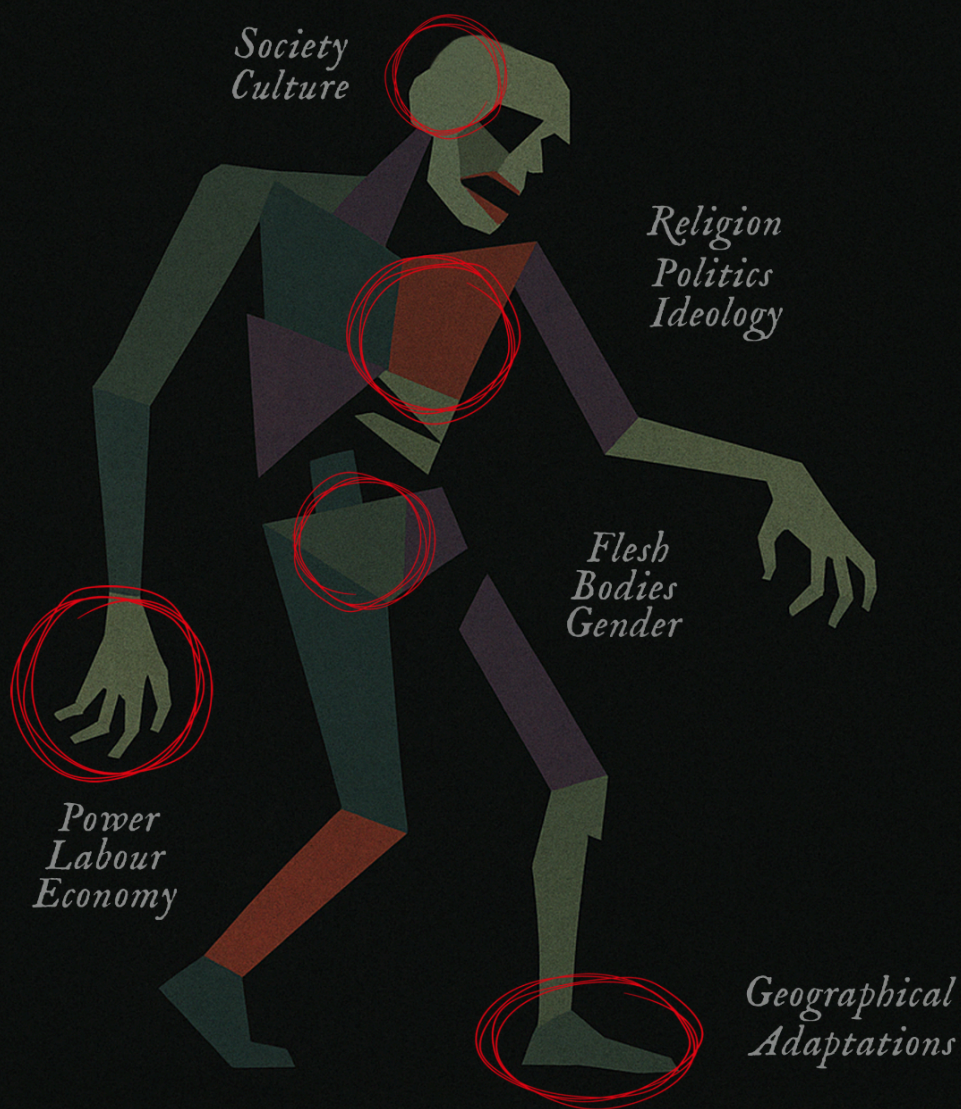


# DECONSTRUCTING THE ZOMBIE

CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL APPROACHES



**Edited by:**  
**Alfonso M. Rodríguez de Austria and Cristina Algaba**

*Dykinson, S.L.*



# DECONSTRUCTING THE ZOMBIE

## Cultural and Ideological Approaches

Alfonso M. Rodríguez de Austria and Cristina Algaba (Eds.)

*Dykinson, S.L.*

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## INTRODUCTION

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The fact that the cultural production of an era is influenced by social, ideological, ethical, and psychological concerns of the time it was created is common knowledge among academics. Perspectives, approaches, forms, themes, characters and plots emanate from a common breeding ground and generally succeed to the extent that the people paying for cultural products identify themselves with those themes, those concerns, those feelings of happiness and joys, and those fears. Cultural products are successful to the extent that they appeal to people to buy a book, pay for a ticket to attend a show or pay for a subscription to an audiovisual content platform.

Historically, the first task of a thriving cultural production is to create a mythology. It does not matter if the myths are dictated by a blind poet or viewed on the screen of a mobile phone. The functions of culture as the creator of ethical and behavioural models, as an instrument of social control, and as a stage for the expression of social concerns have mostly stayed the same. Gods, demigods, heroes and monsters still populate the human cultural milieu, and their adventures are consumed with the same relish—we suppose—as they were 2500 years ago, whether these adventures take place on Olympus, the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits, or Krypton.

The classic fantasy story shares a basic narrative structure: the initial peace and tranquillity are broken by an event that triggers an adventure in which the hero restores the balance, usually by killing the monster. Moreover, he—usually a “he”—is often rewarded with marriage or wealth. Traditional politics of representation bring us closer to the heroes with whom we identify—Us—and take us away from the monsters we reject—the Others. This introductory narrative proposition of identification and rejection has historically had a pedagogical and moral intention: We should be like the heroes, love them, and stay away from the monsters and fear them. There is also a political reading of this proposition: the monster embodies, more or less subtly, a threat to social stability (Ryan & Kellner, 1990, p. 179). Sometimes, the monster is not an external being but an internal one. While the hero

embodies humanity's most visible and luminous aspects, the monster represents its darkest and most repressed parts—fear, desire, hatred, anger, violence, and more (Clover, 1992, p. 20; Wood, 2018, pp. 57–72). These monstrous characteristics and mental contents are shared by people educated within the same culture, meaning they are both personal and social. We thus find that the monsters of an era, “considered from within the complex matrices that generate them, such as social, historical and cultural relations” (Leverette, 2008, p. 187), often reflect accurately contemporary personal and social anxieties in a given culture (McIntosh & Leverette, 2008, p. ix; Bishop, 2010, p. 7; Russell, 2014, p. 18; Bishop, 2015, p. 3; McAlister, 2017, p. 65). For example, werewolves symbolize the tension between culture and nature in human experience: the repression culture exerts on nature in the name of social order and progress, and the inevitable revolt of instinct against such repression. A werewolf (usually a male) is a subject who has not conquered himself, has allowed his animal part to dominate his human part, and is driven by the most primitive instincts, such as desire and rage.

The vampire, the most famous undead in contemporary Western culture until a few years ago (now he is disputing with the zombie for that position), also evokes psychological anxieties and social and political concerns, shared by Gothic horror in general, but with particular characteristics. The noble rank and the castle—the house of Gothic horror—of the classic vampire are reflections of an institution portrayed as decadent in bourgeois culture after the Industrial Revolution. Once the bourgeoisie seized political power by overthrowing the nobility in the more industrially advanced European countries, medieval practices of vassalage and total control over subjects' bodies began to be seen as unjust and obsolete—and thus came to be portrayed as evil in popular culture. From a psychological perspective, the new discourses on the unconscious and the power of higher minds over lower minds—for instance, hypnotism or animal magnetism proposed by Franz Anton Mesmer [1734–1815]—were also added to the figure of the vampire. The question of power, combined with an exquisite education and refined manners, resulted in depictions of the nobles/vampires as sexually depraved but so attractive and magnetic that the victims could not resist. This complete psychological domination of the vampires over their victims (generally adolescent or young women) recalls the dialectic of master and slave described by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, among the reflections on domination and servitude (Ch. IV). (These are the thoughts Marx would use in his later description of the relationships of domination in capitalism). For Hegel, masters become masters, and slaves become slaves, because the former fear nothing—not even death—while the latter do. As we shall see, the zombie plays the slave's role in this dialectic once he has been stripped of desire and will by his master, once he has been “objectified” and condemned to an eternity of labour exploitation.

One of the first records of the term “zombie” in a Western language (French), as a synonym for “living dead”, dates from 1792. We owe it to the writer Médéric Louis Élie

Moreau de Saint-Méry in his account of the early years of the Haitian War of Independence (Rhodes, 2001, p. 75). It is necessary to go back at least to the last quarter of the 19th century to find the term in English writing: the occult-loving writer Lafcadio Hearn used it in his accounts of his stay in Martinique between 1887 and 1889. When Hearn inquires about “zombies”, the natives’ responses are vague: the term may refer to anything from a dread-inducing ghost to the very sensation of fear evoked by walking alone through the jungle at night. (Luckhurst, 2015, pp. 18–19). After several decades of loose and erratic references, the figure of the zombie in Haiti is addressed in greater depth by William Seabrook in his book *The Magic Island* (1929). Seabrook describes the zombie as a person who seems to be dead but is instead kept in a state of lethargy by a sorcerer, whom he/she obeys unhesitatingly because he/she has no will of his/her own. The author proves the rootedness of this belief in Haitian popular culture by quoting the *Code Penal* (Criminal Code) of the Republic of Haiti of 1864:

Article 249. Also shall be qualified as attempted murder the employment which may be made against any person of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged. If, after the administering of such substances, the person has been buried, the act shall be considered murder no matter what result follows. (Seabrook, 1929, p. 103)

The aim of this “bewitchment” using substances, as described by Seabrook, was to obtain slaves who would work without rest (Part II, “Black Sorcery”, Chap. II “...Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields”).

Seabrook’s book was followed by Kenneth Webb’s play *Zombie* (1932) and the Halperin brothers’ film *White Zombie* (1932). The zombification through the practice of voodoo of a young white woman, as depicted in *White Zombie*, has a very different purpose than making her work on the sugar cane plantations. The relationship between horror and sex had begun to be exploited in the pulp fiction literature of the early decades of the twentieth century. The zombie was included as one of the characters in this literature that intended to provoke basic emotions such as arousal, fear, disgust or revulsion (Luckhurst, 2015, pp. 59–60).

The Halperin brothers revisited the theme in the 1936 film *Revolt of the Zombies*, shifting part of the action to Cambodia and focusing on the use of Cambodian zombies as stormtroopers on the Franco-Prussian front during World War I. As in *White Zombie*, the context remained the process of European decolonisation. Zombies made their comedic debut in Bob Hope and Paulette Goddard’s *The Ghost Breakers* (George Marshall, 1940). They soon returned to horror films with *King of the Zombies* (Jean Yarbrough, 1941) and *Revenge of the Zombies* (Steve Sekely, 1943), once again depicting Germany and the Nazis as the “witch doctors” who created zombies for war purposes. Perhaps the most memorable film of this era is *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), which addresses

cultural, religious, and racial differences in the Caribbean colonies with an uncommon awareness for the time (Wood, 2018, p. 37). The end of this era is marked by the British film *The Plague of the Zombies* (John Gilling, 1966), which returns to the theme of slavery and the dialectic of master and slave in Southwest England in 1860, culminating in the inevitable revolt of the working class against the oppressor class, the landed gentry, in this case. (The interest in the Haitian zombie in popular culture did not disappear entirely; see the book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* by anthropologist Wade Davis, 1985, and the eponymous film by Wes Craven, 1988).

It is not difficult to identify the social concerns reflected in the Haitian or voodoo zombie: slavery, labour exploitation, war, and colonial struggles (what Luckhurst describes as “anxiety about reverse colonisation and fantasies of race revenge”, 2015, p. 63). Concerns and anxieties of a more personal and psychological nature are perhaps less conspicuous, but they are also present in some of the cultural productions of the period. Themes such as the power of the mind, the unconscious, hypnotism, magic, racism, physiological differences between ethnicities (often linked to desire and sex), as well as the various nuances of desire and repressed sexuality, were common in these early narratives centred around the figure of the zombie.

The shock caused by the use of atomic bombs on cities and civilians in 1945, combined with the tensions of the Cold War that followed the end of the Second World War, led to the evolution of the zombie figure to reflect new and more overt social anxieties. These included fears arising from the excesses of science, which, for the first time in history, had demonstrated that divine intervention was no longer necessary to bring about the Apocalypse. Concerns about religion and magic shifted towards fears of science, and questions regarding slavery, the unconscious, and the power of the mind transformed into questions about the ideological battle between capitalism and communism, as well as brainwashing. Films such as *Creature with the Atom Brain* (Edward L. Cahn, 1955), *Invisible Invaders* (Edward L. Cahn, 1959), and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Edward D. Wood Jr., 1959) belong to this era. These narratives illustrate that “if we understand the movie monster as a metaphor for some form of social anxiety, the zombie becomes particularly apt” (Koven, 2008, p. 29). However, the symbolic plasticity of the zombie had only just begun to emerge.

In 1968, film director George A. Romero initiated a radical transformation of the zombie archetype. In his film *Night of the Living Dead*, zombification is caused by radiation from a NASA satellite returning to Earth after exploring Venus. The new zombies are no longer living people apparently dead, but rather genuinely dead individuals who return to life with minimal brain and motor functions. They no longer have a master to whom they must submit their will, and their sole volition, their only drive, their only desire, is to consume (human) flesh. They also bring a level of violence that is only comparable to that experienced by thousands of young Americans during the Vietnam War—a war whose horrifying televised images were not far removed from those depicted in the film.

The range of social anxieties and concerns evoked by the new characteristics of the monster evolved (McIntosh & Leverette, 2008, p. ix) over these decades, shifting from slavery to social inequality, from colonialism to racism, and from the dangers of magic that created monsters in abundance to the dangers of science that mass-produced them. While in *Night of the Living Dead* the threat came in the form of radiation from outer space, the causes of the zombie apocalypse soon shifted to human technology, radioactive waste, and bacteriological experimentation for military purposes. Films such as *The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue*, also known as *Let Sleeping Corpses Lie* (Jorge Grau, 1974), *The Return of the Living Dead* (Dan O'Bannon, 1985), and video game series such as *Resident Evil/Biohazard* (Capcom, 1996–present) follow the trajectory set by Romero in *Night of the Living Dead*. When one of the characters (the father whose family is falling apart) informs the group that his daughter has been bitten by “one of those things”, the protagonist replies, “Who knows what kind of disease those things carry?” This era incorporates new concerns about contagion, environmental abuse, bacteriological warfare, consumerism, the disintegration of the nuclear family, feminism, pacifism, homophobia, protest movements, and the psychopathic behaviour of capitalism.

At the beginning of the 21st century, zombie narratives entered a period of splendour, often referred to as a “Renaissance” (Bishop, 2010, p. 25), and within a few years, they had conquered the mainstream of Western popular culture. Films such as *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), *28 Weeks Later* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007), *Land of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2005), *28 Years Later* (Danny Boyle, 2025) and the *Resident Evil* saga (2002–2021) adapted the figure of the zombie to the new socio-political landscape resulting from the terrorist attacks of September 2001 in Washington and New York (Badley, 2008, p. 49; Bishop, 2010, p. 180; Bishop, 2015, pp. 73–78). Zombies in this era can be fast, intelligent, capable of reasoning, feeling, controlling their impulses, and maintaining their human essence, despite being compelled to eat human brains from time to time. When the new world order resulting from the United States’ “War on Terror” after 9/11 combined with the global economic crisis of 2008, zombies found the perfect environment in which to flourish, spread, and evolve. While the classic vampire embodies, in a certain sense, the decadence of the ancien régime and its relations of vassalage, the zombie—both Haitian and “Romerian”—more effectively than any other monster reflects the decadence of capitalism (not its end, but its cyclical crises) and its relations of production. The zombie is by its merit “the capitalist monster” (Newitz, 2006, p. 2), “the perfect monster for the age [of 1929 crisis]” (Russell, 2014, p. 22), a monster that “emerges during times of economic crisis” (Fojas, 2017, p. 62), “the official monster of the recession” (McNally, 2012, p. 1): hungry, shabby, homeless, nowhere to go, nothing to do, consumerist with nothing to consume, a menace to the social order, resentful of a society which s/he/it does not belong to any more, lurking from the other side of the fence, and looking enviously at those who have something—life, flesh.

Three significant milestones in the conquest of mainstream popular culture were the millions of viewers who watched *The Walking Dead* every week since 2010 (reaching an average weekly audience of 10 to 17 million viewers in the United States between 2012 and 2017), Hollywood star Brad Pitt starring in the zombie film *World War Z* in 2013, and Disney Channel's production of the teen zombie musical *Zombies* (Paul Hoen) in 2018. In recent years, the proliferation of video games, films, series, novels, and merchandise has flooded the daily lives of Western societies and other culturally connected communities. The video game industry, which created a specific genre for zombies—survival horror (*Resident Evil* [*Biohazard*], Capcom, 1996)—has produced and continues to produce masterpieces such as the classics *Resident Evil 1*, *2*, and *3* (Capcom, 1996, 1997 and 1999) and *The House of the Dead* (Sega, 1996), as well as modern titles like *Dead Island*, *Dead Island Riptide* and *Dead Island 2* (Techland, 2011/2013; Dambuster Studios, 2023), *The Last of Us Part I* and *Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2013/2020), *Days Gone* (SIE Bend Studio, 2019), and the various remakes and new entries in the *Resident Evil* saga. Zombie literature includes Max Brooks's *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) and *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006), Mira Grant's *Newsflesh* series, and Stephen King's *Cell* (2006).

This extensive cultural production has brought with it a wealth of ideas, emotions, and situations that reflect both old and new social concerns and debates. During these years, the zombie has proven to be “a mass metaphor”, “a figure that binds together other figures in a dense network of meanings” (Rutherford, 2013, p. 18). Some of the themes explored in the zombie narratives, as analysed in different chapters of this book, include new forms of social inequality, prejudice against homosexuality, the rise of the far right and libertarianism, the first election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (2016), immigration, new forms of racism, emerging socio-political scenarios, and the tensions of a society in permanent economic crisis and increasing ideological radicalisation. To this era belong series such as *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022), *Fear The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2015–2023), *In the Flesh* (BBC Three, 2013–2014), *Z Nation* (SyFy, 2014–2018), *iZombie* (The CW, 2015–2019); films such as *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* (Bruce LaBruce, 2008), *Ojuju* (C. J. Obasi, 2014), *Juan of the Dead* (*Juan de los muertos*, Alejandro Brugués, 2015), *Outbreak 2020* (Banji Oyemaja, 2015), *I am a Hero* (*Ai amu a hîrô*, Shinsuke Satô, 2015); novels as Mira Grant's *Newsflesh* series; and games such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) and *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), which were successfully adapted for HBO Max by Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann in 2023 and 2025.

Academic studies on the zombie have multiplied at the same pace as cultural production, giving rise to the discipline of “zombie studies”, firmly supported by the *Contributions to Zombie Studies* book series, directed by Kyle William Bishop for McFarland Publishers. It is difficult to encompass the vast number of academic texts devoted to the zombie, “the only modern myth” according to Deleuze and Guattari (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 2000, p. 335). Like the literary corpus, the cinematic corpus

is nearly impossible to cover—the monster of the crisis is a cheap monster to film. At the same time, video games still maintain a manageable level for an academic—or a group of academics—specialising in zombies.

The concepts associated with the figure of the zombie, a “floating signifier” according to Hogle (Bishop, 2010, p. 3), have crossed the boundaries of cultural studies to be applied in various fields, including Economics (McNally, 2012; Glen & James, 2016; Krugman, 2020), Politics (Harman, 2010; Drezner, 2011; Giroux, 2014), Sociology (Beck, 2000; Vervaeke, Mastropietro & Miscevic, 2017), Religion (Paffenroth & Morehead, 2012; Moreman, 2018), and Philosophy (Greene & Mohammad, 2006; Fernández Gonzalo, 2011; Díaz & Meloni, 2016).

In 2007, Matt Mogk founded the Zombie Research Society “as an organisation dedicated to the historical, cultural, and scientific study of the living dead”. The third founding principle of the ZRS was “[t]he zombie pandemic is inevitable, and survival of the human race is crucial. It’s simply a matter of when, so be prepared”. Since 2020, this principle does not sound so far from reality.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our reality began to resemble what we had seen in zombie narratives. COVID-19 has transformed reality into a kind of zombie fiction, or, conversely, turned zombie fiction into a premonition of what the world might be like if a deadly virus were to ravage it. Empty streets, checkpoints, closed airports, curfews, shortages of goods, panic, fear of contact with our loved ones, groups of people singled out and blamed, rejection of immigrants, isolation at home, loneliness, tension, increased hate speech, rising mental illness, political radicalization, social disintegration... All these are scenarios we had already witnessed in zombie fiction before experiencing them in reality.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has not experienced a moment of calm. The crisis catalyzed deep economic and political tensions that have since erupted across multiple fronts. In Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine—ongoing since 2022—has reignited large-scale warfare on the continent and intensified global competition for critical resources such as gas and grain. In the Middle East, the conflict in Palestine has escalated into a brutal and prolonged war, marked by terrorism, ethnic violence, and the systematic dehumanization of the other. Meanwhile, long-standing hostilities between India and Pakistan over Kashmir continue to simmer, with repeated border skirmishes and nationalist rhetoric keeping the region on a knife’s edge.

Across Africa, multiple armed conflicts are unfolding, often away from global media attention. Sudan has plunged into civil war, displacing millions and triggering a growing humanitarian catastrophe. In the Sahel region, jihadist insurgencies, ethnic violence, and coups d’état have destabilized countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In the Horn of Africa, tensions between Ethiopia and regional groups and between Eritrea and its neighbors

remain unresolved. These conflicts, though diverse in origin, are often exacerbated by climate stress, economic fragility, and external geopolitical interests.

Meanwhile, the exhaustion of fossil fuels—the foundation of modern industrial civilization—continues to approach inexorably. The European Union, in a bid to protect its energy security, has extended the classification of nuclear power as “green energy” until 2045.

In the United States, the return of Donald Trump to power in 2025 has brought a renewed wave of aggressive economic nationalism. A self-declared “war on tariffs” has been launched to reconstruct domestic industry and decouple from Chinese manufacturing. At the same time, Trump has intensified policies targeting immigration, framing migrants as a threat to national security and economic stability. These measures include militarizing the southern border, expanding deportation programs, and restricting asylum protections—effectively turning immigration into an internal front of conflict.

A spectre haunts the world: the spectre of permanent crisis. Indeed, the forthcoming social, economic, and political conditions will favour zombie narratives, ensuring their continued presence in our cultural agenda. This book provides approaches to most of the aforementioned topics, organised around six significant areas of study: 1. Power, Labour, and Economy; 2. Ethics, Religion, and Society; 3. Flesh, Bodies, and Gender; 4. Politics and Ideology; 5. Geographical Adaptations; 6. Social and Cultural Manifestations. Each area comprises 4 to 6 chapters, covering a wide range of topics.

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**PART I**  
**POWER, LABOUR & ECONOMY**



**CHAPTER 1.**  
**FEAR THE FETISH: MEDIA, MONSTER CAPITALISM**  
**AND THE META-MYTH OF ZOMBIES**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

In line with Žižek’s claim (Fiennes, 2012) about it being easier to imagine the apocalypses than it is to imagine the end of capitalism, thus acknowledging capitalism pervasiveness in our collective imaginary, we approach the zombie figure as a symptomatic ideological representation of capitalism working at multiple levels (Boluk & Lenz, 2010). Drawing on a variety of approaches from mediated ideology (Gramsci, 1975; Žižek, 1989; Marx & Engels, 2001), we treat zombies both as an archetype of modernity imagery as well as possessing historically specific ideological functions of framing contemporary capitalist contradictions.

As per Latin root of monster—*monstrum* and *monere*—zombies as monsters both “reveal” and “hide” phenomena. They provide an ideological ground where people acquire critical consciousness because zombies “demonstrate”, but also create the conditions for false consciousness because they hide actual societal problems behind images and metaphors. Accordingly, we suggest that, while depicting that apocalypse threatens our way of life, zombie representations may not necessarily negate capitalist reality but symbolically mediate it (Magistrale, 2005).

On the one hand, zombies symbolize fetishization processes in a capitalist economy, replacing relations among people with relations among objectified people, ergo, things. Thus, zombies appear as subjects turned into inert objects, then turned into living objects, which seem to have taken a life on its own, i.e. a fetish, which confronts humanity “as something hostile and alien” (Marx, 1990, p. 272). On the other hand, as interstitial figures between life and death, lacking “clear defined boundaries” (Platts, 2013, p. 551), zombies represent the fear of liminality tied to a sense of conjunctural crisis. Zombies are fearful

creatures because they dance in the gray area between what Agamben (1995) calls “bare” and “recognized” life.

In order to advance our argument, we first understand zombies as an archetype of the dialectical narrative of modernity. Similar to Frankenstein, zombies are man-made monsters produced by modernity that rebel against humanity: the zombie represents the dream for an absolutely exploitative labor theory of value. We then expound our dialectical reading of zombies as both triumphant colonization of capitalism’s fetishism and alienation, as well as a symptom of a critical transition of neoliberalism to a post-globalization and post-democratic rhetoric. We illustrate our reading by examining several media representations of zombies, such as *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022), *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009) and *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013).

## 2. ZOMBIES AS A TRIADIC IDEOLOGICAL SIGN

In our view, the reason to make sense of zombies through the interpolation of media images and ideological constructs is ultimately based on the assumption that, as monsters, zombies are master signifiers, in the Lacanian sense of being semantic containers without a clear semantic content (Žižek, 1989). In other words, what they really signify is not a particular figure of monstrosity but, more broadly, a particular set of social relations historically inhabited by contiguous but also distinct objects. Therefore, in line with Cohen’s theses on monstrosity (1996), zombies possess a surplus of meaning that can only be understood in larger frameworks, such as the one provided by the study of cultural and ideological mediations. Because of this capability of zombies to defer ideological meaning, we treat them as a sign operating simultaneously in multiple semiotic systems.

More specifically, and echoing Barthes (1976), we argue that mediated representations of zombies operate as meta-myths and comprise three main levels: a denotative, a connotative one and finally an archetypal one. First, a meta-myth comprises a denotative or literal meaning that makes sense of zombies as monsters with particular representational features that common viewers pertaining to the same community of interpretation would recognize (Panofsky, 1970), such as the decomposed body, the blood, the spasmodic way of walking, the particular gurgling noise et cetera.

The second level, defined by Barthes as connotative, signals the association of zombies to historic socio-cultural dynamics such as, as we will discuss later, a perceived failure of globalization and the 2007–2008 crisis. Such level cannot necessarily be associated with visual signs but rather to an overall mode of representation, about for instance the particular insertion of zombies in the general narrative: i.e. not simply what the zombies do but how they do it and in what context. For instance, there is a significant historic specific difference in placing zombies in a 1980s shopping mall as in Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) rather than having them assaulting Jerusalem’s walls as in Foster’s *World War Z* (2013).

Finally, what we define as the archetypal level, in which the just mentioned second order sign becomes the signifier for another level of representation that adds a sedimented sociocultural level of signification coming from the past, which in this case derives from the entrance of zombie to deep collective imagery of a given society. The notion of archetype derives from Jung's (1959) psychoanalytical approach, according to which archetypes then resurface conscious life as recurring characters on social narratives—thus both in fiction and historical reconstructions of social life—such as the hero, the villain, the sidekick, the fool, the sage, the rogue, the damsel in distress, and last but not the least, the monster, which operates as an ideological archetype.

The ideological valence of archetypes consists in being overtime crystallized ideological elements that have been operating for so long to the extent they become an element of unquestioned substrata of truth. In our view, the body of the monster represents the materialization of violated basic ideological boundaries. In the case of the zombie, we believe this archetype symbolizes loss agency and dehumanization linked to anxieties and fear of modernity. More specifically, zombies signal a fetishist dynamic according to which, when a system like capitalism becomes dominant and colonizes the entirety of social life then the inanimate system of capitalism takes life on its own, subtracting from people, which tend to become inanimate and dead.

Thus, summing up, seen this way, zombies illustrate an ideological dynamic of monsters (i.e. *monere+mostare*) that hides and signals, reflects and distorts at the same time. Thus, the zombie figure “reflects and refracts another reality. Therefore, it may distort that reality or be true to it or may perceive it from a special point of view, and so forth” (Volosinov, 1973, p. 10).

By treating zombies as a meta-myth, i.e. signs working at three united but distinct levels of signification, means acknowledging the archetypal ideological order against a more historically contingent one. Thus, an important implication of that is that while zombies entered the collective imagery since the early twentieth century—thus gradually becoming a cultural and ideological archetype—it is possibly the specific social and historical context of the recent years that explains the spectacular explosion of cultural artifacts tied to them.

Such zombie renaissances (Platts, 2013) in popular culture encompasses all sorts of media (e.g., comics, video games, board games, cinema, and TV shows), in this case we are particularly interested in exploring audiovisual production, arguably one of the fundamental reservoirs for both ideological archetype and their historicization, which experienced a spectacular increment of 400% in the last two decades (Crockett & Zarracina, 2016). For Dendle (2012), zombies have re-emerged as archetypes of anxiety due to a renewed sense of instability, such as the one generated by terrorist attacks:

Images of destruction, plague, and civil collapse are especially poignant in the post-9/11 world, and it's tempting to think of the zombie movie resurgence in the 2000s as a response to that event. But *28 Days Later* was mostly shot before the attacks on the Twin Towers, and *Resident Evil* had been in the works since 1999. (pp. 7–8)

In addition to the undeniable trauma of 9/11 mentioned by Dendle, we hypothesize that the last two decades have been impacted majorly by complex global issues such as migration waves, events such as 2007–2008, and an emerging political economy of debt.

In the specific historical context considered here, we believe that the broad historical category that can help us make sense of zombies in a capitalist scenario is not the apocalypse/end of the world/catastrophes, but a crisis, which is more suitable to link zombie to “monster” capitalism and its cyclical downturns.

In respect to crises understood as catastrophic events, thus linked to apocalypses, we consider crisis as an ambivalent phenomenon, destructive as much as constructive, more indicating an unstable and contradictory situation rather than epilogue, much more suitable to represent the liminal archetype of zombie as well as its historicization in the recent historical context. In fact, in our view, crisis constitutes a historical as much as politico-economic category to understand both current capitalism and capitalism as a general mode of production, its contradictory dynamism and the fetishism surrounding it. From this point of view, thus, zombies offer a critical stand against capitalism, effectively displayed in Romero's movies, but also help mediate its contradictions.

In order to exemplify the ideological valence of zombies, we consider here specific themes identified in media representation, such as films such as *Zombieland*, *World War Z*, *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004) and TV series such as *The Walking Dead*.

## 2.1. The Resurgence of Social Darwinism

While among the many movies in which zombies bring the dramatic apocalypse, *Zombieland* stands out for its belonging to the peculiar genre of comedy horror. In the film, zombies are ideological functions, but also homologically unvaried. In this instance, zombies hide, show, tell things, and most of all mediate the present.

