup>9</sup> His orientation away from capitalist frameworks and towards chosen family reflects Lindner's exploration of how certain texts articulate queer orientations and tendencies that are felt by readers. Echoing Lindner, Daryl acquires "'queer' tendencies and orientations by 'tending toward' certain others in ways that disrupt the straightness of phenomenal space, and ways of inhabiting that space."<sup>10</sup>

In season four episode twelve, for instance, Daryl and Beth (Emily Kinney) are separated from the group. Here, they begin to confront, and reject, the societal strictures which informed their lives before the apocalypse. Beth, raised by a loving and normative family with significant class privilege prior to *TWD*'s apocalyptic context – a childhood far cry for Daryl's experience – make

the two unlikely allies. Yet they search for alcohol for Beth's birthday, while Daryl steals money from a country club. As the characters move through classed spaces which have now lost any material meaning, they take shelter together in a once working-class house with stored moonshine, one which Daryl states is starkly like the house he grew up in.

Daryl recounts feeling trapped in his relationship with his violent brother, who dragged him into dangerous drug deals - an experience of crime and torment where there seemed no way out. Defiantly, Beth and Daryl pour the moonshine over the barn, using dollars to fuel the flames. They give the middle finger to the burning mess of *before* (Figure 1), as the class structures which condemned Daryl descend into rubble. Even though they are still in Georgia, the scene shows the mobility and transgression of class boundaries. Like the prison, which once existed as a site of regressive punishment and was transformed into a home for Daryl, the burning of the barn provides a rejection of normative structure and a possibility of existing in a queer space less rigidly defined.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Daryl and Beth burning down a house with money in Season 4 of *The Walking Dead*

Throughout the series, Daryl's group, led by Rick, tries to integrate into a variety of newly built societies which often replicate capitalist structures. Daryl's distrust of these structures is evidenced in his reticence towards these created communities such as The Commonwealth, Woodbury, and Alexandria, where he is often the last to integrate. This is not only evidenced narratively, but also visually. When the group decides to stay at Alexandria, a community with walls, showers, homes, and food, Daryl stays on the porch of the group house for days. He is distant, un-showered and anti-social – as others describe – 'feral.' In one shot, we see Rick inside the house while Daryl sits alone outside. In this classed positionality, Daryl is framed as a 'queered' other compared to Rick who possesses symbolic power as the community sheriff: integrated, clean, and shaven (Figure 2). In this cookie cutter replica of American society, Daryl's othered status is not solely a classed one, but his detachment from the group and reluctance to conform to Alexandria's normative structures can be read as distinctly queer in its defiance.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 2. Screenshot of Daryl outside the home at Alexandria in Season 5 of *The Walking Dead*

The assembling of a chosen family within the show explores alternative queer models of family creation. In season three episode five, after Rick’s wife Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies) dies in childbirth, Rick is distraught and unable to hold his new-born daughter. Needing sustenance, Daryl finds baby formula among the walkers (zombies) and feeds the baby, stepping in as a caregiver. Daryl’s paternal/maternal nature runs throughout the series as he becomes the child’s guardian. In one scene, Daryl endearingly calls the baby “little ass kicker”; he is spatially oriented in the centre of the group, in the prison that they have transformed into to now loving home (Figure 3).

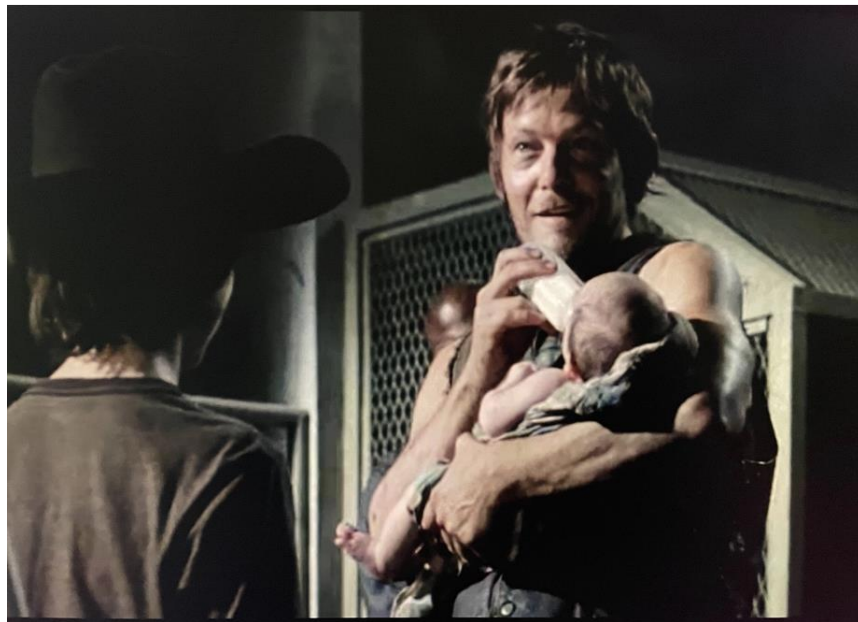


Figure 3. Screenshot of Daryl feeding Rick’s daughter in Season 3 of *The Walking Dead*

As a queer reader, I identify with the acceptance of chosen family and models of caregiving outside of the biological connection. In addition to this, it is a family unit not made of normative reproduction and biological linearity, but a family of Daryl's own choosing. This family is supported by the prison-turned-home environment which can then be read as a queered space. While I have so far explored Daryl’s narrative queer trajectory through a distrust of anti-

establishment frameworks and chosen family, the remaining sections examine the possibilities for a queer butch identification.