In the film, zombies operate as the inhabitants of a new social order in which people can survive only by following the iron law dictated by a social Darwinism defined by the rules of survival of the movie's protagonist, Columbus (Jesse Eisenberg). In our interpretation, the rules signal the social necessities of neoliberal subjectivity shaped by post-Fordist mobility, labour precarity (i.e. underpaid, unstable jobs, and exploitative jobs). In fact, as per description of the protagonist Columbus, life becomes a nomadic “bumpy ride” that requires “cardio”, “wear(ing) your seat belts”, “limbering up”, “travel light”, complete with a “Swiss knife”, “no attachments”, complimented by the oblivious “shake it

off” and with instrumental moral “don’t be a hero” and “check you back seat” which reveals a constant state of social paranoia.

At the same time, the movie also provides an ideological dis-identification with consumerism. Compared to Romero’s movies, which laid the foundation of zombies as ideological critique of 1970s American consumerism, transforming people in addicted commodity conspicuous consumption (Bishop, 2010), *Zombieland* historicizes that with three scenes in which the protagonists vandalize commodities rather than worshipping them as in the case when the protagonists stop by in Southwest gift store and destroy everything, or inside Hollywood celebrities’ home.

The protagonists then overcome the sort of *naïveté* required for ideology to work as misrecognition dynamic, and become instead ideologically cynical subjects (Žižek, 1989), who recognize the zombie’s monstrosity as necessary social monstrosity instead of being “otherness”. Such cynicism collapses the first two semiotic levels, qua the distance between the denotative literal-monstrosity and the connotative metaphorical monstrosity, but maintains the hegemonic function of the capitalist archetype.

It is, in fact, such a particular ideological stance that explains the distancing of this particular movie from horror to romantic comedy. Therefore, returning to the social Darwinist reading and the rules of survival, romance, and affective relations between the protagonists—i.e. the reconstitution of families, and the perspective of potential biological re-production among the lead male and female—makes *Zombieland* a highly pedagogical tool for post-Fordist subjectivities rather than an end-of-the-world preparationism.

## 2.2. The Zombie Crowd: The Warfare of the Excluded

While in *Zombieland*, zombies are depicted as individual monsters replacing the particular subjectivities previously inhabiting those bodies—we find accordingly social types such as the soccer mom, the young professional, fascinating neighbour—in *World War Z*, zombies represent a fast-moving mob. It is a hoard of undistinguished fast-moving grayish bodies that instils fear of revolutionary changes due to trespassing old boundaries such as class boundaries (the revenge of the working class), political boundaries, populism, and state boundaries as mass immigration. In the most spectacular moments, zombies are represented as a quick-moving swarm that reminds Le Bon’s images of *The Crowd* (1947). According to Le Bon’s development of the crowd echoes the process of becoming zombie,

during “submergence” the individuals in the crowd lose their sense of individual self and personal responsibility and become anonymous, in the contagion stage, propensity for individuals in a crowd to unquestioningly follow the predominant ideas and emotions of the crowd, finally in the submersion, the crowd become propelled by irrational and unconscious drivers derived from the uncivilized nature of and archaic shared subconscious. According to Freud, the crowd unlocks

the unconscious mind, which represents the least common denominator among diverse individuals.

The zombie crowd, depicted in the particularly iconic image of assaulting the fortified walls of Jerusalem, do not bring the apocalypse, as in most movies of this genre, but a war between included and excluded. The contagion brings circulation of some kind of class warfare of the masses that, in Le Bon, almost before the letter, envisions a zombie mob:

In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies. When the structure of a civilization is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall. (1947, p. *xviii*)

Where does this mob come from? There is an interesting evolution of a similar theme that links *World War Z* and Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). While both focus on zombies as a mass that moves within hoards, the *telos* is significantly different. Romero essentially points through zombie capitalism's total colonization, it is monster capitalism that trespasses all boundaries such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic classes, or cultural barriers.

Conversely, in *World War Z*, decades after the triumph of capitalist consumerist ideology, we witness capitalist "destructive construction" with its tendency towards plutocracy and the dramatic erosion of the middle class. In this case, zombies represent the mass of excluded, not simply symbolic trespassing, but literally trying to access the privilege of wealthier classes and wealthier countries. Another aspect of a similar general theme of class reconfiguration of Western societies is also advanced by the film *Shaun of the Dead*, an intentional spin-off and satire of Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*. In this movie, the hero pushing back against zombies is Shaun, characterized as a clerk, bare minimum worker, and member of the new working class in the post-industrial era. *Shaun of the Dead* is more reconciliatory because it teaches that social inertia and not revolution can be the best answer to survive.

*World War Z* sublimates the anxieties of globalization already present since the 1980s by the fear of global contagion devastating epidemics such as AIDS, some kind of influenza like in *Resident Evil* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2002; based on the 1996 video game) and *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) as result of capitalist greed symbolized by a research lab that prompted the 2011 "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse", a centre for Disease Control and Prevention guide on how to for a widespread zombie epidemic outbreak. Along the same line, Rodríguez de Austria (2017) suggests that the film uses social Darwinist, overpopulation and migration invasion arguments to ideologically support far-right positions.

The preparedness against zombies signals an inexhaustible faith in techniques and technologies, which in many movies caused the zombie plague, but also can save civilization

from them. In this sense, interestingly enough, in both *Dawn of the Dead* and *World War Z*, technology seems to be the last frontier against troubles. For instance, in both movies helicopters represent a sacred technology that can stay out of contagion, hovering high above monsters. In the case of *The Walking Dead* series, their fugacious appearance represents the hope of the existence of government, thus order and control against the chaos.

### **2.3. Localism/tribalism as a new Globalization**

Another zombie production that seems to explore the implications and answers to globalization is *The Walking Dead*, a very successful TV series released in 2010. *The Walking Dead* is a political and social laboratory post crisis, post mass immigration, and post globalization. Throughout the series, survivors grapple with their respective relationships to politics, how they define “being alive” post-crisis, and death. The survivors peregrinate around visiting and antagonizing different models of societies. In visiting these different societies (and attempting to re-build their own), the characters realize that their previously understood societal structures cannot be repeated, but rather reconceptualized. Although reimagining a better society operates as the golden solution throughout the series (as it does within the perceived benefits of globalization), the chase for a previously understood sense of normalcy positions the survivors as no better than the monsters. Throughout the series, characters mourning the loss of loved ones who turn into zombies lose a “living” interpersonal relationship as a result. Dr. Edwin Jenner, the sole scientist at The Center for Disease Control, dies in the facility explosion after losing hope to find a cure. Survivors consistently attempt to maintain moral and ethical understandings of their surroundings; ultimately, they prioritize keeping their bodies alive over any deeper spiritual awareness. Within *The Walking Dead* universe, communities attempt to re-create boundaries between individuals; in a post-crisis wasteland, this goal simply ensues chaos. Forms of tribalism become the “answer”, as opposed to the promise of science, political structure, and hope.

However, the range of such social experimentation is actually quite narrow, as most in this universe; zombies are terrifying but also depicted as a stage for bands of militias that have replaced the dissolved social fabric of the United States. Thus, *The Walking Dead* merely explores different developments of right-wing-ness, from libertarianism to survivalism: rugged independence, a hands-off government, and most of all, guns, loss of guns. Thus, the answer this TV series offers to globalization is not a global class warfare but a sort of introversion towards tribalism, localism and nationalist populism.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS: FEARING THE CRISIS

In many ways, zombie's monstrosity constitutes a rich reservoir of ideologically primed social metaphors, which provides available social hermeneutics concerned with collective anxieties about the largest monster of all, capitalism. The power of such metaphors is currently going beyond the fictional representation as it is becoming a social category subject to policy making, especially when combined with another archetype of monster capitalism, technology. From the combination of "mass society" perspective of Information Communication Technology and zombies emerges the figure of the smartphone zombie, or smombie. Smombies represent the slowly walking inattentive people attached to their phones, which causes public safety issues for themselves and others. This has led city planners to adopt special traffic signals and special sidewalks for them.

While the historical and cultural heritage of monsters is as old as humanity, every *époque* had its monstrous self-understanding, and zombies seem to be particularly telling of capitalist representations: zombie capitalism accounts for a general sense of de-humanization but also a dynamic that feeds on crisis, which is understood in this chapter as a historic stall, i.e. the undead is the historic past that cannot die and the historic new that cannot be born.

In fact, zombies' monstrosity derives more from "a visual and horrific revelation of the [social] truth" of such a crisis rather than their hideous physical semblances (Seneca, in Staley, 2010, p. 80). However, zombies are trickily revelatory in the same way as Delphic oracles: one must consult and interrogate them very carefully. In fact, zombies literally embody a general fetishism of capitalist society, i.e. the undead: or attributing life to the dead and death to the living, in other words, subjectifying the object and objectifying the subject.

We tried to make sense of such binomial of suggestiveness and opacity by identifying the overlapping of three united but distinct analytical levels of ideological signification, which are based on the assumption of a parallel process of sedimentation of meanings along historical and psychological depth that forms what we defined as meta-myth. Accordingly, we find the zombie as an archetype, the semi "ancestral" figure that, like Shelley's Frankenstein, warns us about the Goyan nightmares of modernity, such as technological dystopias, alienation, exploitation, and dehumanization.

While historically determined, the zombie meta-myth, because of its *longue durée* kind of temporality, appears like an immutable archetype of modern "degeneration". Then, the zombie in its mythical level, the connotative meaning connected to the specific context that has produced a particular generation of zombie (such as the white zombies, the Romero's zombies and the one of the so-called "Zombie Renaissance"). And finally, the denotative level tied to the specific representation of a particular movie/TV show.

In relation to the denotative level of visual representations, the examples examined in this chapter seem to confirm our understanding of zombies as master signifiers, a sort of

ductile critical stage for symbolically visualizing diverse kinds of current social concerns, such as neoliberal subjectivities, globalization its reactionary tribalism and mass immigration.

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## CHAPTER 2. ZOMBIE POWER. BETWEEN SLAVERY AND REBELLION

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The first notable appearance of the term “zombie”, according to Kieran M. Murphy (2011, p. 48), is to be found in *Le Zombi du grand Pérou, ou La Comtesse de Cocagne*, a semi-autobiographical novel published by Pierre-Corneille Blessebois in 1697. Nearly a century later, in 1792, Moreau de Saint-Méry would define the term “zombie” as a “Creole word that means spirit, revenant” (Rhodes, 2006, p. 75). In 1819, the poet Robert Southey used the term as a metaphor for referring to how imperialism repressed the will of colonised peoples (Pulliam, 2007). However, it was not until 1929, with the publication of William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island*, which in turn inspired Kenneth Webb’s play *Zombie* (1932) and, subsequently, Victor Halperin’s film *White Zombie* (1932), that the term became popular, establishing the guidelines for the initial exploitation of the figure of the zombie in popular culture according to Haitian folklore:

The zombie, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life—it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive. (Seabrook, 1929, p. 93)

It is this idea of the existence of beings without will, who act by the desires and orders of a master, that has led us to begin this chapter with the Haitian zombie. Even though the zombie’s representation has evolved over the years, especially after George A. Romero’s contributions, that reference to the duality between master and slave, which allows us to ponder power, still prevails.

### 2. THE IMPERIALIST DREAM AND THE SLAVE’S NIGHTMARE

Haitian zombies are not truly seen as terrifying monsters, as they lack the ability to choose whether or not to harm someone (Pulliam, 2007; Lauro & Embry, 2008)—the figure of Carrefour in *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) is a case in point. If at all, the monster would be the priest or the master performing the transformation (Bishop, 2010,

p. 19), an idea recuperated with nuances in films like *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017). Rather, zombies are seen as symbols of slavery—whether economic, political, or spiritual (Moreman, 2010). When a bokor revives a corpse or steals an individual’s spirit, it is to force them into servitude<sup>1</sup>. Thus, more than fearing zombies themselves, Haitians dread the possibility of being forced back into a life of slavery and eternal subjugation—both physical and spiritual—which would ultimately result in the loss of identity, autonomy, and control, including the power of speech (Gunn & Treat, 2005; Bishop, 2008, 2010; Inglis, 2010; Moreman, 2010). From a more extreme perspective, if possible, for Daniel Cohen, zombies can be understood as the last nightmare for slaves, for whom death would represent ultimate freedom (Lauro & Embry, 2008, p. 98).

Versus European creations such as Dracula, Frankenstein’s monster and werewolves, for Deleuze and Guattari (1985, p. 346), zombies constitute the only modern myth<sup>2</sup>. This is something to which Seabrook alludes in his novel: “It seems to me that these werewolves and vampires are first cousins to those we have at home, but I have never, except in Haiti, heard of anything like zombies” (Seabrook, 1929, p. 93). For Bishop, the zombie would be “a new monster for a New World” (2008, p. 145), which should be understood as the ultimate imperialist dream: “a slave laborer that is truly a thing, unthinking, unspiriting, and nonthreatening” (2008, p. 146).

However, what frightens Western audiences is not seeing black men with huge eyes like Carrefour or Legendre’s legion. Their fear stems from being aware that they, the white people, and especially white women—as in the case of Tourneur’s and Halperin’s works—can also be converted into zombies. As Kee remarks:

Haitian culture might be a threat, but it was clearly more threatening to some bodies than to others. White zombies benefited from their whiteness, because no matter how “black” they may have become as zombies, rescue from zombification was available. Thus, white Americans were never zombified to the same degree as the black zombies, who lacked names and friends fighting to free them. (2017, p. 44)

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of zombies as victims of a hoax based on the administration of tetrodotoxin—a toxin obtained from pufferfish, among others—see Ferrero and Roas (2011).

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Ferrero and Roas (2011) claim that “although an attempt has been made, from Eurocentrist positions, to consider the myth of the living dead as an exclusive creation of folklore and Haitian Creole tradition, this is to be found in all cultures, which demonstrates its universality as regards the common fear of death. Thus, in Nordic mythology there is the draugr, in Arab culture, the ghoul called “ghul”, in Western European culture, the revenant, and so on and so forth. Only in Southeast Asia does the term share the same common root, for instance, in China (jiangshi), Korea (gangshi) and Japan (kyonshi). The figure of the zombie is also tremendously popular in Nigeria”. (Original quote in Spanish. Translation made by a professional translator).

### 3. CONSUMERISM, SOCIAL VIOLENCE AND NOSTALGIA

In the 1950s, folklore was replaced by scientific threats and priests by mad scientists or alien races, which have traditionally been interpreted as a metaphor for the Communist Bloc that “turns human corpses into a slave army designed to invade and conquer” (Bishop, 2010, p. 19). One of the best examples of this would be Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Although the beings featuring in the film cannot really be regarded as zombies, they have a black look and slow movements that George A. Romero—who apparently drew inspiration more from the vampires featuring in Richard Matheson’s novel *I Am Legend* (1954) than the Haitian zombie (Moreman, 2010, p. 270)—would borrow in *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968). With Romero, film zombies acquired the ability to reproduce by infecting humans and ceased to be subject to a master’s will. Nevertheless, far from having cast off the chains of slavery, they were now shackled to a practically insatiable craving for human flesh, the zombie narrative being interpreted as a critique of contemporary capitalism and consumerism (Moreman, 2010). As a matter of fact, zombies are currently dual figures. They not only embody the workers but also the consumers of capitalism, thus perpetuating the logic of the system, for their one and only purpose is to consume human flesh, subsequently generating more consumers (Lauro & Embry, 2008).

On the other hand, the zombie can also be seen as a metaphor for citizens whose (in)action sustains the status quo, yet who also possess the potential to dismantle the very system they are immersed in and have, in some way, helped to create. In other words, the zombie symbolises both slavery and rebellion (Lauro, 2015), a dual vision that was already evident in the first Haitian manifestations. In this respect, the ability of voodoo priests to transform people into zombies would allow for a role reversal between the colonised and the colonisers, for zombification is none other than a process of “uncivilisation” that would ultimately pose a threat to the Western model that every attempt was being made to export (Bishop, 2008, p. 147). So, while the hegemonic model would be defined by the power wielded by those above over those below, zombies would make it possible to tip the balance, regardless of whether this is achieved by turning the tables or converting the populace into clones, thus permitting the creation of a more horizontal structure. As Lauro and Embry (2008, p. 98)<sup>3</sup> note, “The zombie is currently understood as simultaneously powerless and powerful”.

In the wake of a zombie holocaust, hierarchies, or at least the previously established hierarchical structures, become pointless, and institutional leaders have relinquished their

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<sup>3</sup> The authors offer an interesting reflection on this interpretation of the zombie as both slave and slave rebellion. To their mind, besides being a symbol of slave labour, the zombie would also serve as a metaphor for the slavery of human beings as prisoners in their own bodies, reflecting the Platonic maxim of the body as the tomb of the soul. However, zombies are, at the same time, capable of eluding this destiny of confinement by surviving the death of their bodies (Lauro & Embry, 2008, p. 90).

power, if not their lives. The official statement that is heard during the first seconds of the TV series *Z Nation* (SyFy, 2014–2018) illustrates this new scenario rather well: “The president is dead. This is an extinction scale event. Do not panic. Three years after the first infection, national governments have fallen. There is no cure” (“Puppies and Kittens”, S01E01<sup>4</sup>). But even though the main characters are fully aware of the new situation of violence and chaos into which they have been plunged, they continue to respect the country’s historical symbols, as reflected by their anger at those responsible for covering the Liberty Bell and Mount Rushmore with graffiti. “God bless the human race. But there’s still one jackass alive with a spray can”, says Steven “Doc” Beck when discovering the profanation of the US symbol of independence and abolitionism (“Philly Feast”, S01E03); in the episode “Going Nuclear” (S01E10) this same character wonders why people still lock their doors. In this way, the series seems to show the futility of trying to safeguard private property, for there are now other priorities. It also reflects the need to preserve the nation’s symbols because they recall a past when they had at least felt safe and secure.

The rules have changed, and those who held power in the old model of civilisation do not necessarily retain it, a sort of leitmotif not only in the series *Z Nation* and *The Walking Dead* but also, as could not be otherwise, in many films belonging to the subgenre. Returning to the cinema of Romero, in *Day of the Dead* (1985), Captain Rhodes attempts to retain his chain of command but is ultimately devoured by a horde of zombies after being shot by Bub, Dr. Logan’s experimental zombie. In a zombified society, where everyone faces the risk of joining the ranks of the living dead, the only way to resist is by uniting with others. In these films, the main conflicts typically arise between the survivors who, intentionally or unintentionally, put the lives of those around them at risk with their feuding. Illustrative examples include, among many others, the South Korean *Busanhaeng* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016). Also, *The Zombie Diaries* (Kevin Gates, 2006), in which a deadly scenario, like that produced by a zombie pandemic, becomes the ideal context for a wave of murders. In the aforementioned *Z Nation*, the news that Alvin Murphy is the key to discovering a vaccine for the zombie virus arouses the greed of the survivors, who, on the other hand, have no qualms whatsoever about killing each other to save their skins, delivering the rest of humanity from the pandemic being an utterly secondary concern. It is interesting how Murphy, imprisoned for postal fraud and used as an improvised “guinea pig” for the governmental experiments conducted in prison, became the most sought-after and valued person in the United States. However, since he was bitten by zombies just after being vaccinated, he not only manages to survive but also develops the ability to hypnotise—zombify at his whim—all those who have come into contact with his blood or saliva. A character who initially occupies the lowest rung of society is later granted superhuman powers, becoming a sort of “chosen one”.

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<sup>4</sup> S= Season; E= Episode.

Zombies are agents of chaos, yet they operate within the very logic of society itself (McAlister, 2012, p. 474), which may be what makes them so terrifying. The zombie is not merely the “other” posing an external threat, but also the “us”, as seen in *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978). The zombie is “the dual darkness, a consumed *doppelgänger* or an infected Narcissus who reflects my own fears, from which I will never be able to escape, because I cannot halt the infection, the curse, the plague that inhabits me” (Fernández Gonzalo, 2011, p. 29)<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, when the zombie apocalypse occurs, it is not death that is feared, but the transformation and the inevitability of it—a transformation that leaves us at the mercy of our instincts and condemns us to a life of reasonless action. Accordingly, zombies are also, in a sense, enslaved by their past. Romero has them visiting shopping centres, contending to go where they used to go. Similarly, in the Japanese film *I Am a Hero* (*Ai amu a hîrô*, Shinsuke Satô, 2015)—an adaptation of Kengo Hanazawa’s homonymous manga—the infected continually repeat those actions/roles to which they were accustomed when they were still alive. However, it is a repetition of past actions while being unaware of the whys and wherefores of that behaviour typical of automatons, for just as they are unable to recognise a relative or friend, so too is it likely that they will be incapable of knowing where they are. The maxim, “Zombies are autonomous, but incapable of autonomy” (McAlister, 2012, p. 473), which was already evident in the first manifestations of the phenomenon, still holds today.

But the zombies shuffled through the market-place, recognizing neither father nor wife nor mother, and as they turned leftward up the path leading to the graveyard, a woman whose daughter was in the procession of the dead threw herself screaming before the girl’s shuffling feet and begged her to stay; but the grave-cold feet of the daughter and the feet of the other dead shuffled over her and onward. (Seabrook, 1929, p. 99)

#### 4. THE RETURN OF THE SLAVE

As humans are incapable of surmounting the pandemic and propose a better model of society, their “salvation” involves turning the clock back to the pre-holocaust period, either by restoring the humanity of the zombies, as proposed in the series *In the Flesh* (BBC Three, 2013–2014) or by putting the living dead to good use. Concerning this last idea, it is interesting how several films have gone back to the roots of the zombie as an enslaved person, a worker without will who does not need to rest or ask for better working conditions, as occurs at the end of *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004), once everything seems to have returned to normal.

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<sup>5</sup> Original quote in Spanish. Translation made by a professional translator.

In this connection, in contrast to *Day of the Dead*, in which Dr. Logan insists that it is possible to convert zombies into docile beings, more recent films like *Fido* (Andrew Currie, 2006) and the short *Återfödelsen* (Hugo Lija, 2010) enquire into the possibility of converting zombies into a labour force at the service of the living, either thanks to a collar for domesticating zombies developed by the fictitious company ZomCom in the former, or by lobotomising them in the latter. In this vein, it is not now that any person can be transformed into a zombie, but that any zombie, irrespective of his or her past as a living being, can be converted into an “unqualified” worker. Thus, the living dead remain subservient—not always in a stable fashion—thus allowing them to be employed as cleaners, couriers or even sex toys. As to the latter point, noteworthy is Joyce Carol Oates’ novel *Zombie*, in which Quentin P., a character loosely based on the real serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, seeks to zombify a youngster by lobotomising him to have his way with him without resistance or complaint:

A true ZOMBIE would be mine forever. He would obey every command & whim. Saying ‘Yes, Master’ & ‘No, Master’. He would kneel before me lifting his eyes to me saying, ‘I love you, Master. There is no one but you, Master’ [...] His eyes would be open & clear but there would be nothing inside them *seeing* [...]. Nothing *passing judgement*. (Oates 1995, p. 49, original emphasis)

Nevertheless, in the novel, the main character not only reflects on what the zombie would be like but also on who would be the ideal candidate. Thus, after discarding university students because they would be missed, Quentin P. concludes:

A safer specimen for a ZOMBIE would be somebody from out of town. A hitchhiker or a drifter or a junkie (if in good condition not skinny & strung out or sick with AIDS). Or from the black projects downtown. Somebody nobody gives a shit for. Somebody should never have been born. (Oates, 1995, p. 28)

The zombie should be someone whose enslavement is of no concern to anyone, thus recuperating the notion pervading the first films dealing with the phenomenon. Indeed, this brings us back to the origins of zombies in the Caribbean, which, according to Pressley-Sanon (2016), coincided with the arrival of the Spaniards on the island of Hispaniola. After forcing the natives to toil until they were nearly driven to extinction, the Spaniards began transporting Africans to the island, whom they also worked to death (2016, p. 12).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Though zombies can be recognised and treated as “others”, they do not pose a threat and may even be helpful. The problems arise when they realise that they can alter that sort of

hierarchical relationship akin to that between master and slave. In other words, the actual conflict ensues when all the members of society become genuinely equal before the law imposed by the living dead, a law whose punishment is not death but being converted into beings without a will or the ability to decide, whose only objective is to persist in their new situation. Then, power changes hands and is transformed, for the power of a few at the top of the pyramid is transferred to the masses. Thus, the salvation of humanity implies surmounting the previous model of society, substituting competition with cooperation.

Zombies are not monsters with attributes that humans can be attracted to. They are human beings who have been made to pay for the sins they—or others, to whom they have given power, consciously or unconsciously—have committed. In short, zombies result from a society corrupted by an individualist ethic that promotes the survival of the strongest and the domination of some over others.

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**CHAPTER 3.**  
***iZOMBIE*. ZOMBIES AS COMEDIC VICTIMS OF THE NEOLIBERAL  
SYSTEM**

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**1. INTRODUCTION: FRAMING *iZOMBIE* IN ITS DISCURSIVE CONTEXT**

In literature and audiovisual fiction, zombies have traditionally embodied an endemic evil or the threat of the other since the fantasy genre has served as a reflection and commentary on society, displaying a markedly symbolic character in both its works and those of horror and science fiction. However, over the past years, this figure has undergone a transmutation leading to another type of zombie, far removed from the traditional soulless monster and in opposition to the cliché of otherness, represented as a victim of the system and even playing the main role in the story, which can be narrated from his or her point of view. This transformation has been explored from several perspectives, primarily from comedy.

This is the discursive context of *iZombie* (The CW, 2015–2019), a TV adaptation of a graphic novel written by Chris Roberson and illustrated by Michael Allred (Vertigo, 2010–2012), whose underlying message is a flippant but acid reflection on the current world akin to the “liquid modernity” scenario (Bauman, 2013; Palazzi, 2015) in which everything is distorted and likely to be parodied. Likewise, *iZombie* forms part of a vast corpus of audiovisual products linking capitalist contexts to zombie fiction, an aspect that has also been explored at a theoretical level in many recent studies (Serrano Cueto, 2009; Boluk & Lenz, 2010; Fernández, 2011; Christie & Lauro, 2011; McNally, 2011; Comentale & Lenz, 2014; Ferrer, 2015). This association of concepts is based on the perceptible connections deriving from an economic system as implacable and lethal as a virus, in which human beings, dormant-like alienated beings, are appreciated solely for their potential as consumers, for “capitalism acts like a zombie epidemic, it is the thinking of the hoard: covering everything, destroying everything” (Serrano Cueto, 2009, p. 43).

*iZombie* is an interesting object of study because of its dual narrative. It relies on tools such as humour to introduce unpleasant situations while offering a bland critique of the current neoliberal context, which will be described in the following pages.

## 2. *iZOMBIE* AND OTHER ZOMBIE PRODUCTS IN HUMOROUS CONTEXTS: A BRIEF AUDIOVISUAL REVIEW

Zombies as iconic monsters have acquired new meanings in the contemporary audiovisual landscape, abandoning the horror genre to be portrayed in other contexts where their threatening and terrible presence fades. For instance, they have relinquished their traditional role in comedy or parody film productions, such as *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgard Wright, 2004), in which the general inability to distinguish between the zombies and the living is the film's main joke (Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 133), and *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009) in which the undead also act according to the traditional rules of the genre, but are also used as comic relief. *Fido* (Andrew Currie, 2006), which depicts a 1960s-style alternative universe in which zombies act as servants to the living through a corporation controlled by the government, is a curious “jibe at late-capitalist social conventions” (Ferrer, 2015, p. 148). Another instance is *Juan of the Dead* (*Juan de los muertos*, Alejandro Brugués, 2011), in which an indolent man who is always getting into trouble starts up a business to cash in on a zombie epidemic (“Juan of the Dead: we kill your loved ones”), encountering in misfortune an opportunity to survive.

Television has also considered zombies outside their normal horror context by deploying them in humorous and entertaining situations. This is the case with productions such as *Z Nation* (SyFy, 2014–2018) and *Ash vs. Evil Dead* (Starz, 2015–2018), the sequel to the film saga *Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981, 1987, 1992; Fede Álvarez, 2013)<sup>6</sup>, both fictional works that although they retain the basic characteristics of the horror film genre, approach zombies from a humorous or satirical perspective. In this connection, another good example is *Santa Clarita Diet* (Netflix, 2017–2019), which takes the reinvention of zombies a step further by including them in a suburban sitcom. The series revolves around Sheila, an estate agent transformed into a zombie, her craving for human flesh changing her life and that of her family. The interesting thing about the series is how the main character's transformation is at first linked to both the modern welfare and health ideal and the traditional concept of the American Way of Life, portraying the zombie as a potentially active, albeit covert, member of the capitalist system. In its capacity as the symbolic banner of modern capitalism and the American way of life, advertising has also echoed this new way of representing

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<sup>6</sup> Another film was recently released and added to this saga under the title *Evil Dead Rise* (Lee Cronin, 2023).

zombies to add a touch of humour to different campaigns, such as those launched by Honda Civic (2012), McDonald's (2013) and Nike (2016).

With these new versions and resorting to slapstick, zombies have become more and more disassociated from their depraved and hostile nature. Farce, sitcoms and satire have given new meaning to violence and gore, which do not only now serve to lead up to nasty situations, but also to make the audience laugh (the loss of limbs or situations in which zombies attempt to conceal their bodily decomposition tend to be commonplace in these types of comedies), as can be seen in the aforementioned *Santa Clarita Diet*. In this sense, as with slapstick, these comedies tread the thin line between humour and horror (Comentale & Jaffe, 2014, p. 21). However, perhaps the most important change introduced in this respect is the humanisation of the monster, which allows the audience and society to identify with zombies in an age in which conclusions about our nature are becoming increasingly less simplistic.

### 3. HUMOUR AND CAPITALISM IN *iZOMBIE*

*iZombie* tells the story of Olivia “Liv” Moore, a young resident doctor who is transformed into a zombie after an unfortunate accident at a boat party. This allows her to obtain visions from the brains that she consumes, an ability that she decides to use positively to help solve murder cases as a member of the forensic police in Seattle, in collaboration with Rave, her colleague at the morgue, and the homicide detective Babineaux. After being turned into a zombie, she does her utmost to conceal her transformation from her former boyfriend and fiancé, Major Lilywhite and her best friend, Peyton, thus radically changing her life. Nonetheless, they all become progressively involved in this new social reality in which humans coexist with zombies. These characters, who end up becoming the series’ main heroes, have to confront many threats such as the ruthless businessmen Blaine DeBeers and his father, the energy drink corporation Max Rager, which is the cause of the zombie virus, and the private military contractor Fillmore-Graves, which, once the existence of zombies has been revealed, places the city of Seattle under a state of siege.

In the series, zombification is perceived as a process of the individual’s voluntary alienation from the rest of society, for the majority of the undead are portrayed as victims who are making an effort to fit in, curbing their natural impulses and searching for the most civilised way of subsisting without attracting attention. They are considered collateral damage to the system to the point that their annihilation becomes the objective of Max Rager during the second season, which, to safeguard its reputation, attempts to eliminate them using the Chaos Killer—a role played by a desperate Major Lilywhite. Despite being natural predators, the zombies appearing in the series are blackmailed, murdered, kidnapped,

manipulated, and even employed as sexual slaves in exchange for brains—e.g. Natalie (“Cape Town”, S02E09)—forfeiting their role as aggressors on numerous occasions.

One of the novelties included in the narrative is that Liv tells her story from the perspective of a zombie, thus becoming one of the first artistic manifestations in the audiovisual industry, along with *Colin* (Marc Price, 2008) and *Warm Bodies* (Jonathan Levine, 2013), to give voice to the monster. Notwithstanding her inhuman nature, Liv is a real heroine because of her selfless quest for justice and because she occasionally rejects the cure to help others. Unlike the rest of the zombies, she does not conceal the physical features inherent to her species. Instead, she retains her paleness and albino hair, assuming her inhuman condition with all its consequences. However, this celebration of personal identity fully connects with liquid modernity, for the individual is appointed general manager and sole executor of his “Life Policy” and his personal choices become an “unavoidable duty” (Bauman, 2013).

One of the cornerstones of North American post-capitalist narratives lies in the exaltation of individual freedom in the construction of heroes, whose struggle against the tide empowers them as autonomous, independent, and courageous beings who remain faithful to their commitments, however unpopular these may be, has been reaffirmed here. Furthermore, there are other heroic characters who, as Liv, are “accomplices in peacekeeping, playing a clear role in the story as champions of the just” (Raya Bravo & Cobo-Durán, 2017, p. 150). It is telling that Ravi and Babineaux both work for the Seattle Police Department, while Peyton occupies the position of deputy district attorney until becoming the city mayor’s cabinet chief, so they are all legitimate collaborators in upholding civilised coexistence.

During Season 4, humans and zombies begin to coexist openly, which leads to the mass production of brains and the integration of this new industry into the business fabric. The fulfilment of this demand becomes a societal necessity to maintain peace in a new order ruled by the military-enforced government of Fillmore-Graves (whose name is a not-so-subtle nod to the fact that they need to “fill more graves” to succeed), which tries to clean Max Rager’s image after their shares in the company plummet in the stock market as a result of the violent riots that took place in Season 2. Moreover, said military outsourcing represents every trope associated with neoliberal capitalism in fiction, displayed in an overstated manner in terms of militarization, privatization, and segregation of public space (Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 146). It is not a coincidence that the Season 4 premiere episode includes a scene which depicts a Fordist-style manufacture of brains for public consumption, reminiscent of fast-food chain production such as the one used by McDonald’s. Brains become homogeneous dough, aseptic and flavourless, and their use is standardized and regulated.

Therefore, villainy in *iZombie* is not embodied by the monsters, but by the perversion of the neoliberal system and the suppression of moral values (Raya Bravo & Cobo-Durán,

2017). This is mainly symbolised in corporations trying to profit from a pandemic that they created, as well as the individuals who try to become rich at their expense. Season 3 further delves into this matter by exploring the relationship between zombies and corporations in the capitalist structure, where contagion depends on a social model of “interpenetration” and connectivity (Boluk & Lenz, 2010, p. 135).

Beyond Fillmore-Graves, it is Blaine and his associates’ actions on a smaller scale that serve as a blueprint for the development of the new market and its ties to corruption and vileness. From an economic perspective, zombies are portrayed as a new type of consumer with very specific needs: human brains. Unscrupulous businessmen like Blaine take advantage of the situation to fill a market quota, launching business endeavours tied to death and the undead (such as a funeral home or a zombie-exclusive pub). His purpose is the creation of a local monopoly that may later become global. Aside from the satisfaction derived from economic prosperity, these exploitative initiatives provide the villain with a sense of power and immunity that he uses as a bargaining chip and protection.

However, if examined according to our historical reality, Blaine embodies the figure of the entrepreneur who can adapt to the constant transformation of the socioeconomic environment, finding business opportunities that could be interpreted as “blue oceans” (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005), or unexplored economic spaces only perceived as such by the sharpest minds. His success as a survivor and his acute vision for market opportunities often outpace his amoral behaviour, which creates a positive albeit contradictory identification in the audience. This is achieved partly because his character’s dichotomy is built on humour (“They’re playing checkers, Blaine’s playing Monopoly”, S03E01).

Subtext becomes text when this discourse is made explicit in the numerous comical dialogues about economy that take place, especially in Season 3 and 4: “If there’s a cure then I have no business” (Blaine, “Heaven Just Got a Little Bit Smoother”, S03E01); “It’s not personal, it’s capitalism, dude” (Blaine, “Dirt Nap Time”, S03E07); “Exploiting the fragile state of human-zombie relations for a topical dance theme? Blaine must be really hard up for business. Or, you know, he’s just Blaine” (Liv, “Brainless in Seattle, Part 1”, S04E03). Using comedy tools, *iZombie* composes a metacommentary on how characters relate to capitalism that helps the audience separate the villains from the heroes, while at the same time addressing the duality that characterizes all of them.

Nevertheless, in *iZombie*’s reality, zombies are still perceived as villains from society’s perspective. According to Fillmore-Graves ex-CEO Chase Graves, if one in ten people gave donations, zombies could coexist peacefully with living humans, and brain distribution would not be a problem. However, Fillmore-Graves and smaller entrepreneurs such as Blaine will do their utmost to preserve the living dead’s bad reputation to prevent empathy. This frustrates a relationship that could be built towards a global capitalism that, theoretically,

should offer equal opportunity to thrive economically, when in practice, only favours the bourgeoisie (Boluk & Lenz, 2010, p. 129) to which they wish to belong.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

*iZombie's* narrative approach shows a continuation of a hybrid discourse of liquid modernity in which the fusion of the comical and the macabre is possible and is in accordance with several premises that characterize recent fiction surrounding the zombie.

Firstly, the proliferation of zombie products framed in genres that are not horror suggests a reinvention of the undead archetype that has developed during the last fifteen years approximately, exhibiting a search for original perspectives in film and TV. Throughout the 21st century, the new zombie transcends horror parameters into existential drama and comedy, where a deeper identification between “monster” and viewer can be established more easily. At the same time, these narrative formulas reflect a historical reality in which the audience is no longer as afraid of classical monsters, which were created in a dichotomous and naive time when it seemed easier to discern if someone was “good or bad”.

Secondly, it has been shown that there is a direct connection between capitalism and zombie narratives, whose depiction of undead characters has clearly evolved from their origins in the 1930s and later with George A. Romero's influential and progressive rethinking of the myth as a metaphor for the brainless consumer, a slave of a soulless economical system that spreads globally as a virus.

Furthermore, the fact that most of the aforementioned works of fiction belong to British and American audiovisual culture indicates not only the hegemony of these markets but also the specific impact that the spread of capitalism has had in these countries. This suggests a metaphorical threat that, without proper intervention, could end in the social and economic chaos that the zombie genre has portrayed in film and TV.

Thirdly, the case of *iZombie* can be verified as an unquestionably representative example of the discursive relation between zombies and capitalism. Using resources specific to procedural dramas, the show portrays zombies as victims who are trying to fit in society, even making them the hero of the story, as is the case of Liv. At the same time, it identifies its villain in the corporations that try to take advantage of their condition, being also responsible for the creation of the virus.

In Liv Moore's world, zombies adopt different roles and meanings, but the most relevant one represents the common citizen who wishes to be accepted and actively participate in improving society. This variant of the myth allows zombie-viewer identification, which seems to suggest that people's moral values can be well above those of the political and economic leaders who rule us.

In conclusion, according to *iZombie's* message, the real monster is the capitalist superstructure, whose priority is economic profit above everything else. However, as the show suggests, while we can laugh at the monster, there will be hope for humanity.

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## CHAPTER 4. CAPITALISM: AN IDEOLOGICAL ODYSSEY

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

What happened? Zombies were mysterious beings; we did not know why they were here, their purpose, or whether they were some metaphors or a symbol. Through zombies, we were questioning our lives and societies; a particular critique was hidden in Romero's movies, something to think about. Then, rather than beings to think with, zombies became just flesh without personality, animal-like inhuman beasts, roaming without reason, and we stopped questioning this because it was not philosophical at all. It was pure management and nothing beyond. Get to point B, maintain security in the shelter, get food, survive, and repeat. Matt Damon did it on Mars, too. Therefore, what happened? Why have zombies lost this dimension? Or maybe we all lost it?

One of the greatest strengths of neoliberalism is that it can look populist, liberal, normal, and even leftist. You can find quotes from Karl Marx, even praise for his findings, in the books of some neoliberals. Neoliberals can criticize totalitarian societies and later support Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile or just write: "Fascism... saved European civilization" (Mises, 1985, p. 51). It does not matter that Mises' book is called *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition*; this is not trolling, even though it looks like that. It is fascism that saved liberalism.

For example, there are different beliefs about post-apocalyptic situations in *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022). One is that it is a "world without Capitalism" (Vossen, 2014, p. 100) because economic shackles are gone, and there is a fresh start for all. Even better, making money is not important anymore; we can focus on happiness (p. 97). Or maybe it is all about "restoring the Southern image"? (Tenga, 2016, p. 38). On the other hand, there is also a view about an underlying neoliberal logic in the series because of total privatization and the disappearance of public services (Hannabach, 2014, p. 108). Women, African Americans, or gays are either non-existent or subordinated to the usual power holders—white men. That is, in the first couple of seasons, women are dependent upon men, Blacks are killed more often, and there are no LGBTQ characters, except for some hints about queer and butch Michonne (p. 117).

However, we can see how this has changed drastically. We now have strong female and African American roles; we even have homosexual and interracial couples—two of each! We also see degenerate Southern cannibals in *Terminus*. The “economic constraints” are back with the new Negan Empire. Michonne—straight and butch now. Rick, the WASP, may be out of the show. One may attempt to analyse this show, but the findings will likely become obsolete within just a few seasons. Maybe even this paper will have the same destiny, but one thing is sure: the market works. Moreover, it does not think about feminism, racism, or homosexuality. They are customers. The Southern flag and the rainbow flag have a price on them. Feminism can be bought, too. The aim here is to conduct a deeper analysis. Media culture is a set of ideas that people use to construct their worldviews and everyday practices (Mladenović, 2024, p. 87). We require a more straightforward epistemology; it is essential to discuss *capitalism*. To put it succinctly, if you identify as an environmentalist, feminist, and civil rights activist, it is important to note that this does not necessarily position you as a leftist. You will be considered one when you begin addressing these issues explicitly. The rest of the paper seeks to demonstrate the transformation from Romero’s films to the neoliberal ideology of *The Walking Dead*.

## 2. ROMERO’S REVOLUZION

What George Romero basically did was a provocation. Who was the man in the graveyard? Why do the Dead live at all? Are they free from civilization’s control and repression of instincts (Clark, 2010)? Do they embody an unlimited desire for life, or are they just lost beings, pretty sad creatures (Walker, 2010)? Whatever you choose, one thing was constantly on Romero’s mind: that they are us. Not in a way *The Walking Dead* will portray them, and this is a crucial distinction. For Romero, zombies were some kind of people, whether those for whom there is no more room in Hell, or those who listen to music on the Walkman®, even those who build new societies. We can speculate about why they turned this way and whether a specific factor caused all of it, but what Romero never forgot is that they are human. Those who ignored this were killing ordinary humans, too. In *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), it was a “mistake”. It was a full-grown pathology in *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985).

However, the constant questioning of humans themselves made the *Living Dead* series so important. Is shooting the Black man a reminder of Martin Luther’s assassination? Romero always said it is not. Nevertheless, not many people would say that the *Living Dead* had no connection to 1968 or counterculture. How could the Dead be a part of the era of love? Even if Romero did not mention it, the fact that Jack Nicholson in *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) talks about egalitarian societies on Venus shows that the goddess of love was a symbol of counterculture. Therefore, when the TV broadcaster in *Night of the Living Dead* talks about how the epidemic may have come from Venus, this can be interpreted as

fake news from half a century ago, like the counterculture that has risen the Dead. There are many ways to read the film series, but if we continue this way, it is fascinating how the *Easy Rider* theme is present in *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978) and *Land of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2005).

In the case of *Dawn of the Dead*, the usual interpretation is that zombies have become creatures of consumption. Their constant need for flesh is an extreme picture of the society wanting to become a giant mall: “a domain of lawless pleasure” (Clark, 2010). The repressed instincts, all the austerity measures and discipline were gone, and zombies were free of the civilization’s constraints. Or not? People trapped in the mall have experienced practically the same consumerist sensation. They were also aware of the connection with zombies. “They’re us”, Peter said, and that was the truth. In a way, biker gangs destroyed this realm of pleasure. Sure, they did it in a very destructive way. However, with a strange resemblance to Dennis Hopper from the biker films of that era, their leader signified the countercultural break with a consumerist society.

Finally, in *Land of the Dead*, we have Hopper himself portraying a rich man who practically owns a low-life city where zombies are exploited or humiliated. It is a mystery what Romero’s message was here; maybe that counterculture lost its way and became commodified. Again, whatever you decide about it, it can have different meanings, and they will all be thought-provoking. For some, even this little *Easy Rider* reading can be nonsensical, but it can also be said that films are so rich in meaning that the viewers can lose themselves within it and find their own story. You will never find this in the new zombie TV series. What Romero advocated can be formulated as communitarianism over individualism (Murray, 2010) and the real possibility of creating a different society, even by zombies. In the fourth film, *Land of the Dead*, both the impoverished living and the undead attempt to establish a different form of social organization.

However, again, what happened? While the doctor from *Day of the Dead* was working with a zombie to teach him to find something human inside, the doctor in *The Walking Dead*’s first season was clear: there is no humanity there. While *Survival of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2009) experimented with zombie-human interaction, trying to find the formula to be close to their loved ones, this is precisely what *The Walking Dead* Season 2 will not allow: all the zombies on Hershel’s farm are massacred. Family first. So, it is not just that a black man was an essential character in the *Living Dead* series, and zombie food in *The Walking Dead*, or that every *The Walking Dead* character would love to hide in a basement or a jail, or build a wall, but that it is now the only thing they do. It is not a means but a justified end. The leading man in *The Walking Dead* is closer to a villain gunman in *Day of the Dead* than to Romero’s heroes.

This transformation is evident on a purely theoretical level, too. First, zombies were alienated labour, just zombified workers in capitalism (McNally, 2011, p. 144). Later,

consumerist figures were extremely reified beings (p. 212). However, Romero tried to find even something utopian, rebellious, a zombie revolutionary in a blue-collar worker's uniform. McNally (p. 259) tried to think about zombies as disrupting bourgeois life, even some kind of return of the repressed, sure in the ugly and grotesque form, but still as a part of "plebeian poetics". This had to stop. It is too dangerous for someone to fight the system. Zombies in particular. Zombies were "collective structures capable of obstructing the logic of the pure market" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 96). But now they should stop being proletarian. Instead, they will serve as a mindless cybernetic device presenting "itself as a chain of constraints impelling the economic agents" (p. 96). Welcome to neoliberalism.

### 3. THE VITAL WALK

The collective structures that neoliberals fear most are the masses. The very "increase in population of European stock" (Röpke, 1942, p. 241) brought the formation of "modern mass society". This mass was amorphous, just a concentration of people in substantial industrial centres, where keeping one's individuality was under pressure. These people were "spiritually homeless and morally shipwrecked" (Röpke, 1960, p. 11). Wilhelm Röpke was convinced that the population bomb constantly undermined "the small circles—from the family on up—with their human warmth and natural solidarity" (p. 7), and along with leftist intervention in the market, made the cause for everything bad that happened: totalitarianism and World Wars. That is, it was not the market, constant exploitation, fight for the colonies, basically political and economic interests—capitalism—that brought Hitler to power. It was the masses. Even more, if we do not change this "unfit economic and social environment", we will be "disfigured to subhuman cripples" (Röpke, 1942, p. 266).

What we see here is partly critical, but "critical theory connects the problem of power to social conflicts" (Mladenović, 2018, p. 36). Sure that workers have been zombified, and the earlier films showed the masses as exploited and mindless labour. Later, those workers became consumers, but nothing changed in the overall perspective. Being "mere passively activated mass particles... all poetry and dignity, and with them the very spice of life and its human content, go out of life" (Röpke, 1960, p. 41). It's almost unbelievable that neoliberals talk this way, as if they're not remembered as supporters of cut-throat competition and social deterioration. Still, we should be constantly reminded that "they do not in fact practice what they preach" (Mirowski, 2009, p. 425). Of course, that does not mean they do not believe they do. The population increase Röpke feared was easily solved in *The Walking Dead*. The mass society ceased to exist with a little help from the unknown infection. While the mass society was constantly "screening off all the vital things", depriving death of "its dignity", trivializing funerals and moving cemeteries further from the cities (Röpke, 1960, p. 11), the infection brought the "vital things" back to humans.

We are talking about cut-throat competition now, but the series is not showing just that, nor can we say that the neoliberals are presenting themselves that way. Even Milton Friedman (1982, p. 166) said the market's principle is "voluntary exchange", that is, "voluntary cooperation". It sounds silly, coming from a person like Friedman, but what he is hiding is that the market works differently: as *competition through cooperation*. Apparently, it is not a fight but a "social competition, i.e., the striving of individuals to attain the most favourable position in the system of social cooperation" (Mises, 1996, p. 273). Whether this makes sense for normal people is another matter. The parallax view acknowledges this constant play with meaning. For every hegemony, people need to believe that voluntary cooperation is the principle of society. Therefore, competition will be called cooperation—the biggest fake news of all. That is why neoliberals think even Wikipedia is a market (Becker & Posner, 2009): you have a tremendous cooperative product, but only one writer wins, and who is that? Maybe, like Bernie Sanders said—the system is rigged.

In *The Walking Dead*, the most fantastic thing, the rise of the Dead, naturalized the whole idea of simultaneous competition and cooperation, depending on circumstances, and only people whose "vital situation" is remarkable will survive. So, again, neoliberals say people should be "placed in semi-peasant conditions" (Rüstow, 1942, p. 279) in order to revitalize their energies to become closer to nature, but at the same time they are faced with the "market game" with winners and losers and this "game demands... a certain stamina, a readiness to accept setbacks and losses should they occur", if you do not want to be a "bad loser" (p. 271). At the same time, we have romantic contemplations about maintaining the "soil reserves" of society (Röpke, 1942, p. 266) and the winners and losers of the market. Of course, while not practising what they preach, neoliberals show that the zombie apocalypse is their favourite place. TV series' characters are building their stamina with a small population, close circles, back to pre-modern ways of life and semi-peasant conditions. They are becoming more efficient, braver, stronger, and more capable.

Some were unaware of what they could do; they never tried or feared they would fail. Now, men and women reconditioned their "psycho moral forces" (Röpke, 1942, p. 68). The ones who failed became "subhuman cripples". This view of the free market is definitely not mainstream, and you can even hear Friedman talking about voluntary cooperation. However, *The Walking Dead* is open about it because it thinks there is a good reason for doing things this way: we must be safe and away from zombies. That is why we need stamina, to be ready, to fight and survive. Darwinism has not had a better morality tale for a long time. It is the apocalypse; it is a perfect start of the new society, where people learn to be thankful for little things, where extreme austerity is the new normal, even desirable, and where there is a constant zombie threat reminding you not to go back to the old days of modern mass society and state welfare. Now, when no social services exist, people are finally free—to survive or be eaten. As Mises (1996, p. 881) reminds us, "man lives in the shadow of

death”; he cannot escape it. Nevertheless, “as long as a man lives, he cannot help obeying the cardinal impulse, the *elan vital*”. He will preserve his life and remove everything that concerns him; he will make his situation better, and this makes him different from non-human beings: “purposively struggling against the forces adverse to his life” (p. 882).

Surviving on the free market was never that much fun! Just by learning to survive in this brave new world, every strong character has become a neoliberal subject. It is all about increasing your performance. Unlike Romero’s characters, who try to contemplate their situation, philosophers do not survive; managers do. In the words of Michel Foucault (2008, p. 132), neoliberalism should be identified with “permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention”. Permanent performance increase. Permanent living in the risk society, a “state of siege, reduced to a form of social death” (Giroux, 2011, p. 23) that will be portrayed as a game. As Pierre Bourdieu (2000, p. 96) said, it is a logical machine constraining economic agents. Moreover, the most important constraints are zombies. This means another parallax moment—neoliberalism is not about a free market but a controlled one. It is an order that is “guiding us in our actions” (Hayek, 1998b, p. 107); it is “providing inducements for all to use their skill” (p. 125). What neoliberals want from their subjects is “concerted action” (Mises, 1996, p. 144), and that does not mean spontaneous wisdom of the crowds but directing people’s actions: “his ideology is what his environment enjoins upon him” (p. 46).

And what an environment! Are zombies spontaneously created? One who believes that should ask why those zombies do not listen to music or create social revolutions. *The Walking Dead* are a different kind of device. In a world of controlled markets, deliberately designed markets that rig the game in favour of the 1%, while Hayek (1998a, p. 37) explicitly acknowledges that market order is maintained by “cybernetics”, zombies are constraints that recondition the whole society. Because of zombies, the whole society changes, and the people who are still breathing become competent agents, survivors, and fighters. Again, it is all about increasing your performance on the market, and your powers will show what you are made of. It is your “human capital” that makes you an “abilities-machine” (Foucault, 2008, p. 229). The ones who score high on the Anxiety Sensitivity Index are likely to lose the game in *The Walking Dead* (Verhaagen, 2015). Only the ones with “positive psychology” win (Cardona & Taylor, 2015). What Carol or even Eugene were, and what they showed to be capable of later in the show. How ordinary characters like Daryl or Maggie found extraordinary strength and emerged as leaders—no longer merely seen as “white trash” or farmer’s daughters—illustrates a form of social mobility based on personal performance rather than inherited wealth. But have they done it all by themselves or were they made that way? Once again, the public version of neoliberalism would emphasize the spontaneous reconstruction of abilities, suggesting that machines are self-created. However, understanding that the market operates in a cybernetic manner (Mladenović, 2019, p. 555), with the goal of establishing a “social system... which makes use of men in all their given variety and complexity... sometimes intelligent and more often stupid” (Hayek, 1958, p. 12),

reveals that it is, in fact, the constraints imposed by zombies that give rise to these abilities-machines. Zombies embody the “discipline of freedom” (Hayek, 1998c, p. 163).

However, their power is not undisputed. Many times in the show, people tried to recreate old social institutions to really reconstruct the good old days. Almost every colony or town the leading characters visited was a remnant of the old world. For neoliberals, those welfare institutions are dangerous because they lead to spiritual and moral decay, back to mass society, to decadence, and to decreasing performance. Zombies, even though they serve as a check and balance system that pressures humans to maintain a high level of their abilities, cannot stop the rise of the old institutions by themselves. However, the TV show portrays every one of those institutions as degenerate forms, not good enough for the zombie age. CDC cannot stop the virus; doctors destroy everything. Jail is what neoliberals would not advise for a permanent residence, but even Woodbury is not keeping the performance of its citizens at a high level. They are relaxed, living trivial lives, shopping, and even entertaining themselves. However, when Carl saw video games in Alexandria, he became suspicious of losing his edge. Some of the communities, like Terminus, are entirely extreme, but all of them are in some way connected to the old ways, to the institutions of subhuman cripples. In the case of Terminus, there are railways in some industrial areas; in Atlanta, it is a police department and hospital; in Alexandria, it is a politician’s resort with too many gadgets, even electricity.

Fortunately, Negan destroyed this simulation of life and the weak people in it. He “deregulated” Alexandria and its clean energy and water so that incompetent and psychologically weak people could confront the “real world”. Neoliberal veterans such as Rick will take over the town and lead people to a more “vital situation” when they destroy the ultimate old “saviour’s” world. Negan is “death and taxes”, a totalitarian state in the eyes of neoliberals, because “despotic realities as well as egalitarian counter tendencies have persisted to this day, each paralleling and reinforcing the other” (Rüstow, 1980, p. 419). As we saw in the Season 8 finale, no good monarch can exist. Whether “bad” (Negan) or “good” (Rick), once individuals centralize control, they inevitably become tyrants. “Despots and democratic majorities are drunk with power” (Mises, 1996, p. 67). This is a neoliberal fight against populism: a “charismatic leader” governs “with the masses... against the elite that carries civilization on” (Röpke, 1942, p. 246; p. 248). Only dethroning the despots is a way to peace. Moreover, everyone who does not “renounce those military and dictatorial necessities” has to be crushed—then a “garden for all mankind” and “fruitful cooperation” will flourish (Rüstow, 1980, p. 675). It does not matter that Rick became militaristic and dictatorial on his path to “freedom” and that the same thing will likely happen with the “Widow” because they will “abolish war forever” (Mises, 1996, p. 67)—it is a full circle jerk.

#### 4. EVERYDAY CAPITALIZM

*The Walking Dead* presents a world in which survival requires becoming a risk manager, with the responsibility being a constant, 24/7 task. It functions as a reality show where individuals willingly embrace risk and anticipate recognition, yet, ultimately, they will almost certainly face “dismissal” in the end. Whether it is *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004–2017) or *American Idol* (FOX, 2002–2016; ABC, 2018—), there is always some kind of “everyday sadism” (Mirowski, 2013) that is the humiliation of the losers in the game, a public put-down in neoliberal theatres of cruelty. All is just a strategic game, where the winners show great stamina, even wisdom, while the weaker members fail to survive the extreme competition. The Dead are just facilitating this competition. Zombies cannot be characters in *The Walking Dead* because that would mean we must think dialectically. They are reduced to a black-and-white struggle, and it is hard to cheer for these “evil” neoliberal tools. Compared to Romero’s *Living Dead*, the ideological Odyssey destroyed all alternatives: a zombie dystopia or a neoliberal one.

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**PART II**  
**ETHICS, RELIGION & SOCIETY**



**CHAPTER 5.**  
**CELLULOID ZOMBIES AS A REFLECTION OF CONCERNS OVER  
SCIENCE IN FIFTIES AMERICA**

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**1. INTRODUCTION: FEAR AND LONGING IN TROUBLED TIMES**

From a look at film portrayals of zombies in US cinema in the nineteen-fifties, it is possible to glimpse two of the chief concerns that beset society at the time: fear of nuclear holocaust and the relentless advance of the Space Race, in which space can be understood as a place of comings and goings, dreaded ones in the case of a potential alien invasion. In other words, the science-fiction film in the fifties reflects the apprehensions of an era that witnessed a sharp intensification of moral values, a boom in political conservatism, a deep anti-communist feeling in the climate of the Cold War and a fear of anything that came from outside. The word *paranoia* perfectly fits the mood of a period in which the notion of being under siege or attack went into overdrive, as did ideas of alienation or dehumanisation at the very heart of society (Sontag, 1965).

Under this set of circumstances, the zombie becomes a particularly convenient vehicle for embodying fears of atomic energy and alien invasion, frequently becoming the source of the zombie's origin. However, before delving into depictions of the zombie, it is necessary to examine the conception of science that prevailed at the time. Arguably, it was one riven with contradictions. On the one hand, science was regarded as fundamental to the pursuit of progress and important as an economic driver. In the wake of the disasters of the Second World War, however, it was also seen as a key agent of potential annihilation and, therefore, eyed with suspicion and rejection. In fantasy films, the mad scientist is a key figure to embody this sense of science's risks and dangers (Skal, 1998). The mad scientist, who first appears much earlier, assumes major prominence in the fifties when he undergoes a significant change: if his previous haunt was a more Gothic-infused setting, for example, in the iconic towers of Frankenstein's castle (James Whale, 1931), his prescribed spot now becomes an aseptic laboratory. Thus, while the scientist in the celebrated novel by Mary Shelley harnesses electricity to revive a body patched together from the flesh of the dead, the energy source that revives the zombies of the fifties will no longer be reviled volts but powerful atoms, that is, atomic energy. Traditionally, it should be pointed out that mad scientists made monsters out of a desire to play at God, unlock the secrets of nature and seize

power over creation; he aimed to break through the bounds that the gods imposed on human beings and that the ancient Greeks had defined with the term *hubris* (ὕβρις), which is equivalent to excess or enormity. In contrast, in the context of atomic power, the genesis of a new being is due, in many cases, to some fatal error, that is, to *hamartia* (αμαρτία).

In the latter case, the scientist handles a material that is so complex and dangerous that he engenders a monster *malgré lui*. This is evident in a host of films. However, the most representative example concerning atomic energy is probably *The Magnetic Monster* (Curt Siodmak & Herbert L. Strock, 1953). However, other seminal works of the fifties do not mention nuclear energy, such as *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann, 1958) and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold, 1957). Indeed, laboratories have become the quintessential enclaves of science-fiction film, down to the full-blown proliferation nowadays in the subgenres of cyberpunk and biopunk (Piñol Lloret, 2017; Piñol Lloret, 2018).

However, the proliferation of these spaces does not mean that scientists are subject to admiration. As noted earlier, they handle hazardous materials, and any misstep or folly on their part can lead to doom. As a result, they come to inspire a degree of mistrust, whereas the military excites a heightened fervour, which can be seen in the films on which this paper focuses. By looking at the issue in the context of the Cold War, it is also possible to note the emergence of a host of anxieties that take shape in the fear of communists. This is demonstrated clearly by the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) about the Red Scare afoot in the US, even though the filmmakers have explicitly denied any ideological intent. The idea of infiltration by the Other or a doppelganger coalesces in the popular imagination with the existing paranoia, featuring the invader as somebody very close to oneself and offering up a meditation on alienation.

The persona of the fifties zombie is also of great interest because of the hybridisation of horror and science fiction genres that it heralds. In this regard, notable studies address the thematic and iconographic taxonomy of the genre (Algaba, 2015). To a certain extent, the zombie becomes a prelude to what would later be achieved in the figure of the mutant or alien, as in the key example of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979). In short, the zombie is a creature that shows how fuzzy, at times, the boundaries of genre can be.

## 2. ZOMBIES ORIGINS: ATOMIC BIRTH

The persona of the fifties zombie is also of great interest because of the hybridisation of horror and science fiction genres that it heralds. In this regard, notable studies address the thematic and iconographic taxonomy of the genre (Algaba, 2015). To a certain extent, the zombie becomes a prelude to what would later be achieved in the figure of the mutant or alien, as in the key example of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979). In short, the zombie is a creature that shows how fuzzy, at times, the boundaries of genre can be.

Nuclear energy emerges as one of the sources responsible for the creation of zombies. It is the case, for example, in the terrain of radioactive zombies. A key film in this respect is *Creature with the Atom Brain* (Edward L. Cahn, 1955). While Cahn had been a film director since 1917, *Creature* is his debut science-fiction film after decades devoted primarily to crime movies and film noir. That the movie was his first in the genre is apparent from the curious hotchpotch of its storyline: Frank Buchanan is a gangster who flees the United States on the threat of deportation and travels to Italy, where he plots to exact revenge on the gang members who betrayed him. To that end, he recruits a former Nazi scientist and steals eight cadavers from a morgue to reanimate them with atomic energy and use them to murder his enemies. A police coroner, Chet Walker, is put in charge of the investigation and succeeds in unravelling the mystery and defeating the zombies and their creators.