### **Perceiving Butchness**

Lindner discusses her engagement with queer films which precisely explore the female body's movement and tactility, calling these investigations 'textural analysis.'<sup>12</sup> Again, it is not that I wish to divorce butchness from the queer body, but rather explore how the character's codes, movements, and gestures evoke a queer butchness.<sup>13</sup> Unlike many other presumed male cisgender characters on the show, Daryl's body, what covers it and what surrounds it, are sites of investigation. He is often framed hiding his chest from view, moving away from the group on his motorcycle or permanently attached to his crossbow.

The lack of visibility given to Daryl's chest, never seen without his shirt, simultaneously encourages a separation of his gender presentation from the characteristics of his physical body. While not universal, I was initially drawn towards the visual codes embedded in Daryl's clothing and style, which read as queer anti-assimilative butch fashion. This ranged from his particularly layered short haircuts and ripped flannel shirts (Figure 4), to motorcycles, leather jackets, and bandanas annually donned by Dykes on Bikes since 1976.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the series Daryl's character adds layers to his outfits: a leather vest, long sleeves, capes. And as his hair grows longer and the textual layers increase in later seasons, the body in question became more ambiguously sexed as the clothing further disguises the bodies shapes.





Figure 4. Daryl Dixon in ripped flannel in Season 1 of *The Walking Dead*

My perception of these textures and layers as a visual butchness separated from the sexed body is not simply a mishap in visual representation but is also supported by the affectiveness of Daryl's embodied masculinity which exists outside patriarchal structures.<sup>15</sup> His outsider status among the group marks him as other, but the possibility of a queer butch reading expands as the other characters in the show also shift their perceptions of Daryl. As traced in the *NYtimes* piece around butch history, there are ways the media has stereotyped butch lesbians which differs from the realities of butch identity.<sup>16</sup> Daryl's representational trajectory mirrors this path, initially he appears as the butch stereotype (a lone wolf outcast from dominant society) and as his character develops, he expands towards the realities of butch identity (multiplicities of non-heteropatriarchal masculinity). My identification of this in his character is in line with Judith Butler who subverts the idea that masculinity is an exclusive purview of the male body.<sup>17</sup> This reading allows for a perception of on-screen butchness which reads cisgender men as borrowing butchness from lesbian identity as opposed to presuming lesbians are borrowing from cisgender male butchness.

While initially embodying a state of guardedness, the Daryl that emerges in season two, particularly through episodes four and five, begin to visualise a shift towards the kind-hearted character that permeates the remainder of the series. Daryl's movements throughout both episodes foreground his overcoming of trauma and abuse. Intent on finding Carol's (Melissa McBride) lost daughter in episode four, both victims of abuse from fathers, Daryl identifies with the young girl and grows closer Carol. In episode five, following a walker attack, Daryl is haunted by the imagined image of his brother Merle. Merle uses femmephobic and homophobic slurs to belittle Daryl: he accuses him of being "soft," labels him 'Rick's bitch', calls him Darylina, and tells him to remove his "high heels." Drawing courage from his newfound progression away from this repressive past, conjured in the image of Merle, Daryl escapes and returns to the group to find a sense of belonging.

The body is integral to this development, as Daryl which shifts from violent patterns of abuse. He initially does not speak much, other characters know little about his life before the apocalypse outside of this abuse, which mirrors his own reflection: he was "nothing before all this." The sense of becoming 'something' in the apocalypse evokes a gender in flux outside of societal boundaries as well as a perception of Daryl being made for *this* non-normative *world*. As his character evolves in the show his masculinities also orient towards nurture, protection, and friendship, which are made visible through materiality and movement. This development of Daryl's personality is born from a rejection of oppressive patriarchal violence before the apocalypse, which develops into a sense of physical self-reliance and emotional community interdependence, further mirroring a queer butch identification.

### **Blurry Sexuality**

Furthering the investigation of how codes transgress the sexed body, I will focus on the cinematic spatiality of the scene in *TWD*'s tenth season, which confirms Daryl's love interest. This episode (eighteen) furthers suspicion of Daryl's sexuality as *unseeable*, encouraging queer identifications while visually conferring heterosexuality. This episode, shot in long form and spanning five years, follows Daryl's solo journey to find Rick, who has been missing after a heroic attempt to save the group from a herd of walkers.