*Creature* was produced by Sam Katzman, a producer of low-budget movies who worked for Clover Productions, the department of Columbia Pictures responsible for making products of this sort. Katzman took on two projects that year, which both revolved around atomic energy: *Creature*, which is the focus here, and *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (Robert Gordon, 1955), which features a gigantic radioactive octopus. The two movies followed in the wake of an earlier film produced by Katzman that also involved atomic energy: *Atom Man vs. Superman* (Spencer Gordon Bennet, 1950). In the years that followed, Cahn would tackle the subject of zombies, too. In addition to a later film that will be explored in the next section, he did so first in *Voodoo Woman* (1957), which makes a connection between zombies and voodoo and is therefore indebted to *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932). He would do so again in *Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957), where the zombies are underwater beings who guard a treasure that a team of deep-sea divers wants to salvage.

To return to *Creature*, however, the film also contains a mad scientist who creates zombies. As noted earlier, the mad scientist takes the form of a former Nazi scientist who has spent years in the study of what the film calls “amygdala stimulation”. The desire to inject scientific explanations into these films becomes commonplace. In *Creature*, for instance, the scientist clarifies that amygdala stimulation affects the brain, so the body performs involuntary movements. While he has already conducted experiments on animals, he now turns to human cadavers and succeeds in reanimating them thanks to the power granted to him by atomic energy. This marks a crucial change from the electricity employed by the spiritual father of all zombies, Frankenstein. Indeed, in *Creature*, Chet Walker underscores the power of nuclear energy by comparing it to electricity: he explains how the nineteenth-century English scientist Michael Faraday experimented on a frog whose amputated leg was made to twitch after the application of an electrical shock (an experiment actually conducted not by Faraday but by Luigi Galvani) so that now, with radioactive energy, it must be possible to reanimate a human cadaver. Thus, after observing that the perpetrators of the crimes in *Creature* have a chemical compound in their blood and finding

that their fingerprints belong to dead people implicated in the incarceration of their gangland boss, Walker connects the dots and deduces that the zombies are under the control of Buchanan.

How is Buchanan found? By using a Geiger counter, that is, by following the traces of energy left by the zombies, Walker and his team can pinpoint the laboratory of their adversaries. In this respect, the film takes particular care to portray the scientist and the gangster working in hazmat suits (Figure 1) so that they are protected from the consequences of any contact with nuclear energy, and it shows too the device that they insert into the brains of the dead to stimulate their amygdala atomically. For their part, the zombies have stitches across their foreheads, and while their bodies show signs of wear and tear, there is none of the rotting flesh that has become customary in contemporary portrayals.

**Figure 1**

*The laboratory where the zombies are created in Creature with the Atom Brain (Edward L. Cahn, 1955)*



*Source: frame from Creature with the Atom Brain (Edward L. Cahn, 1955).*

In addition, *Creature* raises two issues essential to depicting zombies: their voices and eyesight. First, except when the protagonist's assistant Dave is turned into a zombie, the words spoken by the living dead come from Buchanan, who controls them remotely from the laboratory. They use not only his words but also his tone of voice. With Dave, however, they leap forward, and he has the voice he possessed in life. Of even greater interest, however, is the handling of eyesight, which has a clear impact on the ocularisation of specific sequences. In their laboratory, Buchanan and the scientist have a television displaying

everything being captured by the zombies' eyes, so they can see all the unfolding events through the subjective camera they have made of the zombies' pupils.

By the end of the film, the protagonist, Walker, tracks down the whereabouts of the laboratory and succeeds in defeating the zombies by destroying the machines, which have kept the zombies alive thanks to the energy. As a result, when Walker smashes the equipment, the zombies all cease to function after one of the film's most striking sequences: the scene of the pitched battle between law enforcement and the zombies, who are shown in powerful shots (Figure 2) to be impervious to bullets. The zombies' power is so immense that panic sweeps through the populace, and the army is forced into action; as suggested earlier, the military takes on a heightened importance in these films.

**Figure 2**

*The final battle between the zombies and law enforcement in Creature with the Atom Brain (Edward L. Cahn, 1955)*



*Source: frame from Creature with the Atom Brain (Edward L. Cahn, 1955).*

### 3. ZOMBIES ORIGINS: CREATED BY ALIENS

If atomic energy is one of the sources for creating zombies, another source proves to be outer space, where an interesting connection is drawn between zombies and aliens. This issue will be analysed by examining two films released in the same year: *Invisible Invaders* (Edward L. Cahn, 1959) and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Edward D. Wood Jr., 1959). The first of the pair, doubtless the more interesting one, returns to the issue of atomic energy. If aliens

decide to invade Earth, it will be because they observe that human beings are handling nuclear energy and embarking on the Space Race. The plot starts with Dr. Adam Penner, who steps down as chief of the nuclear research programme after his friend and colleague, Dr. Noymann, is killed in a nuclear experiment. The aliens realise that Dr. Penner is cognizant of the risks of radioactivity, and they take over Dr. Noymann's body to communicate with him. That is because they are invisible and want Dr. Penner to act as a spokesperson for their message: humanity must surrender. However, when Dr. Penner relays their message to Washington, D. C., nobody believes him, and the aliens spread panic by reanimating cadavers and setting out to destroy the world. In response, Dr. Penner, his assistant, his daughter and a military officer take refuge in a bunker, where they hunt for methods to annihilate the invaders (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*The protagonists see zombies on a TV in their bunker in Invisible Invaders (Edward L. Cahn, 1959)*



*Source: frame from Invisible Invaders (Edward L. Cahn, 1959).*

While *Invisible Invaders* is another film directed by Edward L. Cahn, it was produced by Premium Pictures on a shoestring budget. Consequently, it uses stock footage to show the catastrophes unleashed on Earth by the aliens. As Peter Dendle notes, however, it does represent the “first genuine zombie apocalypse of the big screen” (Dendle, 2001), becoming an influential forerunner of a crucial zombie film like *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968). Beyond any repercussions that *Invisible Invaders* may later have, it raises several points that are of particular interest here. First, it indicates that the invasion results

from human beings' handling of nuclear energy and their interest in space travel. These two facts spur the aliens to make contact and deliver their ultimatum. That is precisely the notion of a warning that appears in a seminal movie like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951). It also seems relevant that *Invisible Invaders* opens at Dr. Noymann's funeral, where the action unfolds in a cemetery, a classic setting in films of the thirties and forties, but less common in the fifties when, as noted earlier, greater prominence goes to laboratories and not to settings more typical of the Gothic tradition. Indeed, after the zombie visits Penner's home, Dr. Penner decides to contact the aliens again. The site he chooses is the same cemetery, where footprints can detect their presence since they are invisible.

In addition, the film perfectly encodes the period's fears of alien invasion. However, the apprehensions are also stoked by the use of atomic energy because the protagonists take refuge in a pre-existing bunker built precisely in response to the terror of nuclear war. Again, a Geiger counter plays a central role when it is ascertained that the invaders are taking over the bodies of human beings and reanimating them with atomic energy. Nor is the film short of scientific explanations since the protagonists succeed, after various attempts, in capturing one of the aliens in acrylic liquid, and they learn that the way to defeat the aliens is with sound vibrations that affect their molecules. Not only do sound vibrations render them visible, but they also destroy them. Despite making use of scientific information, however, *Invisible Invaders* also contains striking allusions to God: after the appearance of Dr. Noymann's body, Dr. Penner prays that he has lost his mind, while later on, he says that he still thinks that nuclear weapons are evil and that human beings only will survive if it is the will of God. He realises that the world's nations will have to work together and forget about weapons of destruction. The film's message, therefore, proves to be crystal clear, and the voiceover at the beginning and end hammers it home. Also, just as in *Creature*, the presence of a television is again important, enabling the characters in the bunker to see what is happening outside. However, it remains unclear where the cameras are located. Moreover, praise is lavished once more on the heroic role of the army, embodied in this case by Maj Jay, who wins the love of Dr. Penner's daughter over the scientist's assistant.

The third and last film to be examined here—*Plan 9 from Outer Space*—descends directly into Z-movies' realm. Despite *Plan 9*'s absolute lack of aesthetic quality, it raises some interesting ideas. The first lies in the notion that the alien invasion, if it comes, will be the result of humans using nuclear weapons. In their stupidity and lust for power, they are only one step from discovering the most powerful explosive: solaronite. Once in their hands, solaronite would trigger the destruction of the entire universe. For this reason, the aliens, whom Eros and Tanna embody, resurrect the dead to destroy humanity, specifically reviving a recently deceased police inspector, a woman played by Vampira (Figure 4) and a man played by Bela Lugosi, who appears in footage from an earlier shoot since his death preceded

filming. The overall aesthetic of *Plan 9*, coupled with the cemetery through which the characters lurch, immerses the viewer in a stale style at the time of production.

**Figure 4**

*Two of the zombies that appear in the film Plan 9 from Outer Space (Edward D. Wood Jr., 1959)*



*Source: frame from Plan 9 from Outer Space (Edward D. Wood Jr., 1959).*

*Plan 9*, however, does turn out to be innovative in another regard: it poses a conspiracy orchestrated by the Pentagon to deny UFO sightings. Such a suggestion was not common in films of the fifties. Still, the film turns again to using a television to see what is happening on Earth, alluding to God. Eros tells human beings that they will destroy everything if they do not use the minds that God has given them, thereby establishing that the aliens, too, think of God. This idea is reaffirmed in the film's opening and its ending in lines that are delivered by the psychic Criswell, a friend of Wood, whose words seek to lend veracity by presenting the film's content to viewers as accurate to some extent, concluding with the phrase: "God help us in the future". It is, therefore, a rather curious film because any being that corresponds to the Other in science fiction of the period is generally ascribed a total lack of Christian values and is sometimes even associated with communism. It is no trivial matter, for example, that Mars is often called "the red planet". However, in the case of *Plan 9*, it is precisely the other way around. Eros is the character who raises an emphatic question: "You also think it impossible that we, too, might think of God?" So it is a science that can, if conducted with misguided ambitions, destroy God's creation.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, while these three productions are very modest in economic and aesthetic terms, they are of great interest as a reflection of the societal concerns of the time. They splice together the period's chief apprehensions while also evincing society's view of science's development, if not its progress.

Indeed, within the science-fiction film of the fifties, zombie movies succeed in coupling two of the leading fears of the decade, given that the zombies typically originate either from atomic energy or outer space. Similarly, the films raise the key concern of a siege or attack that can unleash a zombie apocalypse, and this will go on to be a core issue in countless later zombie productions, for instance, in the famous example of the previously mentioned *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), where radiation is again the originating source. In addition, zombie movies are far better than other genre films at attesting to the important mixing and matching of science fiction and horror in the fifties. The idea of the Other is crucial here, too. Whatever its origins, the zombie is a being created out of a human body, blurring a dangerous boundary between life and death and opening a sort of free passage between them: Zombies may keep their human appearance, but they become a threat to all humanity.

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**CHAPTER 6.**  
**THE PROCESS OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE FIGURE OF**  
**THE ZOMBIE-KILLER HERO THROUGH ASIAN CINEMA. THE CASE OF**  
***I AM A HERO***

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the Hero in zombie or zombie-killer films has often been overshadowed by his antagonistic force: the zombies. The latter has been the main focus of interest and the protagonist of most studies. This chapter focuses on analyzing the zombie-killer hero through the internal personal transformation that this figure undergoes throughout his adventure and how this, in turn, implies a critical reinterpretation of the society in which he is immersed.

Through the case of the Asian film *I Am a Hero* (*Ai amu a hîrô*, Shinsuke Satô, 2015), described as one of the best zombie films of recent times (Jiménez, 2017), the aim is to carry out a case study through which deconstruction of the figure of the zombie killer is carried out by analyzing his transformation process.

This transformation takes place in three phases that mark the milestones of the character's evolution, which will configure the structure of this chapter. The first phase is the starting point, before the zombie threat, and coincides with the film's beginning. In this first phase, the zombie-killer hero is presented with characteristics that give him a position or status within society. These personal identity characteristics condition the character's actions and decision-making in the first phases of the film, generating the first conflicts.

The second phase is the turning point when zombies overrun the world. In this phase, the protagonist must reconfigure his personality in a new and crisis-ridden context, adapting and modifying it to survive in the new scenario.

The third phase marks the end of the character's evolution. Following the events and consequences of their actions, the protagonist embarks on a journey of self-discovery and

gains new knowledge. Through this process, they fully reconstruct their personality, becoming a new and inspiring model for others to emulate.

## 2. STARTING POINT: HIDEO SUZUKI, WITH H FOR HERO

Hideo Suzuki is a mangaka (Japanese manga artist) in his mid-thirties who works as an assistant with other colleagues. Although he won recognition for his talent as a young man fifteen years ago, he is now seen by everyone, including his girlfriend, as mediocre. Hideo, with an H for Hero, as he introduces himself, aspires to become a successful and recognized mangaka to free himself from the image of mediocrity attributed to him. Although no one trusts him, Hideo has not given up hope.

We can visualize this feeling of hope through different symbols and manifestations during the film. Among them, the protagonist, in one of his dreams, thinks that being a manga artist is an excellent vehicle to reach out to the world, to all its people and places. Hideo thinks that manga is the most outstanding achievement of Japanese culture in terms of expansion and potential. For him, manga is a mediating tool for achieving success. In his words: “Manga is the dog’s bollocks” (00:01:50). However, this is not the protagonist’s only expression of hope. Also, at home, more precisely in his studio, Hideo can be seen recurrently reading motivational messages written by himself: “Seek and you will find” or “One day they will name a street after you”. This fact shows that despite adversity, the opinion of others, and his insecurities, Hideo does not lose hope.

Despite the above, the predominant feeling in these first minutes of the film, and therefore in the main character, is mediocrity. This feeling of mediocrity attributed to Hideo is reflected in the film at different moments. For example, his co-worker tells him, “Being an assistant is practically like being unemployed. In that sense, you’re a real nobody” (00:01:30). In the same vein, in the film, we see how his publisher, to whom Hideo is desperately trying to sell his work, points out to him that the protagonist of his stories, which Hideo says are based on him, is a mediocre character.

In another scene, we see Hideo return home to find his girlfriend watching a TV program that describes the supposed characteristics of an ideal man. Among them are attitudes such as having character, being a leader, and being able to do things, etc. According to the program, not fulfilling these premises identifies a man as mediocre and makes any girlfriend question her relationship. This fact leads to a fight with Hideo because, according to his partner, he does not fulfill these characteristics and is a mediocre man (00:12:14). This argument ends with Hideo being violently kicked out of the house by his partner, giving him only time to pick up the shotgun (a symbol that will be discussed later) and some personal belongings.

Here is the first revelation of the film. Hideo walks through the night to a street bench where he sits down. Looking across, the protagonist sees a beggar who turns out to be, unbeknownst to him, the first zombie he encounters. With this scene, the director tries to show us the projection of the protagonist into the future within the personal and social coordinates in which he finds himself immersed.

As he is mediocre, his future is doomed to failure, loneliness, and poverty. In this way, we understand that the zombies in the film represent the protagonist's personal fears and the hostility he constantly suffers from being rejected and not valued by the society in which he lives. From this point on, Hideo will break with his three spheres of personal projection: sentimental, occupational, and social.

On the sentimental level, Hideo is forced to kill his girlfriend, who has already turned into a zombie, after a fight that ends with her dying after nailing the trophy that Hideo had won fifteen years earlier for his talent (00:19:16). This fact is a clear allegory for the girlfriend's lack of confidence in Hideo's talent. The fact that the talent trophy ends his girlfriend's life can be interpreted as Hideo's desire to believe in himself and break away from the punishment he receives from his partner and the lack of faith in his possibilities.

On the work level, after visiting his office (00:23:53), he observes how all his colleagues are dead or infected and have destroyed each other. Considering that the office was a nest of competitiveness and jealousy among his colleagues, this fact reflects how these elements have destroyed them. However, unlike his girlfriend, Hideo, upon seeing the situation, decides to run away and not confront his colleagues. This fact shows that Hideo did not participate in this competitive behavior and has no intention of breaking away from the manga world. Hideo believes in his potential as an adventure cartoonist and is unwilling to give it up.

Finally, on leaving the office, still not knowing what is happening, Hideo finds a city completely infected by zombies. The social plane will be the plane from which the protagonist will have the most challenging time getting out and whose struggle develops throughout the film, which we will see in the following sections.

In this way, as has been said, Hideo tries to free himself from the shackles that have been crippling him vitally, qualifying him as mediocre. In this film, we understand that the zombies reflect a society that is hostile to our protagonist and attacks him through rejection and the invisibility of his abilities.

### 3. THE TURNING POINT: HIROMI, WITH H FOR HIDEO

The film's central turning point comes with the appearance of Hiromi Hayakari's character (00:29:03). A young teenage girl who, during the chaos in which the zombie-ridden city finds itself, asks the protagonist for help. From this moment on, an

unbreakable bond is created between the two characters. From the very first moment, Hideo feels the need to protect Hiromi at all costs, even at the risk of his own life. This fact is reinforced by Hiromi being the first person in a long time to show Hideo affection, respect, and trust. So much so that at 00:42:23, we hear her say: “Hero... you are a hero [...] With you I feel that everything will be alright”.

From a narrative point of view, Hiromi becomes the first person from whom Hideo does not run away but incorporates into his new life project in uncertainty.

On a symbolic level, we understand that Hiromi represents the meaning of life, salvation. So much so that, despite being bitten by the zombies (broken dreams), Hideo does not kill her but feels he must protect her. After her transformation (00:46:43), Hiromi is not a zombie like the others but is left in a hybrid state between human and infected. This hybrid state makes her a bridge between the two worlds, the old world from which Hideo flees and what is to come (the fulfillment of goals, illusions, and dreams: becoming a hero).

In the same vein, the origin of Hiromi’s infection comes from the bite of a baby Zokyun, which could represent a new birth, a new chance for Hideo himself to have a new life. As long as Hideo cares for Hiromi, there is hope for him. Finally, the film tells us that climbing Mount Fuji (the highest peak in Japan) is the way to heal the infection. Again, we see the symbolism that the director intends to show us. Healing requires an ascent, a redemption, which brings other classical mythological symbolism to mind.

#### 4. THE LAST STOP: FUJI ROYAL OUTLET PARK

The protagonist’s last great trial takes place in the setting of a desolate shopping mall (00:55:16). On his way up Mount Fuji, Hideo encounters a group of people organized and constituted as a community, where they help each other to achieve survival. The Fuji Royal Outlet Park shopping mall is presented as an oasis amid the zombie holocaust.

On a symbolic level, this space is presented as an obstacle on the protagonist’s path of ascent, overcoming a series of temptations that evoke deadly sins. In the first place, overcoming materialism and the consumerist world model from which he flees has qualified him as mediocre.

As soon as he arrives, anecdotally, Hideo comes across a clothing store where he tries on a leather jacket, which he feels reinforced by his hero figure (00:56:51). Similarly, in other scenes, different community members offer him advantages and privileges based on objects that lack utility and only enhance ostentation and superficiality (such as Rolex watches or when they desperately search for curry). On the other hand, in a new context where no one knows Hideo, he is tempted to lie about his life and invent his role. However, Hideo not only does not do so but also reaffirms: “Are you a hunter?” “No, I’m a manga artist” (01:06:05). Likewise, the shotgun he carries becomes an object coveted by all. The one who

has the shotgun will have the power of control. However, for Hideo, the shotgun does not represent power but value, as will be seen later.

Under these considerations, Hideo realizes this oasis is an illusion, a mirage, a society just as corrupt as the previous one. A society dominated by a despot leader who imposes his will.

On a symbolic level, the film reinforces the idea already introduced that the zombies represent the inner ghosts of the people who make up a sleeping, corrupt society full of routine habits, full of stress, consumerism, and dominated ignorance: “The Zokyuns are trapped in the past, perhaps they are happier than us” (01:06:35). The director explicitly reinforces this by showing us the zombies tirelessly repeating their greatest obsessions or fears.

In this dystopian scenario, Hideo realizes that he has to hide Hiromi’s hybrid nature (the new life project, the dreams, the bridge between the old and the new) as he considers, and rightly so, that she has no place in this society. He has to protect her, not only from the zombies but also from them. To protect her, to hide her, is to protect her goals.

At this point, it is essential to highlight the role of Yabu’s character. Unlike Hideo, she is a nurse who abandoned her patients and fled in the face of the crisis, leaving behind her vocation. The dialogue reflects this: “I consider you a nice guy. She’s sick, but you did not abandon her... I would not have been able to” (01:15:46). Unlike Yabu, Hideo pursues his dreams, even if they are broken (Hiromi’s infection), defends them, tries to heal them by climbing Mount Fuji, and protects them from society’s attack. This act of the past mortifies her. However, meeting Hideo inspires her, giving her a new opportunity to rectify her actions. From that moment on, Yabu, too, will become an advocate for Hiromi. Yabu once again finds a purpose, a meaning to her life.

However, like all great heroes, Hideo suffers a great crisis that will make him question everything and force him to reaffirm himself with determination. In one scene, Hiromi is discovered when some men try to attack her to abuse her and Yabu. After this, Iura, leader of the community, kills Hiromi (she is finally only wounded) in front of Hideo’s eyes, who does nothing and lets them take his shotgun (01:14:44). Hideo is devastated; he has lost Hiromi (sense of life) and courage (shotgun): “I don’t have the gun; I have lost everything” (01:19:30) or “And look how I ended up. I’m a mess, the whole world has changed, and I’m the same, always a nobody. I’m so sick of myself...” (01:20:05).

It is essential at this point to clarify that, in our understanding, the shotgun represents the hero’s courage and determination in this film. From the beginning, Hideo carries the shotgun. However, he never uses it; he keeps it dormant, like his courage gradually increases. For Hideo, the shotgun is not an element to show off or intimidate others; shooting a shotgun is easy. The real value is having the shotgun and only using it when it is vital. This

fact is reinforced when other community members use Hideo's shotgun, which becomes useless and useless in their hands (01:33:29). The gun has no meaning; it requires the right hands to have an end, a purpose, as happens with courage.

After these episodes, the final zombie holocaust is unleashed in Fuji Royal Outlet Park. Iura, moved by anger and envy (references to the deadly sins continue), condemns the entire community by betraying it. In this context, a frightened Hideo, deprived of Hiromi and the shotgun (sense of life and courage), flees and hides in some lockers (01:30:00). At that moment, he receives a call from Yobu, who confirms that Hiromi is still alive: "Four eyes, don't die leaving her here, what about Hiromi, you have to save her" (01:35:52). Hideo reacts immediately and leaves the locker, ready to save them, finding the shotgun on the floor on his way out. At this point, the director again proposes to us to relate Hiromi and the shotgun (01:38:54) to the hero's goals, purposes, and courage. Thus, Hideo once again has something to fight for and regains his courage, overcoming the great crisis of faith he had suffered.

Another central turning point occurs the first time Hideo uses the gun to save Hiromi and Yobu (01:42:37). With this act, Hideo shows his intention to break away from the mall (as he had already done with his girlfriend, work, and society), leave behind the temptations offered by this oasis, and follow his inner path. Hiromi rewards him: "Hideo, when I am with you, I know everything will be okay" (01:45:22). After this, the final massacre begins. Hideo relentlessly and determinedly eliminates all the zombies. He finishes rebelling against society and succeeds by facing all his fears, saving Hiromi and Yobu (01:53:55). Hiromi concludes: "Hero" (01:58:24).

The rest of the characters are devoured by their fears, insecurities, or inability to move on. For example, Abe-san cannot leave his wife behind, is devoured by his loss, and the new leader is phagocytized by his followers, reflecting how corrupt their relationships are based on unhealthy competitiveness and susceptibility to betrayal.

On a symbolic level, it is interesting to highlight a common fact in zombie movies: once we are bitten or infected, we become them. This fact shows a clear allegory of society's power to drag us down and turn us into one more in the herd. To confront the zombies is to resist the canons imposed by society.

The film ends with the three characters fulfilling their redemption, ascending Mount Fuji before the gaze of the zombies who no longer attack them. Hideo is untouchable, and no one can overthrow his character or dreams. In one of the last scenes, when Yobu reveals his real name, Tsugumi Oda, the protagonist introduces himself simply as Hideo Suzuki (no hero h). Hideo, finally, has not drawn his adventure but lived it.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This case study of the film *I am a Hero* has sought to investigate the antagonistic figure of the zombie, the zombie-killing hero, often overshadowed by zombies, due to the widespread interest generated by the attractive zombie culture (Balmain, 2008; McIntosh & Leverette, 2008). This chapter takes a journey through the evolution of the inner world of the zombie killer. We can conclude that the whole adventure that the protagonist lives is an external materialization of the anxieties, fears, and ghosts that torture his person. It is an identity conflict that he must resolve, and that originates the whole holocaustic adventure. Therefore, this study analyzes the solution to Hideo's problem. The protagonist struggles to escape from a society that had excluded, made invisible, and inhibited him. He rebels against a society that, represented through the zombies' aggressiveness, mirrors the hostility he experiences and labels him as mediocre. The path to empowerment puts him in critical situations that end up deconstructing his personality to build a new, stronger, and more self-confident self.

The ideas presented here converge with recent studies that analyze the meaning of the zombie figure. These works conclude that zombies are a reflection of the fears and anxieties of the societies in which they are framed, revealing, moreover, many of the underlying conceptions and values, such as the eternal individualism-collectivism debate (Scott, 2007; Ashton, 2018; Macfarlene, 2018).

Similarly, this interpretation has been found in other successful zombie films. It can be extrapolated to other cases of zombie-killing heroes who, while not having the same fears, do have to resolve internal conflicts. First, we refer to the case of Seok-woo, the protagonist of the acclaimed *Train to Busan* (*Busanhaeng*, Yeon Sang-ho, 2016). In it, we can see the struggle to be a good father that concludes with the zombie killer giving his own life to save his daughter in a clear example of sacrifice, which is what he had to learn. Another case we see it is in Alice Abernathy from *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2016). The protagonist is a biological experiment and must discover her origin and make sense of her life to forge her identity. She struggles with the fear of not knowing who she is. Finally, we can mention *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), in which the protagonist, a young man of color, Ben, fights against a classist and racist society while critiquing various aspects of contemporary society.

Finally, it would be interesting to note that, in many zombie films, the zombie-killing heroes develop their adventure in closed or claustrophobic spaces that, given the character of redemption and cleanliness suffered by the protagonists, could have some resemblance to limbo spaces that remind us of other productions as in the case of the series *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010).

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**CHAPTER 7.**  
**REUNITED AGAINST MASSES: INDIVIDUALITY AND COLLECTIVITY**  
**IN *THE WALKING DEAD***

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1. INTRODUCTION

Representations of zombies have often been associated with critiques of consumer society, a central theme in George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). In addition to that, zombies may also represent the masses and slavery. Rather than being restricted to a universal, unchanging signification, the figure of a zombie proves to be variable, and it can change according to the social and cultural contexts.

Following Russell (2005) and Bishop (2010), it is possible to identify at least three moments within the development of zombie narratives. The first stage takes place between the 1930s and 1940s, when zombie movies signified the fear for the Caribbean Islands, black societies and the revenge of the colonies. Between the 1950s and 1960s, during the second stage, the zombies represent the concerns about the Atomic Age, the Cold War, Communism and Contemporary Wars. The late 1960s and 1970s mark a significant change in the zombie narrative. Thanks to George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), zombies become "flesh eaters" and "zombification" occurs through the bite of the living dead. These narratives emphasize apprehensions about race relations, gender disparity and the erosion of the traditional family. Since then, zombies have become a fertile place for sociological critiques, revealing "additional uneasiness about violence, consumerism, paranoia, classism, immigration, infection, the power of the media, and the general end of the world" (Bishop, 2010, p. 207).

In the 2000s productions, due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and natural disasters, zombie movies have been focusing progressively on the so-called Zombie Apocalypse and its impact on society. The beginning of this new wave can be set to *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), where the contagion is widespread, the zombies are "infected", the social structure as we once knew it collapses, and the social order is destroyed.

The post-2000s wave of zombie movies has kicked off what Darren Reed and Ruth Penfold-Mounce (2015) call the "social science-fiction", that is "fiction used to *explore* sociological themes and concept [...] rather than seeking to explain or describe a social

occurrence” (pp. 125–126). The new productions do not focus on the actual state of society but on a “what-if” scenario, investigating what would happen if a zombie apocalypse occurred and the social order was destroyed.

While a tentative investigation in such direction has been done by the cinema in *Land of Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 2005), *Diary of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2006) and *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013), the opportunity to deeply explore the social dynamics occurring in the outbreak has emerged with zombie TV series. Through the characters’ biography, psychology, relationships and their change over a long period, the serialization “give[s] the zombie narrative the time it needs to map out the complicated human relationships that would result from a zombie infestation” (Bishop, 2010, pp. 206–207).

In this regard, AMC’s *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022) is an appropriate field to discuss the role of individuality and collectivity in the attempt to survive the apocalypse<sup>7</sup>: being a TV series, it allows to explore deeply the character’s biography, psychology and relationships; it also allows to take a look at the impact of the outbreak on the society and how the changes in the character’s biography influence the group. While cinema productions focus primarily on the struggle to survive the zombies, in *The Walking Dead*, the danger is not solely represented by the zombies but also, notably, by human beings. In the story’s development, the zombies gradually become merely one of the existing threats in the world. In this sense, as many scholars (Bishop, 2010; Reed & Penfold-Mounce, 2015; Eschner, 2017) stated, *The Walking Dead* is not about zombies.

## 2. INDIVIDUALS AS NOT-YET-LIVING-DEAD

*The Walking Dead*’s living dead are the “infected”—as they are called in Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002). They are more similar to the zombies of George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1978) than the post-2000 zombie representations, where they gradually become faster, more intelligent and emotional; on the contrary, the walkers, as zombies are often called in *The Walking Dead*, are entirely unconscious. As Dr. Edwin Jenner (Noah Emmerich) explained, the virus reactivates only the brain’s essential functions, instinct, without any ability to reason or self-consciousness. He states that, after being bitten, the infected brain progressively turns off all motor and vital functions, bringing death. The virus reanimates the brain’s essential functions between three minutes and eight hours, and the only way to stop “the reanimated” is to destroy the brain. Dr. Jenner’s explanation suggests a link between the bite, the infection and the reanimation. However, Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) learns<sup>8</sup> that the bite is not the cause of the turning. After killing Shane Walsh (John

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<sup>7</sup> This chapter covers *The Walking Dead* series from season 1 to season 8.

<sup>8</sup> “Better Angels”, S02E12.

Berenthal), Rick sees his friend returning, even though he was not bitten before. In this way, the zombie bite is revealed not to be the cause of zombification; it appears to cause another type of infection, like meningitis, that leads the victim to death, as suggested by Dr. Jenner.

The show, therefore, suggests that *zombification* is in some ways embedded into human beings, intensely modifying the implications of living in a zombie outbreak. While during an epidemic, one can search for safety, running away from the infected (Canetti, 1978), in the scenario of a dormant virus, there is no way of escaping from turning unless the brain is destroyed. So, the survivors can technically be considered as “not-yet-living-dead”: someone just in a transitory status. Survival, then, is no longer about the struggle of avoiding contagion but the attempt to postpone the moment of turning and ensure mercy<sup>9</sup> when death will come. From this point of view, the *The Walking Dead*’s post-apocalyptic scenario offers no way out: humanity is eventually destined to be the one with zombies.

The awareness of being already infected has a profound impact on the lives of survivors, both relieving and stressful. While the embedded *zombification* makes each human being a threat to each other, no matter if a stranger, a friend or a relative, the zombie bite is no longer a death sentence, so one can always have the hope to survive a zombie attack even if it gets bitten. Hershel Green (Scott Wilson) gets saved from death by Rick, who amputates his bitten leg. This awareness takes away the “magical” fear from the walkers. At this stage, they are considered a threat but not a fatal one. The threat is related to the size of the attacking pack; the numerical inferiority makes the survivor feel unsafe because it gets closer at the moment of turning.

At the same time, survivors learn that the embedded *zombification* can be a “weapon” both for attack and for self-defence. For instance, in the sixteenth episode of Season 7, Sasha (Sonequa Martin-Green), being captured by Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), commits a “suicide bomb/zomb”: she kills herself knowing that she will turn and, as a living dead she would have more opportunity to get Negan killed. In some way, zombies are recognized to be potentially much more powerful and efficient than humans. In Season 8, Negan, inspired by Sasha, wants to use the embedded *zombification* as a Trojan horse by killing some of Hilltop’s inhabitants using zombie blood to ensure their death, letting them turn and causing self-destruction.

Zombies are no longer just an outside threat to fight to survive. In *The Walking Dead*, walkers become an essential part of the world, and awareness of embedded *zombification* reduces the distance between the living dead and the survivors. Rick and Glenn (Steven Yeun) cover themselves with the blood and flesh of walkers while walking with them,

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<sup>9</sup> To have/give mercy is an expression used sometimes in *The Walking Dead*’s companion series *Fear The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2015–2023) and in the parodic zombie series *Z Nation* (SyFy, 2014–2018). It refers to the act of hitting the brain of someone dying before he/she turns into a zombie.

indicating the dissolution of the boundaries and differences between the living and the living dead: the smell of putrefaction is the only feature differentiating humans and walkers.

The blurring of boundaries can also be identified in the personal relationships each survivor establishes with walkers. For instance, before joining Rick's group, Michonne (Danai Gurira) moves with her two walkers, who later are revealed to be her family members; Hershell Green keeps the turned friends in his farm's granary, considering them just sick. In the same way, the Governor (David Morrissey) takes care of his turned daughter as if she were still the same person. This kind of relationship is also strictly linked to the survivor's biography. Father Gabriel (Seth Gilliam) turns out to be a coward, leaving his parishioner to be eaten by zombies. In his mind, zombies represent the sense of guilt and the punishment he will have due to his betrayal of his community. After having his family killed by zombies, Morgan Jones (Lennie James) wants to redeem himself by killing all the walkers around, but, at the same time, he becomes a cold-blooded killer, eliminating anyone who interferes, human or not. In Season 8, he starts to consider himself already a living dead, affirming that he cannot die; walkers cannot kill him because he is already dead, being one of them. The little Lizzie Samuels (Brighton Sharbino) cannot afford the change the world goes through: she lashes out at humans and animals, but she is sweet and docile with zombies, whom she considers just different, and this approach causes her to be executed by Carol Peletier (Melissa McBride) because her behaviour has become a threat for the safety of the group.

In conclusion, zombies have become a means to question any distinction between humans and non-humans and the consequences of relationships (Reed & Penfold-Mounce, 2015). The boundaries are so blurred that for some survivors, it is impossible to identify the danger. This inability to distinguish influences their identities and relationships, contributing to defining or changing the form of communities to which they belong.

### 3. THE EMERGENCE OF COMMUNITIES UNDER THE LEADERSHIP

The first instinct in an epidemic is to run away from the infected, which drives people to get divided (Canetti, 1978), but, in the long term, small groups of survivors start to gather to enhance the probability of surviving (Brooks, 2003). This form of aggregation is what Elias Canetti (1978) calls a *flight crowd*, i.e. a group of persons formed by the need to keep the shared danger as far as possible, knowing that moving together increases the chance of survival (p. 53). It can be pointed out as the very first form of social aggregation in an apocalypse scenario. These groups are always on the run, moving from one place to another when the danger (the walkers) comes close. Generally, they are the most comprehensive crowd, including "young and old among them, strong and weak, those less and those more burdened" (Canetti, 1968, p. 53).

Rick's group corresponds to the profile put forward by Canetti. Formed in the Atlanta Survivors Camp (ASC) at the beginning of the first season, Rick's group is an aggregation of

individuals whose only goal is to survive. It is composed of a mix of people that generally would not have gathered: there is the patriarchal family of submissive and religious Carol Peletier; drug and alcohol-addicted Merle Dixon (Michael Rooker) and his redneck brother Daryl Dixon (Norman Reedus); Asian American Glenn Rhee (Stephen Yeun); religious African American T-Dog (IronE Singleton). The group rapidly evolves from a *flight crowd* to Turner's (1991) *spontaneous communitas*, where, despite the absence of formal structure, each member contributes to the community life according to their skills and abilities.

From the relationships between the group members, an “essential We” emerges, i.e. the liminal character who, in the long term, can lead the community to arise (Turner, 1991, p. 137). Relationships among members, one's biography and psychology regarding individuality and collectivity, together with the group's longevity, shape the community's identity and form. First, they give rise to the leaders. Once the leaders emerge, as Ramsland (2015) suggests, the group tends to be influenced by his/her core values, and its organization becomes strictly related to his/her psychology and biography.

Rick generally shows leadership that can be defined as *transformational* (Bass & Riggio, 2006), based on commitment, loyalty, and group satisfaction. He is focused on the idea of collaboration and diffuse management, but he “keeps changing according to the circumstances and the state of his own mental health” (Anne, 2017, p. 8). Even though Rick sometimes refuses leadership, pushing the group to search for a democratic model—creating a Council in the West Georgia Correctional Facility or assigning Maggie as the leader in Alexandria—he always acts as the unofficial leader. For instance, Rick autonomously expels Carol without appealing to the Council after having discovered she secretly killed two sick members at West Georgia Correctional Facility because of the fear that other members might get infected. This continuous change in his attitude also puts the group in a state of constant change. It exposes them to risks, as when they decide to make the first attack on the Savior's Sanctuary, which will cause the execution of Glenn and Abraham at Negan's hands and the beginning of the war with the Savivors. Despite Rick's characteristics, the group lets individuality emerge. It cultivates different forms of leadership, letting Maggie, for example, become the official leader at Hilltop or Carol be the “ambassador” at the Kingdom.

The leadership style is fundamental in understanding the identity of the community. The Governor and Negan are charismatic and express strong leadership in different ways, organizing their communities according to their personal goals. The Governor's Woodbury is an idyllic place with a beloved leader. However, it is soon revealed to be just an illusion, hiding a feudal system ruled by the “most Machiavellian of *The Walking Dead's* monster” (Hetterly & Langley, 2015, para. 1), who, through a *paternalistic* leadership, manipulates people with the sole purpose to create a cult around himself and maintain the power, even if this means sacrificing his citizens.

The cult of personality is also a trait of Negan. He is a megalomaniac showing elements of psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and sadism (Langley, 2015), like The Governor. The main difference lies in motivation and leadership style. While the Governor is just interested in maintaining power, Negan has the highest objective to rebuild the civilization under his command; he sees himself as a Savior (hereby, the name of the community is “The Savivors”), and he wants all the community to follow the mission as he does. This result is achieved through a well-structured system of punishments and rewards<sup>10</sup>. The strict obedience to the rules and the public rituals emphasizing the punishments and rewards create the general and mixed sentiment of fear and respect that leads members to identify themselves with the leader (“I’m Negan”) and his collectivist values (“We Are The Savivors”).

Both the Governor’s and Negan’s actions are rituals belonging to storytelling aimed at enforcing their cult, feeding their egos, and achieving their personal goals. Their communities seem either idyllic (Woodbury) or well-structured and democratic (The Savior’s). Eventually, the first is revealed to be a feudal community and the second a totalitarian system.

Storytelling is fundamental in The Kingdom, the community near Alexandria, and Rick’s group’s settlement since the fifth season. The Kingdom is an uncommon monarchical system, led by King Ezekiel (Khary Payton) and supported by his knights who serve as soldiers, scouts and scavengers. In the community, there are schools, a choir, and a marketplace; people are just required to contribute as much as they can, and they are free to use the facilities. In contradiction to the Governor’s Woodbury and despite the presence of a self-declared King, the community is a place of liberty, and the authority is just a symbol of safety. All the life and governance styles recall a theatrical show (the throne, the tiger and King Ezekiel’s pompous talking style). Like other communities, The Kingdom is shaped around the personality of his leader; Ezekiel, indeed, uses his before-the-outbreak experience in theatre to create storytelling, including rituals to give hope and a sense of belonging to the members of the community, to keep them safe from the “brutal world” outside the walls.

Rick, The Governor, Negan and Ezekiel are examples of different styles of leadership, marked by their psychological profiles and used for different purposes: the idealist Rick’s purpose is to create a democratic and participating society; the selfish Governor’s purpose is to establish a feudal system; megalomaniac Negan aims to rebuild a civilized society under his authoritarianism, and dreamer and protective Ezekiel tries to give hope of peace and safety to his community.

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the punishments are to be beaten to death by “Lucille”; to be turned into a walker and chained to the fence; to have one’s face burned. On the opposite side, the rewards include being nominated as lieutenants, being a part of the leading council or having access to more facilities like a private room, wine, sex and games.

#### 4. THE CHANGE OF COMMUNITIES SEIZED BY EXTERNAL THREATS

Other communities lack strong leadership, and it seems that this lack determines, on the one hand, the group's closure and, on the other hand, exposes it more to external events. "Terminus", the community Rick's group meets in the fifth season, was initially established as a sanctuary in an abandoned train station. Having been attacked by a group of bandits who killed many people and raped women, after weeks of occupation, the original community managed to escape and to reconquest the place. Since then, they decided that no good has remained in the world and would have taken advantage of people who trusted them, as their experience taught them. New arrivals are not just people from whom to take resources; they often become the community's food. People are asked whether they accept cannibalism or not; if they do not, they are captured, killed and eaten, according to the Terminus motto: "You are the butcher, or you're the cattle".

Terminus' leader is Gareth (Andrew J. West), who has many traits in common with The Governor, as confirmed by Lloyd ("Gareth of Terminus", 2015), but differing from him and Negan, he does not elevate over the others. The community shows the traits of *spontaneous communitas* and its shared experience, which leads them to cannibalism and the ritual of acceptance, which strongly marks its liminal *existential*<sup>11</sup> character. Even though they are open to strangers, they act as a *closed crowd* (Canetti, 1978, p. 17) when they ask if newcomers accept cannibalism. The refusal, at the same time, does not provide the physical rejection of new members; instead, it changes their "role", transforming a potential member into a food source. In these terms, Terminus can be defined as a partially closed crowd.

A wholly closed crowd is represented by The Scavengers, or Garbage People, a community encountered for the first time in the episode "Rock in the Road" (S07E09). This community is formed by people who found a shelter in a junkyard near Alexandria, where Rick's group moved after Terminus. They adopt a policy of cutting any contact with the external world and doing nothing that may harm them or cannot be helpful. As a closed community, they even developed a proper way of communication based on broken English. Like Terminus, the leadership is not hierarchical. Their leader, Jadis/Anne (Pollyanna McIntosh), appears to be a person who takes care of the members, trying to provide them with all the stuff they need for survival, teaching them to use the limited resources to create weapons to combat the walkers and external enemies. The general attitude towards the external groups is to avoid fighting and, when a war occurs, to ally with the more substantial part. They are purely opportunistic, betraying, and, alternatively, Rick and the Savivors, and

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<sup>11</sup> Turner (1991) uses "existential" and "spontaneous" in an interchangeable way. Here, the *existential* is used to underline the impact of experience as a group on the community's existence.

this behaviour eventually leads them to be destroyed by the Savivors' lieutenant Simon (Steven Ogg).

Another example of a community without strong leadership is the Hilltop Colony. Founded initially as a governmental outpost after the outbreak (The Walking Dead Wiki, 2018), the military forces abandoned it, leaving the survivors alone. Here, the community is established, surrounding the mansion with walls. As Terminus and The Scavengers, Hilltop is a closed group without a normative structure, and its leader, Gregory (Xander Berkeley), contrary to Gareth and Jadis/Anne, appears to be a selfish and weak survivor. The community is very social-based and avoids conflict, preferring negotiation to a fight. Internally, they refuse any punishment, and the conflicts are resolved through dialogue. This characteristic leads the colony to easily accept the Savivors' rule until Maggie takes over the command, leading the community to join The Militia, an alliance formed with Alexandria and The Kingdom against the Savivors.

Terminus, Scavengers, and Hilltop Colony are all characterized by weak leadership and a similar history. They were all formed shortly after the outbreak, and their evolution is marked by external events that radically change their identity and destiny. Even though they have a caring leader, they lack a strong leader able to organize them into a normative *communitas*, which causes them to become prey for organized groups.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Zombie narratives have followed American society's evolution, highlighting the fears related to the different eras. After 9/11, the apocalypse has become a typical scenario, depicting a world where the social order has collapsed because of an external threat, and survival is a struggle against the "cause" of the collapse. As Reed and Penfold-Mounce (2015) emphasize, confirming Bishop's suggestion (2010), *The Walking Dead* represents an extraordinary opportunity to explore human relationships in an apocalyptic scenario where the social order and society have collapsed. While the show maintains many tropes that characterized the post-2000 film production, it offers the possibility to follow how individuals and communities react to the outbreak as the apocalypse becomes an ordinary new world.

*The Walking Dead's* zombies are no longer the vehicle of contagion because the virus is already embedded in humans and activates with any cause of death. That said, the living are "not-yet-living dead", a transitory stage towards turning into a walker. This tends to dissolve the boundaries between the classical Canetti's (1962) opposition, "The living and the dead" (pp. 63–67), and the struggle to avoid the contagion (pp. 272–275). Survival is more about postponing the moment of *zombification* that can happen beyond a walker's bite.

This has three implications: zombies are no longer a lethal threat apart when they act as a pack or crowd; they only differ from humans just for the absence of conscience and consciousness (Lauro & Embry, 2008); humans and zombies, hereby, belong to the same mass, so the struggle against zombies is not different from the fight against other groups, rather to confront zombies can be more manageable. Furthermore, it means that every social aggregation contains a potential self-destruction, as Sasha’s “suicide-zomb” and Negan’s “time-zomb” attack demonstrate.

While in classical narratives, the struggle was on two fronts (“living vs. living dead” and “human vs. human”), now it is on one single but deeper level, i.e. not-yet-living-dead vs. not-yet-living-dead, and this explains the progressively marginal role of the zombies in the show. The not-yet-living-dead, hereby, is a more dangerous threat to confront than the living dead, and the goal of communities gradually shifts from a pure instinct to increase the distance from the infected (Canetti, 1978; Brooks, 2003) to the need to create a new social order able to control the threat represented by other humans.

Leadership is the fundamental element for achieving this goal. The winning leader is characterized by strong self-confidence, vision of the future and coherence in execution. So, while Rick’s Group and The Saviors, despite the significant differences between the two leaders, seem destined to flourish, closed groups without strong leadership—such as Terminus, Scavengers and, in a different way, The Governor’s Woodbury—are destined to perish. *The Walking Dead*, then, suggests that without strong leadership, a group of individuals cannot become a community and cannot prosper; on the other hand, the individual who arises as a recognized strong leader can play an important role in the group’s survival and the destiny of the weaker.

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**CHAPTER 8.**  
**THE GOD OF THE APOCALYPSE: NARRATIVES ABOUT THE DIVINITY**  
**IN *THE WALKING DEAD***

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**1. INTRODUCTION: CONSUMING THE ZOMBIE**

Historically, attempts have been made to answer crucial questions about zombies' origin, nature and disruptive possibilities as beings with particular characteristics. It has been affirmed that the zombie myth is a product of the social moment in which it is found (Aguado, 2013; Ozog, 2013). However, this myth presents some common elements that Fernández (2011) saw in the first works of one of the most renowned filmmakers of the genre, George A. Romero. Among other characteristics, we can find, for example, the “feeling of overwhelm [or] the growing proximity of the threat” (Fernández, 2011, p. 20). This invites us to think about the construction of the zombie as a being *that is*, but at the same time *is not*. That stalks, threatens and devours its victims in situations of constant urgency, where those who survive usually fear becoming one of them and losing their humanity. The zombie, as stated by Aguado (2013), “has no thoughts, language or desires, only an animal survival instinct” (p. 48).

Hunt, Lockyer, and Williamson (2014) affirm that the concept of the zombie as we see it today is a mixture of ghoul, vampire and the traditional conception of the zombie, agreeing with other authors that this representation has been more grounded in Romero's original works than in the myth of Haitian voodoo. Thus, as a “metaphor of the masses” (Hunt, Lockyer, & Williamson, 2014, p. 2), zombies *consume* their victims much like the audiences who watch them do so: driven more by instinct than by reason

Zombie narratives are “mined fields of ethics, where human beings must be fought, betrayed, abandoned and destroyed so that the main characters, our heroes, can survive” (Canavan, 2010, p. 445). Consequently, when the ethical issue is at stake, religion is seen as a motivator or inhibitor of the character's actions and their relationship with the scenario in

which they operate. In this way, the ethical problems and the person of God in the apocalyptic life are crossed by the references each character makes (or does not) to divinity, thus opening discussions such as the one established in this chapter.

Here, we present a quantitative and qualitative approach using the dialogues of 116 chapters of *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022), corresponding to the first eight seasons of the series. Thus, in each mention of divinity, we identify the divine attribute to which it is referred, among those proposed by the English theologian Arthur W. Pink. Subsequently, the four attributes with more appearances in the corpus were taken to deepen their context, paying special attention to the dialogues pronounced by Hershel Greene and Gabriel Stokes, two openly religious characters.

*The Walking Dead* is classified as a science fiction series that tells the story of a group of people trying to survive a zombie apocalypse. In this new world scenario, those who have died come back to life, transformed into dead walkers who destroy everything in their path. The TV series *The Walking Dead* franchise comprises eleven seasons, with several of its episodes exceeding ten million viewers.

## 2. RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN THE ZOMBIE WORLD

First, we find the relationship between the zombie idea and its connections with Haitian culture and voodoo (Valero, 2006; Kette, 2010; McAlister, 2012). However, some state the presence of the zombie in other mythologies such as Nordic, Arabic, Asian and Nigerian (Ferrero & Roas, 2011), being also a social metaphor, seeing the zombie not as a representation of the fear of death or things that we do not know, but instead as the image of fear of being controlled or acting unconsciously. In that sense, the zombie is an alienated being that “infringes on evil, perpetuates and infects it” (Ferrero & Roas, 2011, p. 23), and that is appropriate to highlight our concerns as human beings (Dendle, 2007; Aguado, 2013).

Speaking precisely about *The Walking Dead* comics, Herman (2014) relates the notion of the body in Buddhism and the idea that we are separated from zombies by a temporary barrier: that zombies represent us in the future. There, he observes how a sense of beauty permeates our concept of death. The zombie comes to break this, and it is possible that for this reason, they call our attention so much because in the said universe, “there are no happy endings” (Blake, 2010). In the zombie world, Blake (2010) would say, it is more likely that the ideas of God or moral standards would be hard to find, although others claim that there is some resonance among zombies with, at least, the belief that the dead will be resurrected (Moghul, 2015).

The stories about zombies, in most cases, can be reduced to a religious question: How bad are we? (Litore, 2012). This leads us to think about the dignity of men as created in the

image of God because, for zombies, people are nothing but food. However, amid how apocalyptic and dramatic it may be, if men have options to survive, the story becomes “an allegory of hope” (Litore, 2012), meaning that everything can end or take another course. The necessary question would be: where or in whom is that hope?

For the above reasons, this chapter seeks to reflect on the relationship between religion and zombies and how it is spread through media that impacts our worldview. Along these lines, we ask ourselves: How is the person of God built in *The Walking Dead* series from the dialogues exposed in the first eight seasons? Here, we try to give an approach to the idea of a god formed from certain divine attributes that come into conflict or adjust to the world in which the observed stories unfold.

### 3. THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE DIVINITY

The person of God is the centre of almost all religions, whether monotheistic or polytheistic, and one way to understand how he is seen in any creed is through the identity characteristics granted to him, also called *attributes*. To analyze them in *The Walking Dead*, we have adopted the perspective of the Christian tradition because it is the dominant religion in the place where the series is developed and the one with the most significant presence in the dialogues. However, we recognize that the audiovisual is not explicitly confessional.

Before we go on, it is necessary to clarify something: Attributes can be considered communicable or non-communicable (Grudem, 2005). This classification allows us to talk about those attributes that God communicates, that is, those that he shares in some way with his creatures without making them equal (love, mercy, knowledge, etc.). Other attributes that God does not communicate, that is, that belong exclusively to him, such as eternity, immutability, or omnipresence.

With this in mind, we can then define these attributes according to the classification proposed by Pink (2008):

1. *Solitariness*: Before Creation, nothing existed except the Triune God. He dwells in eternity without beginning or end.

2. *Decrees*: God has determined the course of everything. His plan is, like Him, eternal and immutable. This does not mean that men are robots or that God is guilty of their transgressions because every human being is responsible for their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

3. *Omniscience*: God knows everything in an absolute sense. Nothing escapes God's knowledge.

4. *Foreknowledge*: God knows what will happen in the future because he predetermines everything. Nothing in the universe surprises Him.

5. *Supremacy*: God is above all. To Him corresponds all glory, and his dominion over creation is absolute.

6. *Sovereignty*: Because God is the supreme being, he can exercise his supremacy over creation. This is called sovereignty: autonomously doing His will without anyone being able to contradict him.

7. *Immutability*: God does not change. His attributes remain intact, and he is the same from eternity, making his will invariable in time.

8. *Holiness*: In God, there is no sin. He is morally pure and perfect in all its attributes. He does not tolerate transgression or overlook the punishment man deserves for evil.

9. *Power*: God does what he has decreed. This is the faculty with which he enforces all that dictates its will, since it is not restricted by human desire or will.

10. *Faithfulness*: Unlike man, God never fails to keep his word or promises. He is faithful to fulfilling his covenant and threats.

11. *Goodness*: God is eternally good, and everything that emanates from Him (laws, decrees, providences, etc.) has the same characteristics.

12. *Patience*: It is the limitation of the actions of his own accord, so that he forgives the sinner and delays for some time the deserved punishment.

13. *Grace*: This is exercised over his elect and is the sovereign favour of God, through which he blesses his own without demanding compensation.

14. *Mercy*: Derived from goodness, God inclines to lessen the misery of fallen and sinful creatures. This attribute extends to all His creations and not only to the chosen ones.

15. *Love*: Love is not a feeling of God but His very nature. God's love is intrinsic and sovereign because nothing drives or compels him but resides in his own will. It does not change, nor is it regulated by passion or sentimentality.

16. *Wrath*: It is the eternal loathing of God towards all kinds of injustice. It is the holiness of God acting against iniquity.

#### 4. GOD IN *THE WALKING DEAD*

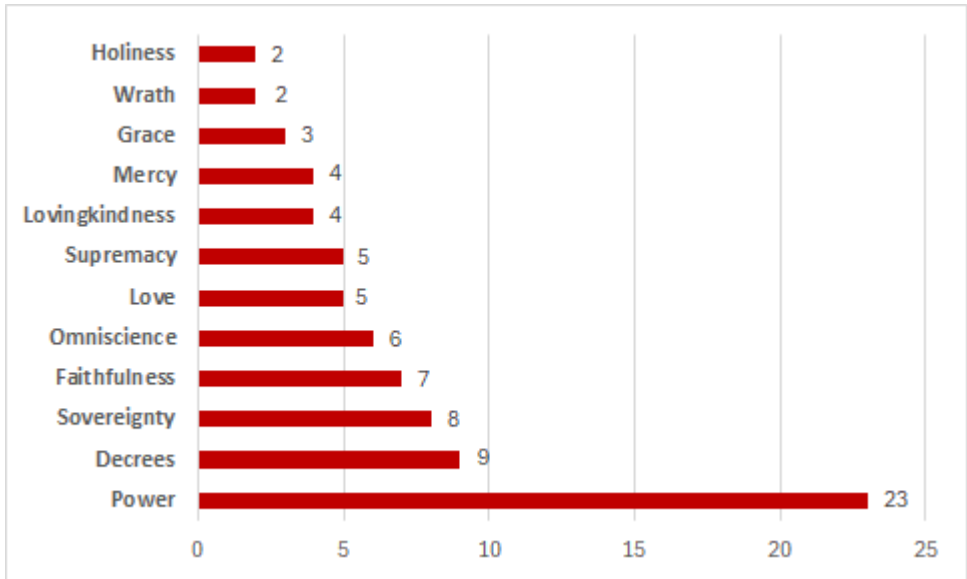
Observing the dialogues of 116 episodes, we found that *God* was mentioned 245 times. Of these, 171 corresponded to simple exclamations (e.g. "Oh my God!"), which we omitted because they were not the main interest of this chapter.

What did we find? In the other 74 mentions, 12 attributes of those that Pink (2008) exposed were set forth. Despite not mentioning *God* explicitly, five more cases are included because they relate to one of its attributes.

The first attribute is the power of God (n=23). Secondly, we found the Decrees of God (n=9), followed by his Sovereignty (n=8) and his Faithfulness (n=7). Figure 1 shows the frequency with which these attributes appeared in the dialogues:

**Figure 1**

*Frequency of each attribute in the corpus of dialogues*



*Source:* Own elaboration based on the data of this study.

## 5. WHO IS THE GOD OF THE APOCALYPSE?

### *Power*

Power is the attribute we found the most. Pink (2008) defines it as the faculty of God to carry out everything He has determined. In that sense, it was identified that the allusion to this attribute is related to survival and protection, recognizing that God keeps them, in this case, safe and sound. The above is delineated by Pink (2008), who says that “no creature has the power to conserve itself” (p. 56), but it is God’s option to sustain man or not.

We also see how some characters come to God for support or help in despair (e.g. “God, help me!”, S01E03). Despite not having a straightforward life of communion with the divinity, certain characters recognize his existence and possible favour when facing difficulties. In other cases, the figure of God seems to be rather a kind of amulet occasionally invoked to get extra help, punctually, for someone else (e.g. “praying for what?—My friends. Looks like they could all use a little help right now”, S02E03). In both situations, it is perceived to some extent that God can intervene and resolve the problem.

Power is not seen as an attribute of God in all situations, but the characters also state that this faculty belongs to them. It means that they can solve their problems without depending on something or someone external (e.g. “It’s a waste of time, all this hoping and praying. We are gonna locate that little girl”, S02E02). Pink (2008) would say just the opposite, arguing that power can only come from God because this “cannot be acquired nor is it in the hands of any other authority” (p. 53).

Attention is drawn to an intermediate point in some dialogues, in which the power of God is recognized to protect them in a specific case while ensuring that He has given some characters particular abilities that will allow them to survive (e.g. “God will save Alexandria because God has given us the courage to save it ourselves”, S06E09).

Here, we highlight the case of Gabriel Stokes—an Episcopal priest—for whom the power of God is manifested and expressed through His word, through which he receives protection. He does not need weapons or defence mechanisms: despite being in an apocalyptic environment, the supreme being takes care of him.

### *Decrees*

The Decree is the purpose of God or the determination of future things and indicates that what must happen (and has happened) was predetermined from eternity (Pink, 2008). Some characters recognize that God makes a plan and that it dictates the development of particular circumstances. Despite that, do they understand it? In some cases, they state that understanding the divine plan is difficult or impossible since the events that are presented are not exactly what they want or expect (e.g. “In all the chaos, you found your wife and boy. Then he was shot, and he survived. That tells you nothing?—It tells me God’s got a strange sense of humor”, S02E04).

In the case of Gabriel, in tune with his idea of power, he affirms that God has a plan for everyone, which is why each person is guided through the paths He has decreed. For the priest, faithfully obeying this plan is synonymous with doing the right thing, which is related to what is stated by Pink (2008) when he speaks of the Decrees as absolute, unconditional and inviolable, and that is why the Scriptures indicate the responsibility of man in his actions, not as a condition for the plan to be fulfilled, but as a duty and an act of obedience.

The worldview of the priest is not limited to his behaviour but influences the actions of other characters. He has interference, for example, in the decisions made by Eugene Porter (openly atheist), who does not recognize the authority of a supreme being but decides to help Gabriel fulfil what the priest has called a mission of God. This points to another characteristic of the Decrees of God as presented by Pink (2008): His wisdom, which ensures that when God decrees something, He not only chooses the best possible ends but also provides the most appropriate means to achieve them.

Hershel Greene, another explicitly religious character but of Protestant inclination, evidences a particularity in front of this attribute. In a situation of uncertainty, he expresses his poor understanding of God's plan. However, he confirms his confidence in the divine promise of the resurrection of the dead, an important concept in the zombie world. This aspect is interesting because even though he has an apparent knowledge of the Scriptures, he doubts whether the resurrection mentioned in them is the same apocalypse they are living in. He does not question whether the promise is false but argues that perhaps God had something different in mind when he planned it and, therefore, does not correspond to what he believed it would be (e.g. "I can't profess to understand God's plan, but Christ promised the resurrection of the dead. I just thought he had something a little different in mind", S02E13).

### *Faithfulness*

God "never forgets, nor misses his Word; he never pronounces it hesitantly, he never gives it up" (Pink, 2008, p. 60). About this, we find two perspectives: the first corresponds to the expression of swearing by God, which could indicate that, for certain characters, when making this vow, it is sworn by a higher standard worthy of being considered faithful, that is, God himself. Thus, the word acquires more excellent value when it involves Divinity. Pink (2008) states that "man can trust in God. No one has ever trusted Him in vain" (p. 60), and this seems to be the principle under which the characters put God as a guarantor.

The second perspective concerns God's non-response to prayers, which would demonstrate, according to Pink (2008), an underestimation of his faithfulness or a lack of trust in Him. Pink (2008) ensures that one of the purposes of this attribute is to discipline those who follow him so that He is faithful in what he gives but also in what he retains. From the author's perspective, the negative or silent response to a specific request is not in any circumstance a contradiction in its nature but, on the contrary, is due to that instruction.

## *Sovereignty*

We can say that this attribute is the execution of the supremacy of God. It speaks of a characteristic of authority, dominion, and hierarchy (Pink, 2008). “God is the Most High, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, is infinitely exalted above the most eminent of creatures” (Pink, 2008, p. 36). But do the characters of *The Walking Dead* perceive it that way?

Several claim they will act in a certain way or achieve a specific goal only if God allows it. Pink (2008) will say that God is independent and is not subject to or influenced by anyone, so the relationship of dependence is men’s to the divine and not vice versa. This aspect is highlighted by certain characters, who subject their desires to the supreme will even though their life is at constant risk (e.g. “What I want, Jim, if God allows, is to get you some help”, S01E05).