The length of the episode coupled with the character's newfound isolation emphasises the ambiguity of Daryl's sexuality, obscured from the viewer and from the other characters in the series. After years in isolation, Daryl meets a new character named Leah living in the woods. Leah's chosen family, like Daryl, is one born without biological relation – and likewise, spends long stretches of time alone. Their courtship is non-traditional and reads more as a character mirrored, which, given my prior reading of Daryl, is reminiscent of the lesbian figure as doubled which Teresa De Lauretis and Clara Bradbury-Rance explore at length in lesbian cinema.<sup>18</sup>

As the characters move between the space of the home and the woods, spatial orientation signifies the development of their relationship. Nonetheless, any suggestion of a sexual relationship is kept largely hidden from view. The only time the characters touch, through holding hands and presumably having sex offscreen, is positioned from Daryl's eyeline perspective. Leah, undressed in front of a fire, turns around and holds her hand out, he/we hold her hand and then everything fades to black. Compared to the numerous straight couples on-screen who have sex, and even the out gay and lesbian characters, it is the most reserved and suggested romantic scene of the show.



Figure 5. Blurry close-up of Leah and Daryl holding hands by the fire in Season 10 of *The Walking Dead*

The reasoning behind this scene is up for interpretation. On one hand, fandom around Daryl being asexual or gay as well as Covid precautions did influence the writers to avoid showing Daryl kiss the character Leah on-screen.<sup>19</sup> Considering the prolonged stretch of time where Daryl was denied a love interest, it was surprising all that was shown was a holding of hands (Figure 5). However, the fade out indicates that there is something the viewer *should* not see, which harkens to the Hays code when homosexuality and lesbianism could not be shown on-screen due to censorship.<sup>20</sup> The foregrounding looks and close-up shots by a fireplace are typically reserved for reading lesbian desire in cinema, as Bradbury-Rance states that the gaze intensifies desire and that “processes of looking continue to lay the groundwork of lesbian representability in twenty-first-century cinema.”<sup>21</sup> The delicacy around the relationship, its confinement to the one episode, and the similarities of Leah to Daryl continue to leave space for queer butch readings.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, *TWD* encourages a broader queer identification with Daryl's narrative and choices, being oriented towards a queer narrative trajectory and chosen family. I explored the specifications of reading Daryl's queerness along with his physical body, codes and gestures, those which provoke – I argue – a butch queerness. While either one of these trajectories could be analysed alone, together, they unpack the potential for a queer butch orientation which has typically been associated with non-cisgender, non-male, bodies.

## Notes

1. Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, "Thunder without Rain: Fascist Masculinity in Amc's the Walking Dead," *Horror Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): 125-46.
2. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Katharina Lindner, "Questions of Embodied Difference—Film and Queer Phenomenology." *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 199-217.
3. Sobchack, *Address*, p. 5.
4. See Sobchack, *Address* and Katharina Lindner, *Film Bodies: Queer Feminist Encounters with Gender and Sexuality in Cinema*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 209.
5. "The Walking Dead's Daryl Reveal Is a Missed Opportunity for Asexual Representation," Digital Spy, Last modified March 7, 2021, <https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/a35712754/the-walking-dead-daryl-leah-asexual-lgbtq/>.
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7. Zoë Shacklock, "Queer Kinaesthesia on Television," *Screen* 60, no. 4 (2019): p. 522.
8. Lee Edelman, *No future: queer theory and the death drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). And Jack Halberstam, *The queer art of failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
9. Kasandra J. DiSessa, "The Modern American Family in Amc's "The Walking Dead"" *Inquiries Journal* 13, no. 03 (2021).
10. Lindner, "Questions," p. 214.
11. Edelman, *No future*.
12. Lindner, *Film Bodies*, p. 3.
13. Sobchack, *Address* and Lindner, "Questions," and Shacklock, "Queer Kinaesthesia."
14. For more information on historical butch fashion see Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994). And "Dykes on Bikes," Dykes on Bikes, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.dykesonbikes.org>.
15. Lindner, "Questions," p. 209.
16. "The Renegades: Butches and Studs in Their Own Words," NY Times, last modified April 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/13/t-magazine/butch-stud-lesbian.html>
17. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
18. For more on the lesbian figure doubled see Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema*, and Teresa De Laurentis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
19. Screen Rant, "10 Things".
20. Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).
21. Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema*, p. 122.

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### **Author Biography**

Sam Tabet (they/them) is an adjunct instructor at NYU Tisch Collaborative Arts and a PhD researcher at the University of Strathclyde examining violent lesbians in queer horror films released between 2016-2020. They've presented papers on queer horror at the SCMS Conference, Queer Fears Symposium (UK) and the Audience Lost conference (Belgium). Sam produced the Peabody award-winning and Emmy-nominated film *Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four* (Tribeca, 2016). The feature documentary explores the wrongful conviction of four Latina lesbians known as the 'San Antonio Four' during the 'Satanic panic' era in Texas and played a crucial role in their exoneration. Sam founded the Queer Producers Network and has served as a screener and juror for Chicken & Egg Pictures, Tribeca Film Institute, NewFest, and InsideOut. They've spoken about queer visibility at SXSW, IFW, GLAAD, and Firelight Media.