Gabriel appears with two more interventions. In the first one, he affirms God has placed him in a sovereign place. Gabriel, therefore, argues to trust in what God has to do from that situation, which is indecipherable for them (e.g. “Do you really think God is leading the way? He’s always leading the way”, S08E11).

The second intervention is at a funeral, where through his sermon, he alludes to the biblical passage of 2 Corinthians 5:1: “For we know that if our earthly house of *this* tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (KJV)<sup>12</sup>. This can be understood considering Pink’s position (2008) on the condition of man before the divine: God’s sovereignty is manifested in the way in which He relates to the creature, particularly in the unconditional condition they have acquired, not through its merits, but through the path that God himself has determined. Thus, He allows human beings to have the confidence of having an eternal and heavenly room.

Hershel Greene and his beliefs regarding the Decree and the promise of resurrection emerge again here. In Gabriel’s case, we see how the character, in a moment of affliction and collective weakness, alludes, through the biblical passage mentioned above, to this promise of eternity made by God.

## 6. SOME FINAL BITES

In this chapter, we wanted to show how the narratives about divinity were built in *The Walking Dead*, analysing the divine attributes enunciated by the characters in the series. There is a marked presence of characteristics such as power, decrees, sovereignty, and faithfulness. However, by delving into their appearances and comparing them with the classical postulates of Christianity that we use as a framework for the analysis, we see that the

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<sup>12</sup> *King James [Bible] Version* in USA; or *Authorized Version (AV)* in UK.

latter sometimes appeared distorted, among other things, because of the inability of the characters to articulate them with the surrounding reality, the apocalyptic universe.

Although characters like Hershel Greene and Gabriel Stokes are more inclined to talk about divinity, religious doubts arise from their experiences since their beliefs conflict with the ethical dilemmas presented in the series and the fact that there are beings (zombies) not contemplated in their worldviews, which are complicated to address theologically. Other characters, such as Rick Grimes, although they recognize that there may be a supreme being even amid the apocalypse, qualify their claims, making it hard to identify a specific theological perspective.

According to these clues that the zombies and the living around us are leaving us, and contrary to what Blake (2010) would say, we consider that there is room in this scenario for the idea of God and specific moral standards because the dialogues let us see that several characters, as Litore (2012) affirms, keep hope. For some, God somehow has something to do with what is happening; for others, what happens is precisely a sign that, although God was present, He now seems to be playing with them or even abandoning the world.

Works like this open the door for other explorations, such as those based on image analysis. It would be interesting to examine the nonverbal language and other practices involved in the series, such as burials with crosses and the hijab, a key symbol of Islam. Also, the theological discussion within the framework of the zombie universe is valuable and necessary to try to understand these narratives, considering that the religious question is indisputably present. For sure, our text will not be the last bite.

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**CHAPTER 9.**  
**THE LIVING DEAD AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH VIOLENCE IN**  
**SPANISH CINEMA**

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**1. INTRODUCTION: ZOMBIES AND THEIR VIOLENT NATURE**

The living dead and their inclusion in audiovisual fiction products have always functioned as an attraction for the viewer in the face of the superstition, mystery, terror and fantasy created around these figures. Although their anthropological origin lies in Haitian folklore (Bishop, 2010, pp. 196–205), literature and cinema have raised these creatures to international fame as more dangerous beings than they were in their early days. The evolution of this figure begins “with its presence in African tribal mythology, moving through its transformation into Caribbean religious practices and concluding with its current incarnation as an aggressive, meat-eating threat to the survival of the individual” (Boon, 2011, p. 51).

Along these lines, and if the living dead constitute and represent a threat to the survival of humanity by persecuting human beings to feed on them and thus infect them, zombies are violent from the very moment they are conceived as such. It is a cause-effect relationship that has a triple aspect. First, it must be considered that the human being’s socialization process turns him into a rational being capable of inhibiting his most primary instincts since “they have been suppressed as we evolved rationally” (Campos, 2005, p. 198). Aggressiveness is one of those instincts that, from socialization and education, can be channelled and controlled so that it does not manifest itself in a harmful and destructive way and turn into violence (Ribotta, 2014, p. 297). Therefore, from the moment zombies cease to be human to become the living dead, reasoning moves away from them, and they begin to be dominated by the impulsivity of their instincts, where survival and obtaining food are priorities to be achieved through uncontrolled aggression that ultimately becomes an exacerbated violence used as a means to achieve their goals.

On the other hand, the fact that zombies are violent per se addresses the threat to humanity posed by their very presence. Before even attacking and infecting humans, the threat to their survival and integrity makes them victims of psychological violence that gradually deteriorates and degrades the human mind. Fear is a germ of violence and violent

behaviours, which, in turn, generate fear, which can be defined as the responses and sensations experienced when danger is present and near (Becerra-García, 2007, p. 76). Thus, the panic and social alarm aroused by the resuscitation of the dead leads to psychological aggression towards humans since the results of the same produce damage and consequences that the victim does not desire, as well as a state of anxiety whose intensity increases “depending on the probability of the occurrence of danger” (Becerra-García, 2007, p. 76).

Finally, it can be said that the direct and physical violence that zombies exert on humans is a consequence of all of the above. If they are depersonalised figures who lack reason, let themselves be carried away by their impetuous impulses and pose a threat to humanity by endangering their survival, their aggressiveness without filters manifest through direct violent acts—they are visible and manifest and easily identified—and of a physical nature—physical force is used to cause damage, injury and even death to the victim, whether or not objects or weapons are used for this purpose (Galtung, 1969, 1990, 1998, 2003). With all this, as the only motivation of zombies is to feed on human flesh, the violence to which they resort to achieve it is varied and of all kinds. Attacking, biting, strangling, killing or eating human flesh and viscera are some of the ways the violence that the living dead exert on their prey is represented. However, depending on the audiovisual product, the genre and the characteristics of the plot, its representation may be more or less explicit and bloodthirsty. The spectacularization of violence is a fact that the audiovisual media know how to exploit because, by enveloping it in a fascinating stylistic atmosphere, it aims to captivate the audience and awaken in it a series of emotions in the spectator, ranging from fear and fright to attraction and excitement.

## 2. THE FIGURE OF THE ZOMBIE AS AN AGGRESSOR IN SPANISH CINEMA

Zombie cinema has traditionally been framed in the genre of terror and, as such, the living dead generate fear, dread or, at least, restlessness among their viewers. To continue the path of success created by the monstrosity of Frankenstein or Dracula, zombies had to represent the fear of dehumanisation and make the spectator experience a way of living “in a world in which the rule of law has ceased to exist and is not replaced but by direct violence with which all the problems that until then afflicted society are resolved” (Ferrero & Roas, 2011, p. 14). But how have zombies been portrayed in Spanish cinema from the perspective of violence? How are these creatures when they act as aggressors rather than victims of human fury?

### 2.1. The living dead and violence. Why are they attacking?

The Spanish filmography’s contribution to the zombie genre began with Armando de Ossorio in 1972 with his tetralogy of terror on the Living Dead. Since then, how zombies use violence has evolved, even though the background remains unchanged. Thus, if one

focuses attention on the cause for which zombies attack, it seems evident that it is for the attainment of their objectives—the zombie is, basically, a consumer of human flesh—and, for this, violence is the means by which they manage to reach them. Except for the animated children’s films *Papá, soy una zombie* (Ricardo Jamón & Joan Espinach, 2011) and *Dixie y la rebelión zombi* (Ricardo Jamón & Beñat Beitia, 2014), the living dead who appear in it—fully aware and without losing an iota of their rationality—make no use of violence centred on the voracious ingestion of humans, as it is used only rarely and for reasons that lack transcendence. Returning to the main motivations behind zombies’ use of violence, it can be broadly stated that the impulse—rather than the necessity—to irrationally consume human flesh is the common thread among most Spanish zombie films. Nonetheless, some variations can be observed in their actions’ specific motivations.

Among the most outstanding motivations is the thirst for revenge, seen in Ossorio’s films and others, such as *El espanto surge de la tumba* (Carlos Aured, 1972). In the former, the corpses of the Knights Templar come to life every night to take revenge for being executed for the practices they carried out in life—performing rituals and sacrifices in which they murdered their victims to drink their blood. In the latter, it is a French knight who, at the moment of his execution, swears revenge and promises to return to life to kill the descendants of his executioners.

Along with this, it is also remarkable that films such as *The Orgy of the Dead* (José Luis Merino, 1973), *The Rebellion of the Dead* (León Klimovsky, 1973), and *One of Zombies* (Miguel Ángel Lamata, 2003)—despite the significant time gap between the first two and the last—incorporate the same motive for which the living dead attack humans. In these films, zombies are governed by the will of their “resuscitators” and remain under their control. In the first, a scientist implants a capsule in the corpses to revive them and make them kill humans so that his experiment funding is not cut off. In the second, a Hindu man knowledgeable in voodoo and magic dedicates himself to resurrecting dead women to use them for murders. In the latter, the character played by Santiago Segura, Entrecot, creates an army of zombies who are slaves to his will and uses them, like hired killers, to torture and kill humans to extract information according to his interests.

However, the most common reason zombies resort to aggression and violence to achieve their goals is simply that they are the living dead. They obey instincts devoid of reasoning and planning, which drive them to attack human beings to consume their flesh and/or drink their blood. As Trigos (2013) states, “All of them have been previously stripped of their basic mental functions, remaining at the mercy of forces that they cannot control (because they are not even fully aware of them)” (p. 15). In this sense, the causes for which zombies resort to violence are depicted in films such as *Do Not Profane the Sleep of the Dead* (Jorge Grau, 1974), where people who have just died come back to life to devour humans after their nervous system is altered by ultrasonic radiation. Similarly, the films that make up

the *REC* saga (Jaume Balagueró & Paco Plaza, 2007–2014) are prime examples of the voracious, exacerbated, and uncontrollable violence zombies unleash when attacking humans.

## 2.2. Forms and Representation of Zombie Violence

The modus operandi of the living dead, when acting as aggressors and using violence to attack humans, has evolved from its beginnings in Spanish cinema to the present day. If violence is a social phenomenon and a concept that “changes with time when cultural conditioning factors also change” (Sánchez et al., 2014, p. 35), it is logical that its representation on the big screen has also evolved. However, even though the type of violence perpetrated by zombies against humans is direct and physical, the perversity of the aggressions committed by the living dead has increased over time—something to which the evolution of special effects in the film industry has also contributed. If, in the first films of the zombie genre in our country, the aggressiveness of the zombies focused only on their attacks and not on their actions before the aggression—that is to say, they displayed bloody violence when killing but not when chasing humans—little by little, violence has permeated all aspects of the aggression scene, making zombies bloodier, more ruthless, and more savage. Thus, in the 1970s, zombies were not characterized by having aggressive movements. Although they moved toward humans with determination once that goal was set as their sole objective, they lacked speed in their movements—displaying clumsiness and languor—and did not paralyze their victims with terrifying screams. These living dead belong to the classic genre stage and, as observed in the Ossorio saga, do not seem to take pleasure in attacking humans. As Trigos (2013) notes, “the Templars do not seem to be pleased with the punishment they provide to their victims” since “they are also victims of a past to which, through a pact with the Devil, they remain tied” (p. 20). However, there is an evolution in the way humans are attacked.

Zombies gradually cease biting the neck to extract the blood of their victims and begin to devour them. They also resort to strangulation or the use of weapons such as swords or various objects to kill humans and feed on their bodies. Their representation becomes more explicit and, at times, even disturbing. For example, in *Don't Profane the Sleep of the Dead*, a group of zombies attacks a police officer in the cemetery by throwing a tombstone at him, wounding him. Once he is on the ground, one zombie strangles him while another digs into his stomach, removes his viscera, and begins to eat them. Additionally, it is worth mentioning the raw brutality with which the aggressions of the living dead are depicted in *Latidos de Pánico* (Paul Naschy, 1983), as the scenes in which the resurrected knight mercilessly murders his victims are incredibly graphic. The aim is to highlight the danger embodied by zombies and the threat they pose to humanity if these creatures were ever to rise from their graves.

**Figure 1**

*Explicit representation of the violence exerted by the figure of the zombie on one of its victims*



*Source: Panic Beats (Paul Naschi, 1974).*

Advancing to the 2000s, the depiction of violence associated with zombies as aggressors becomes significantly more diverse. The violence is even noticeable in their physical appearance, as they are no longer cadaveric, pale, slow, and inexpressive figures. Instead, they are “post-human” zombies who expel the person from his or her own body in order to take possession of it, which explains “the vomited blood, pus, and bodily waste that populate the current subgenre” (Roger, 2008, p. 129). Along with this, it must be added that the fear of being infected causes hysteria and collective panic among the population, making the atmosphere generated by their presence inherently violent. The zombies of this era are no longer just dead people resurrecting from their graves but rather individuals whom a virus has infected, and their contagion is unstoppable. That is why the physical qualities of the latter are very different from those of the earlier ones: they exhibit enormous speed, are quick in their attacks, and act like uncontrolled beasts, out of control and extremely aggressive. Thus, the four films that make up the *REC* saga highlight the characteristics described, as zombies—or rather, infected individuals—are creatures that use extreme violence when biting humans. Unbridled, hysterical, and mad, these beings are possessed by uncontrollable fury when they see humans. Therefore, it is not surprising that the representation of violence they use is extraordinarily expressive and manifest, following the frantic vortex in which they are the protagonists. These zombies take pleasure in feeding on their victims, relishing the act of removing their viscera and devouring all parts of their bodies. This is particularly evident in *REC 3: Génesis* (Paco Plaza, 2012), where the intensity of the violence exhibited by

both the infected and humans shifts the film away from the horror genre, steering it toward an exaggerated and grotesque form of gore designed to elicit extreme emotional responses from the viewer.

**Figure 2**

*Clara, already infected, kisses her husband Koldo and tears out his tongue, infecting him as well.*



*Source: REC 3: Genesis (Paco Plaza, 2012).*

Despite this, there are other films from this stage in which zombies follow different violent guidelines. In *Una de Zombis* (Miguel Ángel Lamata, 2003), although more haggard, the living dead retain a human appearance and seem to have full consciousness as they talk to their victims and understand what they are doing and why. The aggressions they commit are far from those described in the *REC* tetralogy, as they are a gang of shooters working for their leader. Therefore, they use weapons to kill or torture their victims, but not to eat human flesh. On the other hand, in *La hora fría* (Elio Quiroga, 2006), the physical violence of zombies is barely present, giving way to symbolic and psychological violence. The threat of being infected by “strangers” merely through contact looms over a group living in a bunker in a post-apocalyptic environment. *Retornados* (Manuel Carballo, 2013) reflects a similar type of violence: the fear of being infected by a virus, which can only be kept at bay with a daily injection to prevent it from evolving into a zombie, permeates a psychodrama full of psychological and emotional violence.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Aggressive and violent imaginaries have always been present in Spanish zombie cinema, even though it is no longer the exclusive domain of horror. It is now open to combining genres such as animation, comedy, drama, or science fiction. In this sense, it should be noted that the evolution of the living dead and their relationship with violence in Spanish filmography has escalated at all levels of performance and representation. The zombies from Ossorio's films, languid, clumsy and driven by an imperious thirst for revenge, felt the impulse to attack and eat humans, but they are now distant. Progressively, the living dead have evolved into creatures that do not need to act to exude violence from every pore of their skin, as is the case with those in the *REC* saga. Although the zombies of this new era still obey instincts devoid of reason, they now possess an enormous force that allows them to carry out physical aggression in a state of rage, hysteria, and lack of control. However, it should be pointed out that physical violence must now be considered alongside the prominence of symbolic and psychological violence, as the fear and threat of being infected and becoming post-human create an atmosphere of collective panic among the entire population. Despite everything, what remains constant over time is that zombies and the halo of violence surrounding them symbolize the collapse of society as it is conceived in the present moment.

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**CHAPTER 10.**  
**“ALIVE OR DEAD, THE TRUTH WON’T REST”: POLITICS AND  
POETICS OF MEDIA REVOLUTIONS UNDER THE ZOMBIE  
APOCALYPSE IN MIRA GRANT’S *NEWFLESH* TRILOGY**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Rising occurred in July 2014. The mutated Kellis-Amberlee virus, born out of successful cures for the common cold and cancer, with some misinformed bio-terrorism<sup>13</sup>, spread over the planet. Upon death, any mammal over forty pounds now “amplifies” into a zombie as the virus becomes active in their bloodstream. At humanity’s darkest hour, while traditional media refused to believe in (and report on) what was happening, the truth came from a video posted illegally by a virologist from the Center for Disease Control on his teenage daughter’s blog. From there, a grassroots revolution emerged in that medium, and bloggers are still the most reliable news source twenty-five years later. In the world of Mira Grant’s *Newsflesh* series, information is literally vital. Welcome to the zombie post-apocalypse: share, repost freely, and rise up while you can.

The first book, *Feed*, begins in 2039, when siblings Shaun and Georgia Mason are chosen with their tech genius Georgette “Buffy” Meissonier<sup>14</sup> to cover Republican candidate Peter Ryman on the road to the presidential race. At the end of this political thriller with zombies, Ryman is president, but Shaun is the sole surviving member of the *After the End Times* website, and has to assemble a new team of bloggers to avenge his sister’s death by uncovering the truth she held so dear. Levels upon levels of conspiracies are untangled

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<sup>13</sup> That period, alluded to throughout the series, is chronicled in more detail in the short story “Countdown”, written in thirty instalments on the author’s blog in the month leading up to the third book’s release. It was later published as part of the collection *Rise*, which features all the short fiction written in the *Newsflesh* universe.

<sup>14</sup> Romero’s status as one of the “accidental saviours of the human race” is explicitly acknowledged in the protagonists’ world, while *Buffy* is simply written off as a “pre-Rising show” unknown to the siblings (Grant, 2010, p. 23). The homage to *Shaun of the Dead* is never addressed.

through *Deadline* while he travels the country, surrounded by voices old and new. *Blackout* loops back to a more personal scale in a race to free Georgia, returned to life as a government-created clone, by exposing just enough of the epidemiological and political truth to be able to disappear from the public eye.

Zombiism always remains in the background of this world as an impersonal threat to modern civilization, clearly linked to human hubris in its inception but explored in a factual, thought-experiment fashion. As such, it puts a new spin on the classic link between zombie epidemics and divine wrath, rooted in plague narratives where “zombies constantly vacillate between biological and theological in origin” (Zani & Meaux, 2011, p. 99). This does not render them devoid of symbolism; rather, it calls for considering their cultural significance within the specific generic, stylistic, and narrative choices of *Newsflesh*, especially since “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). To that end, this chapter will first explore the representation of the blogosphere within the series. We will then delve into the prevalence of freedom of information for the political structure and narrative pact, before reflecting on the power of word-play when faced with the zombie apocalypse.

## 2. THE BLOGOSPHERE

The medium around which the world and the text are designed, the blog, functions as a perfect zombie metaphor: at once outdated and thriving, collective and personal, immediate and hypermediated. According to one review, the series is “in a roundabout way, a love letter to long-form blogging”, which is particularly interesting considering micro-blogging’s importance now (Price, 2016). Seanan McGuire (Mira Grant’s real name, under which she publishes her fantasy series) was an early adopter of LiveJournal and still updates her personal blog regularly. Nowadays, blogs are even more prominent than in the early 2000s, but how they are accessed has changed. Like most near-future science-fiction, *Newsflesh* failed to anticipate a major shift in our everyday access to news—after all, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were still in their infancy when *Feed* was written in 2007. Reversely, the books perfectly capture one of the paradoxes of the medium, the fact that “the political/personal divide doesn’t really hold up in the blogosphere” (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 172). The focus on political blogging as a force for change<sup>15</sup> is part of this fictional world’s origin story, but all the posts presented in between chapters are taken from the characters’ personal blogs. Georgia actually dictated this setup because she didn’t want to mix her personal opinions with her reporting. She is a Newsie, the faction of bloggers focusing on Factual News, while Shaun is part of the Irwins<sup>16</sup> who make Action News—he goes into dangerous areas to poke zombies with sticks. Buffy, who writes poetry and purple prose, completes their team as the

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<sup>15</sup> This can probably be tied to the role that bloggers played in uncovering Senator Trent Lott’s racist views in 2002 or the 2004 Rathergate scandal.

<sup>16</sup> Named, of course, in tribute to the Crocodile Hunter Steve Irwin (1962–2006).

resident Fictional. This is a typical alliance, summed up as follows: “We’re the all-purpose opiate of the new millennium: We report the news, we make the news, and we give you a way to escape when the news becomes too much to handle” (Grant, 2010, p. 50).

The structure of the books telegraphs a desire to make room for a plurality of voices and opinions. The traditional third-person limited perspective (Georgia’s in book 1, Shaun’s in book 2, and alternating between the two in book 3) is progressively nuanced by the blog extracts concluding each chapter, taken from an increasing variety of characters. In addition, *Feed* and *Deadline* are divided into five<sup>17</sup> sections and one coda, which are all prefaced with two short epigraphs. They are attributed, but not dated or sourced (unlike the blog extracts), which gives them a disembodied quality. They also systematically stand in opposition to each other: the first section of book 1 sets up the Mason siblings’ conflicting world-views and personalities like a debate, Georgia’s laconic “You can’t kill the truth” being followed by Shaun’s rambling “Nothing is impossible to kill. It’s just that sometimes after you kill something, you have to keep shooting it until it stops moving. And that’s really sort of neat when you stop to think about it” (Grant, 2010, p. 1). While the reader remains limited by the protagonists’ (lack of) knowledge, the book suggests from the beginning that there is always another angle<sup>18</sup>, and this inherent duality is part of the minimalist stylistic devices that embody the blogosphere’s nexus. The book includes no visual representation of it: no icons, banners, pictures, hyperlinks or extracts from the comments section. A dividing line and a change in font barely signal the limits between the narrative and the blog extracts. *Newsflesh* does not belong to ergodic literature as defined by Aarseth (1997). Yet, I would argue that the multitude of voices from the present and the past which constantly intrude on the narrative, like a discordant chorus from Greek tragedy, creates a non-trivial mental effort to traverse the text, even though the reading is technically linear. Among the many contradictions that link the construction of the books with their zombie subject-matter, this tension between technological saturation and a straightforward narrative showcases the importance of im-mediacy and immediacy in Grant’s world.

### 3. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION?

As far as time is concerned, blogs exist within “a perpetual present and an ever growing past, as posts almost immediately become obsolete, disappearing into the archive, replaced by a more present present” (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 182). In *Newsflesh*, the blog extracts at the end of each chapter offer a static representation of the dynamic processes described within the

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<sup>17</sup> *Blackout* only has four sections, and it diverges from the twenty-five-chapter pattern set up in books 1 and 2.

<sup>18</sup> The novel *Feedback*, published in 2016, takes place during the events of *Feed*, but is told from the perspective of the team of bloggers following the Democratic candidate.

narration: recording audio, choosing thumbnails, editing footage, sifting through data, and uploading posts. The spread of information is as vital as the spread of the Kellis-Amberlee virus is deadly, as amplification only takes a couple of minutes: cyberspace functions as humanity's immune system. The results of the frequent blood tests are uploaded to the CDC database while the characters are getting them, and the "shoot first, ask questions later" attitude has been written into the legal system. This is deemed necessary for survival, but also makes most crimes impossible to solve. Since amplification upon death is automatic, there is no way to prove that the person was not a zombie beforehand. In *Feed*, it becomes clear how dangerous the absence of an incubation period for information is when the Masons' test results are falsified: declared legally dead to the CDC even before taking said tests, they are almost shot on sight. Ironically, the instantaneous uploads which define their work almost silence the bloggers forever.

In *Deadline*, disseminating information is portrayed as perilous when the characters discover that two in ten thousand people affected with reservoir conditions<sup>19</sup> have a chance to spontaneously recover from a live infection (Grant, 2011, p. 238). The team agrees that if this were common knowledge, "society would collapse", since everyone would hesitate before shooting their amplified loved ones (p. 239). This revelation is especially tortuous for Shaun since he had to shoot Georgia while she was amplifying at the end of *Feed*, a moment recorded in the unfinished blog post which concludes chapter twenty-five. As poignant as it is stylistically experimental, that extract yields the "rise up while you can" plea which reappears in *Blackout* in graffiti form (Grant, 2012, p. 361). At the end, the reader witnesses the shift between humanity and zombiism: "Shaun I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I didn't mean it [...] Shaun please cant hold on everything jfdh cant do this hjnbnnnnnn mmm have to my name is Shaun I love you Shaun please gngn please SHOOT ME SHAUN SHOOT ME N—" (Grant, 2010, p. 518). The absence of punctuation and the typos (multiplied as Georgia's manual dexterity fades) transcribe the breakdown of identity and language in real time, and the final aposiopesis acts as a visual representation of the gunshot. Having the importance of this sacrifice undermined in *Deadline* throws the bloggers' world-views into disarray, and the chapters regularly end on the contrast between fake blog posts (designed to hide their location from the authorities) and genuine ones, marked as "unpublished" or "shared internally only". This functions as an interesting translation of their moral quandary, reinforcing the cacophony of voices.

However, we ultimately discover that the CDC is not really withholding information for the greater good: they are not researching a cure, because it is in their best interest to keep humanity under constant threat while amassing money and power. The reflection on terrorism, which runs through the whole series, comes to a boiling point at the end of book

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<sup>19</sup> In some cases, symptoms of zombiism appear in specific organs, although the individual is not amplified or contagious. Georgia has retinal Kellis-Amberlee: her pupils are permanently dilated and very light-sensitive like a zombie's would be.

2, when the CDC weaponizes an even more aggressive form of Kellis-Amberlee through mosquitoes to bring about a second Rising. Throughout *Blackout*, the protagonists fight for their renewed faith in freedom of information, but the truth appears much less clear-cut than at the beginning of *Feed*. Furthermore, the keenest betrayal in *Newsflesh* is not on the collective, world-building scale but on the personal, narrative one. In *Feed*, Georgia makes an implicit pact with the reader to always tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, to the best of her knowledge—except when it comes to the reality of the adopted siblings’ relationship, revealed in *Blackout*, “the one thing [they] never wrote down [...] because no file or server is ever totally secure” (Grant, 2012, p. 389). On a metafictional level, the offence lies less in the incest itself than in breaking the narrative pact. The classic trope of the unreliable narrator can therefore be read as one of the ways in which zombies, as Lauro and Embry (2008) remark in regard to post-humanism, are “antiresolution, anticatharsis, and cannot speak” (p. 106). Obviously, the most striking paradox when analyzing stylistic choices within a zombie narrative is that zombies have lost their language access, let alone to the verbal pyrotechnics that Grant is prone to.

#### 4. PUNS AND POEMS

Overall, *Newsflesh*’s style walks a fine line between excessive verbosity and raw intensity. The sections into which the books are divided all have titles, and several are puns related to death and journalism, such as “Burial Writes” (Grant, 2010, p. 519) or “The Mourning Edition” (Grant, 2011, p. 223). Although they are not part of the blog extracts, these are the sort of easy puns you would expect bloggers to craft to make people click through. Since the first book is a political thriller, the parallels between voters and zombies seem inevitable: when a woman goes to ask a question during Ryman’s first rally, Georgia remarks “live one” to her colleagues (Grant, 2010, p. 123). On the surface, this is a snarky way to indicate that interesting footage can be had, but in the world of *Newsflesh*, going in-person to a large gathering is a very real danger, a proof of political activism. Moreover, despite the doubts raised in book 2, the immediate spread of information is still vital throughout the whole series, so the pun between the adjective “live” and the verb “to live” is always at the back of the reader’s mind. In the same way, the book titles *Feed* and *Deadline* seem to resurrect the original meaning of dead metaphors and imbue them with a renewed urgency. In a world where getting a timely warning of an outbreak can make a difference between life and (un)death, words are powerful and precious: while opening an email marked “Urgent”, Georgia notes that “[p]eople stopped flinging that word around like confetti after the Rising” (Grant, 2010, p. 46).

Words are powerful weapons, and both the epigraphs and the blog extracts showcase how the characters use them to resist the culture of fear in which they live, with snarky,

fatalistic or inspirational bravado, depending on their respective personalities. While reflecting on how pointless her unpublished blog entries are, Irwin Rebecca notes “but it’s routine, and it’s a form of saying ‘fuck you’ to the people who’ve driven us to this” (Grant, 2012, p. 161). British Newsie Mahir, faced with the cloned Georgia, protests that the dead shouldn’t walk, because “it’s simply impolite” (p. 379). When in doubt, Shaun falls back on threats of violence and promises to wrestle a zombie moose (p. 625), while Georgia always holds on to her beliefs, here with a quick allusion to T. S. Eliot: “It’s better to go out with a bang and a press release than with a whimper and a secret” (Grant, 2011, p. 383). The frequent aphorisms stand out but seem also in danger of being diluted within the dialogue and blog extracts, which contain a lot of rambling and repetition: this, in turn, could be said to mirror the “quotidian flow of consciousness” of the medium analyzed by Dibbell (2002, p. 76). In this tug-of-war between collective and personal, restriction and excess, the most intriguing generic choice is the inclusion of half a dozen zombie poems. The last one is situated in the final section of *Blackout*:

Because we chose to tell the truth  
(The cool of age, the rage of youth)  
And stand against the lies of old  
(The whispers soft, the tales untold)  
We find ourselves the walking dead  
(The loves unkept, the words unsaid)  
And in the crypt of all we’ve known  
(The broken blade, the breaking stone)  
We know that we were in the right  
(The coming dawn, the ending night).  
So here is when we stop the lies.  
The time is come. We have to Rise.

—From *Dandelion Mine*, the blog of Magdalena Grace Garcia, August 7, 2041. (Grant, 2012, p. 561)

Appearing as an unspoken tribute to Buffy in book 2, Magdalena’s poems seem at first less connected to the political context than the rest of the blog extracts, but this one clearly rejoins the intent voiced by the other bloggers, channelling personal memory/grief for the future of the human race<sup>20</sup>. Once again, binary structures are overwhelming here: the eerily regular iambic tetrameter, the couplet rhymes, the alternation between a line with parentheses (with a clear caesura) and one without... With the simple imagery relying on contrasts and repetitions, the stylistic devices create an impression of unbreakable intent and resistance—carried, of course, by the rising rhythm of iambs. It is anything but revolutionary on a formal level, but it carries a message of revolution, just like the book series as a whole.

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<sup>20</sup> That is the whole concept of the Wall, a virtual memorial to the victims and heroes of the zombie apocalypse, which collects any and all documents of theirs.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS: RISE UP

Dendle (2011), analysing the adaptability of the zombie to a range of new media and genres after the turn of the millennium, concludes on one of the many paradoxes of the creature: “a highly stimulated, technologically saturated, and fast-paced generation has fixated on a monster known especially for its slowness, its one-dimensionality of thought [...] and its inability to use even the least technologically sophisticated of tools” (p. 186). Many millennial zombies reverse this original lore by regaining speed, language, dexterity or a conscience, but not the zombies of *Newsflesh*: despite the obvious symbolic parallels drawn between zombiism and journalism, capitalism and/or politics, the creative use of the blog holds fast like a beacon in the apocalypse. We write, therefore we are: the act of processing and disseminating information and crafting inspiring or provoking opinion pieces are portrayed unironically as ways to maintain one’s individuality and change the world. Millennials, as a generational group, have lived most (if not all) of their lives with terrorism and climate change as established truths; in more recent years, they are at the forefront of trying to navigate fake news in an environment where informational input never stops. Fading into the mass of mindless consumerism may seem inevitable sometimes, and zombies hold up a mirror to that fear. But as *Newsflesh* tells us, while “feed” is a powerful imperative, so is “share”: communication (which includes live metaphors, revolutionary poetry and pop-culture allusions just as much as facts) was key to preventing the apocalypse in the past of Grant’s fictional world, and it will continue to be so. The series concludes with Georgia’s final blog entry, a video transcription which ends as follows:

DOWNLOAD ALL ATTACHMENTS? Y/N  
TERMINATE LIVE FEED  
RED FLAG DISTRIBUTION RED FLAG DISTRIBUTION  
RED FLAG DISTRIBUTION  
REPOST FREELY  
RISE UP WHILE YOU CAN. (Grant, 2012, p. 622)

Even though the Yes/No option is only on paper and not something we can actually click, the choice (to learn the truth and share it) is left open to the reader.

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**PART III**  
**FLESH, BODIES & GENDER**



**CHAPTER 11.**  
**BODIES BEYOND THE GRAVE: GENDER, BODY AND DISGUST IN**  
**FEMALE ZOMBIES**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Zombies are asexual undead, having “no race, no gender, no sexuality”, “bodies, nothing more”, which “frequently disregard gender for viscera” (MacCormack, 2008, p. 104). However, it is possible to find exceptions, specifically in two contrasting periods in the history of the zombie genre: in its beginnings, with titles such as *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) and *I Walked With a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943); and more recently, at the turn of the century, with titles which sexualise the phenomenon (the Japanese *Rape Zombie* trilogy of 2012 directed by Naoyuki Tomomatsu, for example), and specifically the small clutch of titles that bring together zombies and strip clubs, such as *Zombie Strippers* (Jay Lee, 2008), *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!* (Jason Murphy, 2008), *Big Tits Zombie* (Takao Nakano, 2010) and *Zombies vs. Strippers* (Alex Nicolau, 2012).

The feminization of the zombie raises a range of questions linked to gender and the body: first, how is a zombie gendered, and for what purpose? Second, it questions what a female zombie’s body is like, how it differs from the male zombie, and to what extent it shares characteristics with the female body, which obliges us to inquire into conceptions of the female body, its taboos, limits and social functions, as well as its evolution over the last century.

The obvious consequence of the feminisation of the undead is their sexualisation. Their carnal condition, however, has not remained the same throughout the history of the genre. While in zombie films before Romero, neither putrefaction, decomposition, dismemberment, nor cannibalism took place, and fear was grounded in the racial conflict; it is mainly in the last crop of Z movies, the “Cycle of the Infected” (Ortiz, 2014), when disgust at rotting bodies and their spectacular destruction take on a radical importance. In this context, it is, at the very least, problematic to attribute sexual attraction towards a corpse, given that desire and disgust are two emotions that repel each other. The only way of articulating it is through satire and comedy, as is done by the zombies and strippers microgenre that concerns us here. Humour always brings with it a revelation of conflict, of

the hidden and/or the inferred, to laugh at it, and so questions about disgust, the body, and desire for the female body are clear and evident.

In order to analyse all this amalgam of elements in conflict and to try to resolve the unknown regarding their tensions, two films will be analysed and compared whose protagonist in each case is a not-living/not-dead woman: *I Walked With a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) and *Zombie Strippers* (Jay Lee, 2008), using, among other authors, the phenomenological analyses of Iris Marion Young (1980) and Sara Ahmed (2006) concerning mobility, spatiality and the orientation of the female body.

The turn towards the body and its affects has been the most important change that has taken place in film studies and the theories or tools used to analyse cinema. This new conceptual framework, based on phenomenology (Marks, 2000; Sochback, 2004; Laine, 2006; Barker, 2009; among others), explains how we are able to sense contact, excitation, smells and tastes, feel touched and moved through an exclusively audiovisual medium. “Contact theory” is that view of film analysis that refutes the idea of the viewer as a disembodied eye, and which situates the body, not the brain, as that which first perceives and understands the cinematographic experience. Horror films seek not only to stimulate the viewer’s body, but also, as Xavier Aldana (2014) maintains, referring to what he calls “Body Gothic”, the genre “takes corporality to the extreme, and so that one could say that the texts in question do not merely aim to have an effect on the bodies of their consumers, but also openly play with the body at thematic and imaginary levels” (p. 7). The body is always linked to many social and political discourses, especially the woman’s body. Drawing on the phenomenological experiences described by the philosophers Iris Marion Young (1980) and Sara Ahmed (2006), we will describe the presumptions around the women’s body, which will be used to analyse the representation of the body of the monster, in this case, the woman zombie, in both films.

## 2. *I WALKED WITH A ZOMBIE*: THE DISORIENTED WOMAN, THE WOMAN WITHOUT A HOME

In zombie cinema before Romero, that is, before the release of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the zombie monster is linked to voodoo, the black magic of Haitian descendants of slaves, whose rites could overcome the will of a person after their death and force their obedience. This was the great fear of the African slaves, not being able to rest after death, that the white master would raise them from their graves to continue working. But this is not a reason for white audiences to fear, since it is only when the white woman becomes one of them that it becomes a source of horror. The insensitivity in the face of the Afro-Caribbean islanders’ suffering is explicit in *I Walked with a Zombie*. When the coachman explains to the tenacious and optimistic nurse that his parents and grandparents were enslaved and taken to these far-off lands, she replies “At least they took them to this

lovely place”, without a hint of irony or compassion (*cf.* Fillol, Salvadó-Corretger & Bou i Sala, 2016, p. 56).

*I Walked with a Zombie* tells the story of a Canadian nurse who takes on the job of looking after Jessica, the wife of a landowner, who is in a catatonic state, on the Antillean Island of St. Sebastian. The island inhabitants believe, however, that Jessica is a zombie, one of the undead. Betsy, the nurse, falls in love with the grieving husband. After trying unsuccessfully to cure the woman using Western medicine, she tries using the voodoo rites of the Afro-Caribbean descendants of slaves. However, she discovers that it is the mother of her boss, Mrs. Holland, who oversees these rites and who is the one responsible for having turned Jessica into a zombie. She did so because Jessica would run away with her other son, Wesley. Wesley is still in love with his sister-in-law Jessica, and he decides to drown with her in the sea to prevent the *bounfort* (the voodoo assembly) from reclaiming her.

Tourneur builds a restrained narrative; that is to say, the actions and events that are portrayed are very harsh, painful and violent, but everything happens with an appearance of courtesy and good manners. As Mr. Holland says to his new employee on their first meeting, “There is no beauty here, only death and poverty”. The film gives us a glimpse of the cruelty of a slaver family and of descendants of slaves who cry at births and celebrate at funerals, as well as a cruel and abusive husband who mistreats a woman who is punished for finding love in her brother-in-law, whose pain has led him into alcoholism.

The use of chiaroscuro hints at buried violence. Most of the film takes place at night, but it is a bright night, casting shadows over the family members in the form of shutters or foliage (Figure 1). The shadows mark them, point them out, and hide them.

**Figure 1**

*I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur, 1943)*



*Source: frame from I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur, 1943).*

The only person who always walks towards the light is Mrs. Holland, a zombie, who walks disoriented, with her vaporous light-coloured dress and blonde hair, phantasmagorical, outlined by the light in a world of greys (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur, 1943)*



*Source: frame from I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur, 1943).*

Tourneur highlights insistently the contrast between light and shadow in the few daytime sequences, such as when the nurse goes out for a walk in the city. Black and white, so different in the conventional world, are inverted in the night sequences, where the night is luminous, the shadows fall on the supposed “good guys”, and the female monster shines out, wrapped in tulle, with her whiteness. During the day, the conventional time, white and black are separated correctly. The night, a time that is governed by other laws, ones that are more magical, less rational, more outside the rules of the white man, is the time when the two tones mix; they alter, they change places: this is the time when black can mix with white, that is to say, black Afro-Caribbeans with their white masters. Different studies of the monster (Creed, 1993; Cohen, 1996; Shildrick, 2002) talk about it as the being that embodies the fear that our limits will be diluted or questioned or that we recognise something of the monster in ourselves, breaking the tranquillizing border between us and the “other”. The monster questions the symbolic order, it threatens it.

In this film, the French director presents us with certain novelties regarding gender. As he did in *Cat People* (1942), Tourneur makes the women the protagonists and the men objects of desire. We do not see a hero and a monster fighting over a young, defenceless

woman, but rather a female triangle fighting over their men. Betsy is in love with the husband of her catatonic patient, Jessica, who has been left in that state by her mother-in-law. Mrs. Rand resorted to voodoo to avoid her family breaking up since Jessica wanted to run away with her brother-in-law. The matriarch acts as the leader of her family, her body is associated metonymically with the body of the family, which in turn is embodied in the house. When the nurse meets the younger brother, Wesley, he introduces her to the chair that belongs to his mother. A long shot shows the empty chair while he continues to talk about Mrs. Rand, underlining her power through a presence that remains, although it is not there physically.

Jessica wanted to flee from that home, but her mother-in-law turned her into a zombie. Using the explanation Sara Ahmed used to reinterpret a case of Freud's, we find ourselves facing a "family case, about how family love needs to follow a given direction, or at least to have a certain orientation" (2006, p. 73). While Freud considered the family to be a place of libidos, repressions and identifications, Ahmed sees it more as an artificial social group in which "one has identified one's ideal ego with an object, or the family becomes the object that is put in the place of the ideal ego" (p. 73). If, normally, it is the body of the father that embodies the family, in *I Walked with a Zombie*, it is Mrs. Rand who acquires this role, with whom the family members identify, and they desire her love and wish to continue her line: the family becomes her ideal ego.

In this context, the beautiful wife of her first-born son does not wish to continue the line set by the family, but rather, her desire guides her towards other paths outside the home. Then her punishment will be the cancellation of her will: she will become a disoriented creature. The woman who did not want to walk the path set for her, who should have been a beautiful object but wanted to be a subject, was dispossessed of her orientation and her direction because she challenged the law of the family. Her body, which was her power, is reduced to a shell. Curiously, the woman who now competes for the love of her husband is a professional woman. According to Tim Snelson (2009), the horror films released during the Second World War and featuring a female monster embody the categorical crisis of femininity at a moment when women were leaving the home to fill men's jobs. "This was a period of complex ideological struggle in which multiple voices vied for control in defining the meaning of female identity and the meaning of women's bodies specifically" (Snelson, 2009, p. 34).

Only at the end of the film does Jessica recover her destiny upon hearing the call of the Afro-Caribbean witch doctors, but once again, the family, embodied this time in her lover, does not permit it.

Disorientation is a feature of all zombies: They do not recognise the space in which they are, and they have no aim, goal, or task set for them; they just wander. This lack of orientation is monstrous. The first time that Betsy sees Jessica, she cries out in terror upon

realising that the woman is not walking towards her or any place in particular; there is no goal in her walking; her movement is not human.

### 3. *ZOMBIE STRIPPERS*: WHEN FLESH ADMITS ITS NATURE

*Zombie Strippers* is a Z comedy that deals with gender, as well as the US political situation in the years of George W. Bush, satirically. A group of scientists create a zombie virus whilst trying to achieve the perfect soldier, one that comes alive again after death and continues to fight. The virus differentiates between men and women, with women being the perfect host since the infection gradually deteriorates in men and with successive infections. The experiment gets out of control, and a special team is called in to exterminate the zombies.

One of the soldiers who is repelling the lab zombies is bitten and takes refuge in a strip club. There, he infects the main stripper, who acquires more bodily dexterity when it comes to performing, attracting more spectators, whom she devours, converting them in turn into zombies. Her colleagues, jealous of her success, ask her to infect them so they can share. This makes the avaricious club owner, who has shut the infected customers in a basement, happy. The zombies multiply unstopably and inevitably tragically in the strip club's enclosed space until the arrival of the special army squad.

Post-Romero zombies, especially those who have been called "infected" (Ortiz, 2014), embody our fear of death, exhibited as the putrefaction, dismemberment, corruption and repugnance of the body, which becomes flesh, cadaver, after death. Our corporality informs us of our mortality, but, for a correct working of our existence, we forget, we ignore our body, and we make it invisible to ourselves. But for women, it has a greater presence. The woman lives her body as an object but also as a subject because, although she cannot avoid being a human being with her awareness and autonomy, in our current, sexist society, she is seen by others as a mere body.

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention (Young, 1980, p. 154).

The film *Zombie Strippers* takes some objectified women who are "mere bodies" (Young, 1980) and converts them into zombies, "bodies, and no more" (MacCormack, 2008). This double reification creates a monster free of the contradiction her subjectivity brings, and it celebrates a new, more powerful, strong and sexy corporality. One of the strippers wants to become a zombie because "the temptation is too much. The attraction of not having to go back to thinking for myself and taking decisions". Simone de Beauvoir already warned in the early pages of *The Second Sex* (1949/2005) that there is "the

temptation to flee from their freedom in order to become a thing [...] in this way they avoid the anguish and anxiety of an authentically assumed existence” (p. 7). Strippers revert to their status as objects; their reification takes on a monstrous degree, granting them power.

But since they are dead, their flesh decomposes, and although the audiences attend their putrefaction, the pure carnality of these creatures fascinates them. This register is possible thanks to the comic and satirical tone of the film, but it nonetheless poses questions regarding the reification of women by the male gaze.

In her seminal article, “Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality” (1980), Young points out that the woman recognises herself as an object in the mirror and she dresses up for the gaze of the other, “the basic fact of the woman’s social existence as the object of the gaze of another, which is a major source of her bodily self-reference” (p. 148). Many of the film’s sequences occur in the dressing room, with the women talking to their reflections (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Zombie Strippers (Jay Lee, 2008)*



*Source: frame from 'Zombie Strippers' (Jay Lee, 2008).*

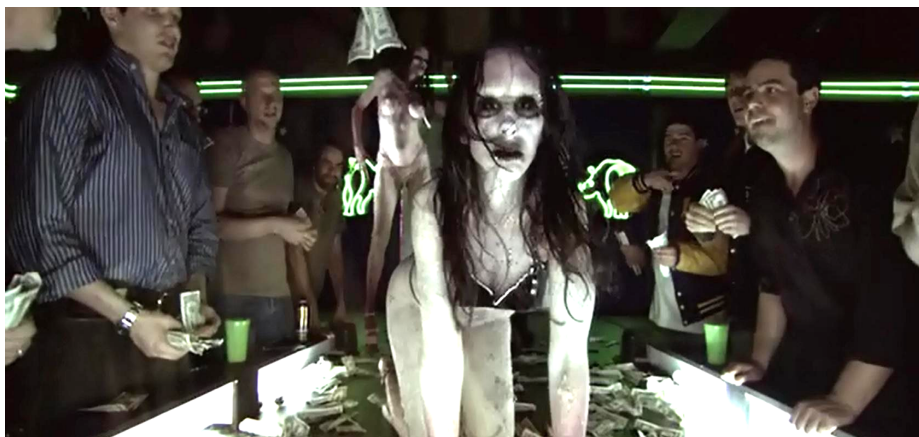
The strippers of the film fight among themselves to achieve the recognition of the male audiences, and so they ask the first infected zombie to convert them into undead and thus gain success in their shows. They can kill each other to be the most beautiful, the most admired objects, the most desired flesh. In fact, one of the strippers, the only one that manages to survive the zombie holocaust, shuts in her dressing room, looks at the mirror and, crying, says, “Look at how ugly you are”. When the soldiers have destroyed the living dead, she goes to them, making them think that she is infected, and so they shoot her. Then,

injured, she smiles and exclaims: “Finally, I am beautiful, I am beautiful. Do I look beautiful to you?” and they finish her off.

The film resolves, in a comic manner, the tension between desire and disgust. As Steve Jones states (*cf.* 2011, 2013a, 2013b), in every sexual relationship, there is a degree of disgust that decreases with the pleasure obtained. With its cavities, excretions and fluids, the body provokes repugnance, but desire cancels out this rejection and transforms it into delight. The zombies on the stage take this contradiction to the extreme, given that they gradually rot before the public, who continue to desire them (Figure 4). The crowd does not mind that they are dead; they are fantasies, desirable objects constructed for their contemplation.

**Figure 4**

*Zombie Strippers (Jay Lee, 2008)*



*Source: frame from *Zombie Strippers* (Jay Lee, 2008).*

Disgust is an emotion useful to viewers to remind them of their own corporality, making them aware of their mortality (Korsmeyer, 2012). The final battle of *Zombie Strippers* is a grotesque orgy of dismemberment, corrupt and rotting bodies that disintegrate, that by its exaggeration causes laughter, yet is still disgusting. The carnivalesque, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word, representation of the death and destruction of semi-naked women alleviates the tensions of a corporality that is uncomfortable for us.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The feminization of the zombie has two different purposes and forms in the two films. The first case talks about the home, where Jessica does not want to be shut away, and how another woman transforms her into a zombie so that she cannot escape. The zombie in *I Walked with a Zombie* is the metamorphosis of an inadequate wife into a monster, into a creature who is culturally inappropriate and excessive, whose true home is among the black islanders since she is a hybrid of those two worlds. It is curious that, in this film, as in *Cat People*, the monster is the housewife, and the other protagonists are professional women who are not defined by their beauty. As pointed out by Tim Snelson (2009), both films were produced at a time when women had to take the jobs of enlisted men, which created contradictions regarding what the role of women should be in American society: guardian of the home, or professional in the fight against the Nazis. Female monsters, such as the panther woman or the zombie, arise from this contradiction.

The feminization of the zombie in *Zombie Strippers* takes place to sexualize it, to satirize the objectification of the female body and the desire that this reification provokes. The film portrays women who are hungry for male attention and admiration, to the point that they wish to be dead, to be hungry for the flesh of those whose gazes turn them into nothing more than meat. Jay Lee's film deals with the tensions of the body, disgust and desire, on the one hand; and the woman's body as object and as subject, on the other.

Female zombies are female monsters who revert to their status as flesh to become flesh-eaters. Still, at the same time, they are slaves, they are not subjects who use their bodies as means for doing things. Still, they suffer from what Fisher (1964) has called "bodily prominence", an awareness or attention towards their bodies, which they adorn. They worry about how others see it, instead of considering it to be a vehicle of "transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities" (Young, 1980, p. 148).

This satire is ambivalent in several ways. First, it grants the figure of the monster the capacity for vengeance for the exploitation suffered, yet at the same time, the whole plot is an excuse to show beautiful, semi-naked women. Second, it mocks the reified and artificially constructed way in which men feel desire, able to recreate a fantasy of sexual objectification with decomposing cadavers, and it compares the crowd to a mass of brainless zombies, yet, cinematographically, it enjoys the show in the same way as the club's customers.

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**CHAPTER 12.**  
**THE HORRORS OF THE FLESH. THE ZOMBIFIED BODY AS EFFECTIVE**  
**ARCHIVE IN *IN THE FLESH* (2013–2014)**

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Monsters and the Gothic fiction that creates them are [...] narrative technologies that produce the perfect figure for negative identity. Monsters have to be everything the human is not and, in producing the negative of human, [...] make way for the invention of human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual (Halberstam, 1995, p. 22)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a monster figure, the zombie is what queer theorist Jack Halberstam pointedly called a “*meaning machine*” (Halberstam, 1995, p. 21): a narrative technology that (re-)produces concepts of humanness in situated socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, although zombies do not stem from a Gothic tradition of (body) horror but are, in fact, part of the North American colonial fear apparatus (with roots in Haitian mythology), Kyle Bishop comprehensively argues that their monstrousness functions in similar ways as a screen for projected fears of a symbolic breakdown (Bishop, 2010, pp. 19–24). Accordingly, the BBC Three Series *In the Flesh* (Dominic Mitchell, 2013–2014, 2 seasons) purposefully used the zombie figure to explore the temporal and social dynamics of processes of Othering in a conservative, rural (British) setting. The following chapter employs a close textual and aesthetic analysis to (queer-)interpret the materiality of the zombified body as an archive of affects and historically situated lived experiences under violent circumstances, while also exploring the possibility of queer resistance through the transgression of temporal and physical boundaries.

## 2. (ZOMBIFIED) BODIES-AS-ARCHIVES

According to the standard (Anglo-American) zombie lore, the only way to kill a zombie is a shot to the head to extinguish what is left of its (barely functioning) brain. Consequently, some recent academic literature has focused on the (fictional) zombie’s

relationship with philosophical zombies as thought experiments on phenomenology (in recourse to David Chalmers, 1996, see e.g. Hauser, 2010; Jones, 2014; Mason, 2015). However, while significantly younger examples of the genre indeed invoke anxieties concerning the unpredictable and finite nature of the human mind in intellect-based high-tech-societies, it does not remove the horrors of the flesh, for zombies are still bodies with missing limbs and holes that allow their inner organs to pour out into sight. Therefore, the horror of the zombie stems not just from the confrontation with a corpse running on an instinct-driven brain but more generally from the confrontation with various materialities that are not in order or supposed to be hidden. Its horror lies in the inescapable confrontation with a physical materiality that has to be “abjected”, by the means of psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, to secure a precise idea of the living body:

[W]ithout makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. [...] There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3)

Following Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower, and Judith Butler’s take on becoming-bodies through performative acts, bodies are material battlefields, inherently defined by their surrounding structures and discourses of power. As such, they are inherently gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classified into specific categories that arrange and organize capitalistic societies (Foucault, 1978, pp. 135–145; Butler, 1993). In a (present) time and (western) place of neoliberal capitalism, obsessed with the mass production of hyperwhite, non-disabled bodies following hegemonic rules of everlasting youth and artificial beauty standards, the zombified body represents everything that is considered undesirable, disgusting, or in the word of Kristeva: “abjected” (Hubner, Leaning, & Manning, 2015, p. 6).

Stemming from a tradition of feminist/queer theory concerned with questions of historicity and documentary as the basis for becoming an intelligible human being (Foucault, 1988; Cvetkovich, 2003; Love, 2007; Freeman, 2010), one could also call these bodies a certain kind of archive then: a body-archive which shelters the experiences of a lived reality as affective documents. While tracing lesbian histories in The United States, a system that has been adamant on erasing as many clues on queer lives as possible from the institutionalized archives of the dominant culture, queer affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich realized that to find and tell queer histories, it is necessary to reconsider and widen the concept of the archive itself:

Lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism—all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive. [...] gay and lesbian archives address the traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics [...] they must enable the

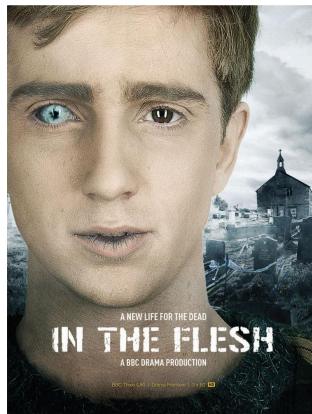
acknowledgement of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness. (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 241)

So, in order to achieve systematic equality, meaning an unconditionally equal, respectful and careful treatment of bodies in accordance with their respective needs, it is first necessary to address the systemic violence certain bodies have been and are still exposed to. However, how does one “re-tell” sensory experiences that might be “resistant to consciousness?” How—and where—can one find the abject archives of queer trauma?

### 3. TRACES (IN) *IN THE FLESH*

#### Figure 1

In the Flesh *PR*



Source: BBC Three (2013).

In 2013, BBC Three launched the TV Miniseries *In the Flesh*, which dealt with precisely those questions, and managed to visualize those abject archives of queer trauma with the help of zombies. It tells a tale about zombies after the apocalypse, in a world where scientists have found a “cure” to turn zombies back into conscious, “humane” beings and re-integrate them into society. Concentrating on the fictional rural village of Roarton, Lancashire, the narration follows Kieren Walker (Figure 1), a deceased 18-year-old who rose from the dead in an apocalyptic “Rising” after he had committed suicide upon learning of the death of his best friend and secret lover Rick, who had been sent to join the army by his prejudiced father and got killed by an IED in Afghanistan. As standard in the zombie genre

following the tradition of George A. Romero, zombiism is used to visualize the structures and dynamics of prejudice whereby the zombified bodies are positioned as the materialized battlefields where those dynamics manifest themselves (Pfaffenroth, 2006, pp. 2–6).

The series starts with Kieren’s return to his parents and sister after receiving extensive medical and psychological treatment in Norfolk’s cold, white-toned scientific laboratory. Now officially called “Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers” (or short PDS sufferers)<sup>21</sup> and pejoratively known as “rotters”, the undead are equipped with contact lenses, cosmetics, and daily injections of liquid medication (called “neurotriptaline”) to help them conceal their deceased status and tame their zombified instincts. “Without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live”, wrote Kristeva, and this fear of what lies beyond the mask is pointedly visualized by literally forcing the zombies to artificially cover—*mask*—themselves with makeup, contact lenses, and body-covering clothes to hide all reminders of their undead state (namely the pale skin, lactic eyes, dilated pupils and the holes, fissures or scars covering their bodies).

The living villagers of Roarton face the rehabilitated undead with prejudiced hostility, led by conservative beliefs propagated by the church and far-right politics, executed through the so-called “Human Volunteer Force” (HVF), a militia formed during the war between living and undead following the initial Rising. While the show focuses on the events surrounding protagonist Kieren in the village of Roarton, it is regularly mentioned that elsewhere in England, other PDS sufferers have started to organize under the banner of an “Undead Liberation Force” (ULA), which (violently) fights for equal rights irrespective of looks and level of liveliness. What unites these ULA members is their *un*willingness to mask and hide their bodies, which works simultaneously—negatively—as the uniting element for the “Human Volunteer Force” (HVF). Within this set-up, the materiality of the body—and especially its surface—becomes the constitutive force in the individual becoming and community-building processes. The inescapable intersection of the personal with the political is narratively written into the character constellation in the protagonist’s family: Kieren’s sister Jem is an equally traumatized but devoted member of the HVF, which leads to tensions in the Walker household that are further fed by the arrival of free-spirited Amy, an undead friend of Kieren who unabashedly spreads energetic undead, un-masked pride. Things become even more complicated when Kieren’s secret lover Rick, returns home from Afghanistan, a PDS sufferer himself, to a father who still sticks to his religious conservatism and who now leads the HVF. Convinced that his son is still “not right”, he eventually kills Rick in the Season 1 finale upon seeing him without makeup and contact lenses for the first time (S01E03, 00:34:45–00:36:00). Afterwards, the father is shot himself by another villager in an act of vengeance for the brutal killing of his undead wife through the hands of the HVF (S01E03, 00:39:35–00:45:15). In this social tragedy, zombiism is used as a stand-in for

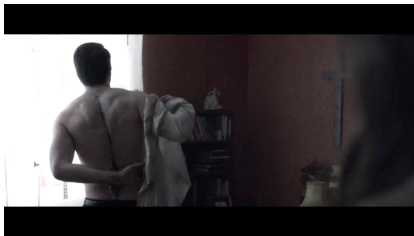
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<sup>21</sup> An obvious reference to the very real condition of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

(sexual) difference, with the possibility of a liveable life bound to the submission to the body-centric visual demands of the dominant culture of the living. The demand to mask themselves, to hide the material of their very own body behind makeup, contact lenses and appropriate clothes, denies the PDS sufferers equal rights and instead holds them in a constant state of tolerated pariahs.

**Figure 2**

*S02E01. 00:47:06*



*Source: frame from S02E01. In the Flesh.*

**Figure 3**

*S02E05. 00:04:50*



*Source: frame from S02E05. In the Flesh.*

This narration is challenged in Season 2 with the introduction of Simon, a leading member of the radical “Undead Liberation Army” (ULA), who is brought to Roarton by Amy in search of the so-called “First Risen” (synonym for the mystified first risen zombie, which supposedly happens to be Kieren). Introduced as the first undead upon whom the PDS treatment chemicals had any effect, Simon is a “Patient Zero”, a figure who was used, or rather tortured, by scientists to refine the cure for the undead. In one of the first shots Simon stands with his back to the camera and, while getting dressed, presents a long straight scar on his back that follows the whole line of his spine (Figure 2) (S02E01, 00:47:03–00:47:10). Although the audience doesn’t know the cause of this scar yet, it is clear from this moment on that Simon’s body has been exposed to some kind of physical intrusion; a notion that is further strengthened in the following episode, as the audience learns that Simon once died from an overdose of heroin, depicted in the exposition of his right lower arm where scars of needle holes hold the memory of the golden shots (S02E02, 00:34:09–00:34:19). Later on in the series, the audience is furthermore confronted with traumatic flashbacks filled with gothic symbolism that calls upon stories of the creation of Frankenstein’s monster: strapped to a metal bar with his spread arms chained to his sides, the audience watches as lab coat-wearing scientists implement the body with metallic instruments, diverse liquid chemicals and various amounts of electrical energy in an either dark or dimly lit cellar room, which frames Simon’s body in either bright (electric) flashlights, surrounded by sparks or in red lights from various “Danger-signs” (Figure 3) (S02E05, 00:04:50–00:05:22;

00:15:43–00:17:47; 00:34:00–00:35:08). In this sinister atmosphere the initially little conscious Simon comes slowly back to consciousness, which is indicated through his increasing articulations of physical pain. He subdues the commands of the scientists in an attempt to help find a cure, but when it is found, Simon is left to himself without much consideration of the emotional implications and sent home with a father who blames his son for the death of the mother. Nevertheless, another violent father-son-drama unfolds that forces Simon to escape and seek shelter with the ULA (S02E05, 00:36:41–00:42:10). These dynamics of a discursive intersection of religious fascism, scientific advancement and intimate family bonds form the basis of social sorting, or what Foucault would call “normalization”. It is here depicted solely through the lens of the bodies. The figure of Simon is presented as an abomination gone wrong, a troubled son who eventually rebels against his founding fathers, which includes his father, as well as the scientists who re-created him and the society at large, which eagerly tries to “humanize” him as a human and as a zombie.

Consequently, his initial confrontation with a somewhat assimilated Kieren at the start of Season 2 bears as much radical, tragic potential, which is narratively negotiated in another romantic storyline. It guides both on a slow journey of coming to terms with their respective states of being and their position within the social cosmos of the village, a journey that once again unfolds on the surface of the bodies. The climactic Episode 4 of Season 2 starts with Kieren pressuring Simon to put on makeup to “act like a normal being” for one day so that he can introduce him to his parents. Simon obliges begrudgingly and appears in a cover-up for the first time in the series. Kieren is so pleased by this gesture that he kisses Simon for the first time on the open streets (after keeping the affair a secret up to this point), which is accidentally observed by still resolutely un-masked Amy (S02E04, 00:27:20–00:28:40). This scene is crucial in that she not only becomes aware of the secret love affair but also witnesses a moment of assimilation in which the rebellious Simon, introduced as the personification of radical opposition to the demands of the dominant society, seemingly submits to them. Accordingly, the upcoming estrangement between the three is visualized through a spatial distance that positions Kieren and Simon inside the village. At the same time, Amy is standing at the border of it, signifying her distance from its societal norms<sup>22</sup>. Kieren then introduces Simon to his parents, who stay oblivious to his undead state at first, indicating that the masquerade worked (S02E04, 00:31:20–00:32:19). In the ensuing dinner scene, however, Kieren’s sister Jem arrives with her boyfriend Gary, now leader of the HVF, and a fight about equal rights for the undead ensues (S02E04, 00:37:10–00:43:03). Kieren and Simon eventually leave the table and in an affective-laden final scene Kieren angrily stares in a

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<sup>22</sup> A lot more could be said about the character of Amy, who died of leukaemia and provides yet another affective archive that focuses more on the intersection of physical disability, femininity, and female sexual desire, but which will have to fall short here to keep the focus on the intersection of zombiism and traumas of homophobia.

mirror, takes out his contact lenses and picks up a cloth to wipe away the makeup on both of their faces (Figure 4) (S02E04, 00:53:25–00:54:35). This moment of self-awareness on Kieren’s side, who has to wipe away the mask to see his own (un-masked) reflection in the mirror, plays on the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage in which a child recognizes itself for the first time. The act of *un-masking* becomes an act of revelation, then, of revealing a bodily materiality beyond the coloured surface that leaves no doubt about his (and Simon’s) state of “othered” being. The outer physical appearance functions as a double-layered reassurance within the fictional universe here: for once, it reminds the characters (and the audience) that beyond the mask, Kieren is a part of the monstrous realm, but it is also, secondly, a metaphor for a hidden identity, which turns the mask into a synonym for the (homosexual) closet (Sedgwick, 1990).

**Figure 4**

*S02E04. 00:54:00*



*Source: frame from S02E04. In the Flesh.*

Following Kieren’s newfound self-consciousness, he becomes increasingly estranged from his family, confronted now with his pale and fragmented appearance. In a fight between parents and son, Father Steve tells Kieren that his sudden unwillingness to use makeup and contact lenses can be understood as an act of violent behaviour, and blame Simon and Amy for that (S02E05, 00:42:26–00:43:32; S02E06, 00:02:46–00:03:56). The implication here is not just that his un-masked looks connect him with a community of other undead people who are collectively understood as fanatic terrorists. However, his appearance is addressed as a visual reminder of his undead state, pointing back to a shared history of the whole family and the village. Seeing him in his undead state is not just a

reminder of his death, the subsequent rising and his actions as a zombie, but also of the circumstances of his death—which was, after all, the suicide of a gay boy in reaction to a homophobic environment.

#### 4. ZOMBIFIED BODIES AS AFFECTIVE QUEER ARCHIVES

Returning to the initially presented concept of bodies-as-archives, the unmasked, undead bodies of zombies can be interpreted not only as a confrontation with markers of death, decay, or finiteness but also as embodiments of lived, deceased, and now haunting histories of shared experiences under specific societal conditions—histories that demand acknowledgement and engagement. By forcing the undead to cover up their skin with makeup, hide their fragmented bodies, and diagnosing them with a medical condition, nobody has to address the circumstances that led to these deaths in the first place, which also means nobody has to address the accompanying questions of power and social responsibility in a society that is fundamentally built on the exclusion and creation of monstrous Others. In this environment of strategically induced silence, the undead bodies become the crying archives themselves, providing materialised life documents under precarious conditions that have constantly been threatened. The zombified bodies provide not only reminders of death that is about to come, but also of political structures that lead to death. They are the personified (or rather, zombified) past that haunts the present. The physically materialized, moving archives of institutionalized violence document all the feelings of pain, hate and shame of affective experiences that words might not be able to capture appropriately.

Queer potentialities in terms of resistance to normative concepts of temporality are also present here. In contrast to the villagers, who are resolute in their focus on the present and future, the zombified bodies in *In the Flesh* remain, to some extent, bound to the past. On the one hand, in a very literal sense, they do not age anymore and can't die from physical weakness, but on the other hand, in a metaphorical sense, they carry the marks of past times and events on visible display. They are, in the words of performance theorist Alvis Hoi-Ying Choi, “containers of all the elements on the timeline, mashing past, present and future, breaking apart linearity, disrupting the progress narrative [...] and generating an alternative temporality” (Choi, 2016, p. 93). In their zombified state, those bodies invoke not just the future (of a certain death to come) but also traumatic experiences of the (collective) past, and thereby withdraw themselves from a linear development of time and space, as well as from a clear distinction between self and community, private and public. In positioning the materiality of those zombified bodies centre stage, *In the Flesh* focuses on “the small dramas” to circle back to Ann Cvetkovich, “that interest me because they draw attention to how structural forms of violence are so frequently lived, how their invisibility or normalization is another part of their oppressiveness” (Cvetkovich, 2007, p. 464). In this sense, the zombified bodies embody the abject queer archives that contradict the silenced spots of a hegemonic

heteronormative memory and provide queer forms of be/coming that insist instead on confrontation and retrospective responsibility.

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**CHAPTER 13.**  
**ANIMALS VS. ZOMBIES: REPRESENTATIONS AND ROLES OF THE**  
**ANIMAL KINGDOM IN ZOMBIE FICTION**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The many works that stage the modern zombie, i.e., a man-eating living dead in the tradition of the ghouls from *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), generally depict extremely anthropocentric fictional universes. In contrast with several other well-known monsters, such as werewolves and vampires with their respective tutelary wolves and bats, zombies have no intrinsic or established ties with wildlife. However, even if animals are sometimes absent from zombie films, novels, comic books and video games, they occasionally appear and sometimes even play a key role, such as the carriers that bring about the zombie infestation. Different creators portray the animal world differently; some imagine animals as being immunized against the contagion, while others relegate them to the horde of reanimated corpses, with creators deliberately using animals to toy with the codes and clichés of zombie fiction. Beyond this essential polarization, there are, in fact, many specific cases that must be considered in order to analyze animals' narrative and symbolic role and, in turn, to understand the many permutations of human zombies properly.

This chapter examines various representations of the animal world in zombie fictional works based on three cases covering most of the possibilities. First to be examined is the universe of the novel *The Rising* (Brian Keene, 2003), where the zombie threat looms over the near-totality of the animal world. This is followed by an examination of the film *Survival of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2009), in which zombies do not, at first glance, appear to take an interest in animals. Finally, the focus turns to *Apocalypse Cow* (Michael Logan, 2012), a work that even more plainly explores man's place in the food chain, given that in this scenario, animals are the first to transform into zombies, rather than vice versa.

2. "DO ANIMALS HAVE SOULS?"

Although relatively scarce, cases of dead animals rising back to life as zombies are far from absent from fictional works. However, how the animal world is incorporated into

zombie fiction varies, often proving inconsistent or incoherent, as not all animals seem to be affected. In general, zombie animals are used merely to accentuate horror by creating spectacular passages, especially in cinematographic works, where just one animal or group of animals is zombified<sup>23</sup>. A good proportion of wildlife has received this treatment: various works have featured zombie bats (*The Roost*, Ti West, 2005), bears (*Z Nation*, SyFy, 2014–2018), cats (*Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse*, Christopher B. Landon, 2015), deers (*Attack of the Lederhosen Zombies*, Dominik Hartl, 2016), dogs (*The Boneyard*, James Cummins, 1991; *Resident Evil*, Capcom, 1996; Paul W. S. Anderson, 2002), fishes (*Undead*, Michael & Peter Spierig, 2004), horses (*Blood Creek*, Joel Schumacher, 2010), rats (*Zombie-Loan*, Peach-Pit, 2002–2011), salmon (s)*Blood Quantum*, Jeff Barnaby, 2019), tigers (*Army of the Dead*, Zack Snyder, 2021), vultures (*The Rage*, Robert Kurtzman, 2007), and more. This non-exhaustive list illustrates that even without widespread or universal contagion, striking scenes and passages of animals serve as key visual or emotional moments, despite their lack of any real implications for the nature of the zombie infestation. In some cases, being a zombie is merely incidental, insofar as it is the animal's aggression and usual or stereotypical physical features that produce the dramatic tension and horror, as in *Zombie Shark* (Misty Talley, 2015)—which partakes in the “shark movie revival”—and *A Zombie Croc* (Robert Elkins, 2015)—in which zombie sharks and crocodiles are neither more nor less dangerous than their living alter egos. The same could be said of a good portion of the zombie animals in the film *Zoombies* (Glenn Miller, 2016), the graphic novel *The Other Dead* (Joshua Ortega, 2014) and the comic book *Zombie Proof: Zombie Zoo* (J. C. Vaughn, 2016), which are rarely any more fearsome than the wild animals seen in *Zoo* (James Patterson & Michael Ledwidge, 2012; CBS, 2015–2017).

Among the works that bring into play a world where all animals are at risk of being transformed into zombies, *The Rising* (Brian Keene, 2003) stands out in that it reflects on what makes these transformations possible (or not). Undeniably, the novel contains its share of spectacular passages (attacks by a zombie lion and a zombie anaconda) and abundantly plays the card of its “living dead bestiary” (p. 86), complete with “undead bunny rabbits” and “undead turkey buzzard” (p. 79). However, Chapter 4, which is set at the Baltimore Zoo, goes a step further by having “zoo animals”<sup>24</sup> take over the city and inhabit the urban world. At the same time, the survivors are unable to recapture the country. Hence, in Keene's universe, man is not pitted against an animalized version of himself<sup>25</sup> but instead is faced with a world that has become fundamentally and entirely inimical to the human race,

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<sup>23</sup> One exception worth mentioning is the case where zombies are subjects controlled by parasites, as in *Night of the Creeps* (Fred Dekker, 1986) or *Slither* (James Gunn, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Which are neither “domestic” nor “wild” animals but something in between (Marvin, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> On this subject, see Allard, 2015, Ch. 1.3, and the reflections about Stephen King's *Cell* in McAleer, 2013.

which is relegated to the role of prey that most animals want to shred to pieces<sup>26</sup>. This raises the question: where is the line drawn regarding organisms susceptible to transforming into zombies? After all, a world where dead germs or bacteria are reanimated into anthropophagous creatures would not make for a lengthy film, novel, or comic book<sup>27</sup>. For example, in *The Rising*, insects and tiny animals are unable to be zombified, a situation that the scientist Baker explains thus:

I don't claim to have all the answers. Maybe insects don't have enough of a life force. Maybe their frames are too fragile. I don't know. All I know is that when our—or an animal's—energy or life force or soul or whatever you want to call it departs, these things take over. (p. 269)

The notion that “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, 1945, Chapter 10) also seems to apply to zombie apocalypses. In this context, Baker reproduces a very real cognitive bias that has been the subject of numerous academic journal articles<sup>28</sup>. In other words, the narrative choices that shape the outcome of the zombie infestation for wildlife are rooted in our perception today of our environment, as the dominant species.

This selection among animal species goes hand-in-hand with a conspicuous dehumanization in which language is used to separate predator from prey. Zombies refer to humans as “meat”, thus reducing them to the role of a food source which humans usually reserve for animals, while the military leaders who brutally rule over the survivors, for their part, designate a “meat wagon” which they use to imprison women and transform them into sex slaves. The parallel between the two groups is intentionally obvious and illustrates how man can be more dreadful toward his kind than a beast or zombie would be. The fact that this parallel is drawn using an expression with animalistic connotations further underscores violence against women, who are doubly marginalized since they serve to satisfy the needs of both dominant groups, which lack any regard for their well-being as individuals.

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<sup>26</sup> It is significant that the sight of a healthy animal, namely a nighthawk (p. 44) and a fawn (p. 26), is used not once but twice to hark back to the time before the zombie apocalypse. This is the opposite of what can be seen in the opening of *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985), where an alligator is shown casually walking alongside zombies to illustrate civilization's fall.

<sup>27</sup> In a passage where the character Jim dreams about his son, he envisions a fully zombified world: “The street was alive. Dogs. Cats. Worms. Birds. Trees. All dead. And all alive” (p. 132). This reference to a tree is atypical. However, a widespread zombification caused by agriculture can be traced back to *Les raisins de la mort* (Jean Rollin, 1978), and apart from the occasional vegetarian zombie, the only work that seems to draw a connection between the plant world and zombies, aside from the videogame series *Plants vs. Zombies* (George Fan, 2009), is the film *Attack of the Vegan Zombies* (Jim Townsend, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Clark & May, 2002; Bonnet, Shine, & Lourdaï, 2002; Titley, Snaddon & Turner, 2017.

### 3. “MAYBE THEY DON’T LIKE PIG”

The world of the dead imagined in films such as *The Rising* nevertheless accounts for only a tiny portion of zombie fiction. In the vast majority of fictional universes where the dead come back to life as zombies, they instead seem to be driven by the urge to devour human flesh as opposed to any real need to feed or propagate, which explains why they rarely go after animals as prey<sup>29</sup>. The 2004 remake *Dawn of the Dead*, directed by Zack Snyder, illustrates this in a sequence where the protagonists use a dog to safely deliver supplies through a horde of zombies. Although attacks on animals do occur, they are infrequent. An example would be the famed fight between a zombie and a shark in *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979), which, cursory research suggests, constitutes the first battle staged between a modern zombie and an animal. The encounter is mainly intended to emphasize the danger zombies represent. After a few *Jaws*-inspired scenes during which the shark chases a diver before charging into the heroes’ boat, a zombie goes after the same diver, and then the shark. A close-up of the shark’s jaws, opening and closing, parallels the two superpredators. The fight yields no clear winner: the zombie wrenches away a chunk of the shark’s flesh and, in turn, loses a hand to the shark before fleeing. The series *The Walking Dead* (Robert Kirkman & Frank Darabont, 2003–2019; AMC, 2010–2022) has also used animals to stress zombies’ voracity, among other things, in the second comic book and the first episode of the television series, in which Rick’s horse is attacked and then devoured by a hoard of the living dead. Given that in both cases, this is the first horde of zombies with which the viewer is confronted and that the concept of the “horde” subsequently plays a key role in the universe of *The Walking Dead*, these attacks on animals serve—just as in *Zombi 2*—to make the reader or viewer immediately aware of the scope of the threat posed by the living dead<sup>30</sup>.

What is the symbolic meaning of zombies’ interest (or lack thereof) in animals? This question permeates *Survival of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2009). Indeed, one of the narrative threads involves a potential rehabilitation of zombies: might it be possible to bring them to eat animals instead of human flesh? It is no coincidence if such a reflection can be found in one of Romero’s works, given that this filmmaker has often toyed with the fundamental features of the monsters he created, especially those that distinguish them from normal humans; in this respect, one could cite the characters Bub (*Day of the Dead*, George A. Romero, 1985) or Big Daddy (*Land of the Dead*, George A. Romero, 2005), both of

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<sup>29</sup> According to some naturalists, zombies would instead be the prey of the animal world (Mizejewski, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Many scenes, such as the death of Shiva (*The Walking Dead*, AMC, 2010–2022, S08E04), serve the same purpose. Even the spin-off series *Fear the Walking Dead* (AMC, 2015–2023) adopts the same tack, among other things, with a dog in the first season and subsequently with a horse in the third.

which display signs of intelligence<sup>31</sup>. Like Dr. Logan in *Day of the Dead*, the characters in these films intentionally strive to modify zombies' behaviour, in this case not to domesticate them, but to get them to turn to other sources of food<sup>32</sup>.

It is worth recalling that zombies are not cannibals but rather anthropophagi: they eat humans, but not each other. Both culturally and ethically speaking, the transgression is not the same. The source of zombies' horror resides in the fact that they become the predators, and we, the prey; food-wise, in a sense, they become a distinct species. This argument is invoked in nearly all zombie films to justify the actions of the protagonists: beyond self-defence, killing a zombie is not the same thing as killing a human being—they are no longer who they were before<sup>33</sup>. It is them against us. In the Romero universe<sup>34</sup>, where the living dead do not spontaneously attack animals, getting zombies to eat animals becomes a means of rapprochement between the living and the living dead. It is, therefore, no coincidence if the initial attempts involve a massively consumed farm animal, i.e., pigs. The first attempt is nevertheless a failure. The second attempt has an even broader symbolic scope in that the experiment is on Jane, Janet's twin sister, one of the protagonists. Even though she has transformed into a zombie, Jane continues to mount her horse and go horseback riding in the country. Not only, like many other Romero-style zombies, does she replicate a behaviour she engaged in while living, but she does not seem to show the least interest in humans; when captured, she initially shows no signs of aggressiveness whatsoever. Of course, the use of twins stresses the parallel between the living and the living dead, especially given that, as soon as an attempt is made to force her to eat her horse, Jane initially reacts by biting her twin sister, thus sealing her fate. The zombie, up to then harmless, is more faithful to her animal than to her flesh and blood, and it is only after this ultimate transgression that she sinks her teeth into her horse. The sinister ending is very much in keeping with Romero's other zombie films: after a character asks herself, "What if we could teach the dead to eat

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<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that no satisfactory definition of a modern zombie currently exists—or probably ever will—as the many branches in Jason B. Thompson's beautiful *Map of Zombies* (2014) suggests. The reader can consult Dion, 2014; in Romero's movies, zombies are never all "thoroughly in-human" (Botting, 2010, p. 187). Reflections on the nature and agency of zombies can be found, among many others, in Lauro & Embry, 2008; Bishop, 2010, Ch. 5; Le Maitre, 2015; Szanter & Richards 2017 or Cohen, 2017. The "philosophical zombie" debate is also closely akin to some of our analyses (see Brault, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> In the series *Santa Clarita Diet* (Netflix, 2017–2019), this possibility is explored parodically when the heroine discovers that even raw meat from the supermarket offers no satisfying substitute. This echoes some works that feature animal blood as a substitute for the human blood consumed by vampires.

<sup>33</sup> This has led some critics to describe zombies as the new Nazis of video games—enemies that allow players to engage in violence without any sense of guilt; see Krzywinska, 2008. For a more nuanced study, see Backe & Aarseth, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Romero had intended to include zombified rats in *Land of the Dead*, but the sequence was dropped for financial reasons. The script containing the original scene can be consulted on the website <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Land-of-the-Dead.html>.

something that wasn't us? ... I guess we'll never know", the film jumps to a shot of three zombies devouring Jane's horse. Like the zombies drawn to a mall, Bub giving a military salute or Big Daddy leading a revolt, the zombies who eat animal flesh remind us that they may not be so different from us after all. Eating meat is meant, here, as a clear sign of humanity.

#### 4. "THEY KNOW WE MEAN THEM NO HARM"

The figure of the zombie frequently conveys criticism of society, whether in its voodoo incarnation that symbolically reproduces slavery or in its modern version, as in *Night of the Living Dead*, which ends against a backdrop of racial tension, as many academics have noted. Animal-zombie relationships are similar in this respect and, among other things, frequently showcase an environmentalist, vegetarian or vegan discourse. Indeed, the infestation is often symbolically perceived as a punishment for man for treating animals. This moralizing charge can be observed in fictional universes where animals are at the source of the zombie infection; an example is the initial zombie spread in *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2003) or in *Black Sheep* (Jonathan King, 2006), paradoxically initiated by activists while trying to save animals. Moreover, the method of zombies' proliferation in zombie fiction, which strongly resembles a viral contagion, very much echoes the epidemiological model (among others, see Lauro, 2011; Leiva, 2015) when direct references are not made to actual epidemics (SARS, H1N1, etc.). Mad cow disease, in particular, has proven a prime (latent, if not direct) source of inspiration for many works where beef consumption is at the root of the zombie infestation. This is the case in the film *Dead Meat* (Connor McMahon, 2004), in which the action begins with an attack by a zombie cow, even if no other animals are subsequently among the zombie hordes that feature in the film<sup>35</sup>. It is also the case of *The Mad* (John Kalangis, 2007), in which hamburger patties attack restaurant patrons and turn them into eaters of human flesh, which the hero calls "Mad cow people. Dementis carneiro humanis". A humorous conversation with a breeder emphasizes this fundamental link between animals and the meat for which they are used:

"Has your beef been acting strangely?"

"You mean my kettle?"

"No, I mean your beef".

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<sup>35</sup> At the movie's end, the reversal is as explicit as the film's criticism of breeding practices when the surviving humans are treated like cattle and piled into a trailer.

Behind this slapstick pun is an observation that the film revisits on multiple occasions, namely that the quality and especially wholesomeness of food largely depend on how the animal was treated. Along similar lines, blogger Chris Cooney, known by the pseudonym “The Vegan Zombie”, just released *A44* (2025), a film explicitly dedicated to the cause of veganism. Again, in this context, eating meat is cast as the root cause of human beings’ zombification, with the film being both a social commentary on our dietary practices and a powerful plea in favour of veganism<sup>36</sup>.

In *Apocalypse Cow* (Michael Logan, 2012), the standard pattern is reversed, given that throughout the novel, only certain animals, mainly cows, are zombified, and the virus is only transmitted to humans at the end. Nevertheless, one of this work’s key points of originality resides in its treatment of the vegan question. The novel exhibits a strong discourse against the military-industrial complex and cattle raising: the “bad guy”, a scientist working for a military agency, is eminently stereotypical, and one of the three heroes is a slaughterhouse technician whose foul-smelling place of work has led him to develop a neurosis. In the novel, if mankind is faced with a zombie epidemic, it is not only because we have eaten meat, but because capitalist interests have made intensive farming so atrocious that some companies are performing genetic manipulations to decimate the herds of competitors and to force animals to devour each other. As a counterpoint, the zombie threat brings out the best in the slaughterhouse technician, who undergoes a veritable epiphany: he becomes a hero by rebelling against his former employers.

On the other hand, the novel also gleefully ridicules veganism in the character of Fanny, the mother of one of the three heroes, who is zealous to the point of caricature. Noteworthy in this regard is her highly symbolic death. While several people are pillaging a grocery store for food, and just after an argument with another survivor, which prompted her to lash out, “You’re not cooking your filthy meat in my house” (Logan, 2012, p. 173), things turn sour:

Fanny continued to hector David as, at the rear of the aisle, a cluster of bulky pigs appeared. They came at full tilt, trotters scabbling for purchase as they turned. ... Fanny looked at David and then turned round to face the charging pigs. ... She let out a shriek and looked at the can of sausages, horrified. Terry thought she was going to lob it at the animals. Instead she dropped it and held her hands out in a gesture of pacification.

“They’re not mine”, she said hurriedly.

But the pigs were not interested in the contents of the tin. Fanny flew back under the force of their charge, skidding at least five feet on her back. The animals crowded round and began tearing at her, their massive pink bodies quivering. [...].

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<sup>36</sup> Zombification is one more argument to add to the long list examined by Larue (2014).

“This isn’t fair”, she said. “I’m a vegan”. (Logan, 2012, pp. 173–174)

The scene’s double humour is flagrant: Fanny is killed in a grocery store by livestock after having stood up for her vegan convictions, even as she is holding a can containing the processed meat of the animal species attacking her. It is also eloquent that her panic is brought on by the zombies and her realization that she is holding such a can. What’s more, for seasoned viewers of zombie fiction, her attempt to parley carries a double meaning: if reasoning with a pig is futile, so too is reasoning with a zombie. The animal is treated like the other characters: zombification has changed and transformed it into a dangerous animal, so it is no longer what it was.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

As the handful of cases overviewed in this chapter have shown, representations and roles of animals in zombie fiction are as complex as the figure of the zombie itself. Of course, this text has merely brushed the surface of the topic. Some cases have been left out, for example, those in which zombie fictions bring into play the motif of humanness: It is not unusual for works to blend zombification and animal mutation, as in the films *Black Sheep* and *Zombeavers* (Jordan Rubin, 2014), which connect with the *topos* of the hazards surrounding genetic manipulations or chemical products. Also not dealt with here is the issue of attributing language and cognition to animals, which has been the subject of recent poetic, neuroscientific and ethological studies<sup>37</sup> and is central to the animal characters described in the comic books *Afterlife with Archie* (Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa & Francesco Francavilla, 2013) and *Dead of Winter* (Kyle Starks & Gabo, 2017). The treatment of animals in the various fictional universes we have examined may stem less from whether or not they are immunized against zombification, and more from our society’s perception of the animal world. In other words, in zombie fiction, as in real life, “Animals don’t have a rulebook” (Logan, p. 241).

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<sup>37</sup> Given the numerous recent studies on animal speech and thought, an exhaustive list cannot be provided here. It suffices to mention Anne Simon’s zoopoetics project *Animots in the literary domain*. In the natural sciences, Darwin’s older propositions (1872) have inspired several articles, among others, in the *Nature*, *Current Biology* and *Animal Behaviour*, investigating animal subjectivity and cognition. The best example of the profusion of such research is the 2016 launch of *Animal Sentience*, an interdisciplinary journal on animal feeling. For an article about zombie language, see T. Soldat-Jaffe (2014): “Language deficiency suggests the absence of the reflective cogito and thereby denies the ‘object’ its human existence”.

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**CHAPTER 14.**  
**AGENCY OF THE FLESH: HUMANNESS, OBSCENITY, AND DEATH IN**  
**BRUCE LABRUCE'S *OTTO; OR, UP WITH DEAD PEOPLE***

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates how the conceptualization of humanness specifically gets invoked concerning death by the imagery of undead corpses, which can trigger strong emotions in the living. In this sense, the fictional figure of the zombie might help to deconstruct further the allegedly self-contained boundaries of humanness, which is already being questioned mainly by queer, post-human and queer post-human theories. The early movies made in the USA on zombies draw on these historical and cultural origins by showing the zombie as a monster yet (partially) human from the unknown, be it death or the mysterious cultures that have not been fully discovered (Christie, 2011). However, referring only to the history of the zombie figure in order to understand the split within the conception of humanness and, consequently, the mechanism of othering may remain simplistic and reductionist for the explanation of the intense emotions such as fear and disgust that the image or the imagery of the zombie generates in contemporary popular culture. The Otherness of the zombie is part of how the human is constituted by separating itself from the animal and the machine, and also how humanness is defined in contrast to a kind of non-humanness or lesser humanness. Post-humanist theories focus on these boundaries and their blurring while examining humanness (MacCormack, 2009; Wolfe, 2010). This chapter aims to incorporate those arguments within the framework of zombie studies that address the figure of the zombie as the ultimate other of both the human and animal and, maybe, that of the machine.

As an attempt to understand the limits of humanness concerning its fictional threat, only the reasons for uneasiness about the zombie articulated in Bruce LaBruce's film *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* (2008) are examined here, while other possible challenges posed by the zombie figure, such as reflections on necrosexuality or considering the zombie as posthuman will be left out of the scope of this chapter. First, this film's significance lies in its main concern with and a challenge to the normative understanding of humanness. LaBruce handles the topic playfully and sarcastically and provides an alternative approach to

exploring the exclusionary workings of normative and binary understandings of livingness through the personal narrative of a zombie.

This chapter focuses on two main themes of the film: first, critiques of the normative accounts of humanness—fleshiness and the cultural fears and desires in modern capitalism provoked by the conception of death through the figure of the zombie; and second, the question of obscenity and the sexual representations that help identify the constructed meanings of humanness and sexualities.

## 2. HUMAN/NESS AND ZOMBIE/NESS

The figure of a zombie itself here comes closest to the idea of the flesh endowed with some strange agency, a *human* not reduced to meat but hyper-aware of its corporeality. Unlike the vampires and the werewolves, the zombie's human origins and corporeality (even if it is decomposing or dismembered) are significant compared to the other monstrous figures in popular culture. Considering this, the authenticity of the zombie lies in its questionable humanness and, at the same time, its lack of it. It is not wandering around on the boundaries between animals and humans like werewolves (Bernhardt-House, 2008), nor does it signify some kind of immortal predator like vampires, which are primarily associated with animal figures such as reptiles and bats (Azzarello, 2008). Whether the zombie is perceived as disgusting or scary, the human origin creates its very problem. It is possible to argue that the figure of the zombie can be examined not merely as post-human, nor as a queer becoming but as a tool to investigate the limits of the conceptualization of human as being-ness (either as human or non/human), which is to be freed from living-ness.

New materialist feminism focuses on the agency of the body and the relatedness of beings, breaking the law of considering the mind as the superior component that defines the human (Braidotti, 2002). The modern association of the mind with masculinity can thus be overcome without the need to support the mind/body distinction. In this sense, the figure of the zombie may be seen as an antidote to how the modern human is commonly defined, and it can allow a rich field of research for feminist scholars to rethink the constructed meaning of humanness that usually functions in very exclusionary ways.

In LaBruce's film *Otto; or, Up with Dead People*, Otto, the title hero, believes that he died and came back to the earth from his grave. Soon, he meets Medea Yarn, an indie director, and agrees to participate in her movie. The character Otto is a fruitful example in pursuing the exploration of the definition of humanness, since the zombieness of this fictional character remains disputable throughout the film. The audience learns that when he was alive, Otto was a vegetarian, gay son of a butcher. As a zombie, then, his first challenge consists of consuming flesh, and he cannot immediately bring himself to eat human flesh. His difficulty with eating flesh is not connected to his everlasting love for humankind or prescribed taboos that the modern Western subject shares about cannibalism.

Otto, the zombie, does not enjoy the company of other humans much. In the opening scene, after rising from his grave, Otto explains (with a voiceover) his ideas about the living/human beings very clearly: “It is not easy being undead. The living all seem like the same person to me, and I do not think I like that person very much” (LaBruce, 2012). Nevertheless, in the next scene, he follows a smell, the smell of flesh, the smell of human density, and goes in the direction from which it comes: Berlin.

Unlike other zombies in the genre, Otto is not after human brains. Instead, his primary source of nutrition is flesh: at first, he consumes dead animals, and later, the living. Looking at the evolution of the movie’s zombie figure, we can see that many zombies became more intelligible and faster compared to the past representations of screen zombies that were “originally slow of mind and foot” (Dendle, 2011, p. 175). Nevertheless, many zombie figures in cinema still conform to the original template. Peter Dendle mentions that in Dan O’Bannon’s film *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), a captured zombie explains that eating the brains of the living helps her overcome “the pain of being dead” (Dendle, 2011, p. 176). Dendle’s remark shows an important shift from the classical zombie figure to a more sophisticated conceptualization of zombies who can accurately explain their needs, feelings, and pains on an ontological level. However, Otto suffers from another kind of pain that we can call the pain of being undead. He calls himself a zombie with an identity crisis, and until he figures this out, he consumes “whatever non-human flesh was available”.

LaBruce articulates his general stance on the fleshiness of human existence, combined with a political stance through the instructions given by Medea on consuming meat. Medea is filming a movie about Otto within the movie. While shooting in a supermarket, she tells Otto to eat the meat in the freezers: “I want you to focus on meat. Because the world is meat. We are meat. Do you understand?” (LaBruce, 2012). The human as meat; the fleshiness of humans is a claim that LaBruce offers in his movie. Thus, if we consider that the flesh has a strange kind of agency, the whole definition of humanness shakes considerably.

In most zombie films, the forms of social organization are ruined; thus, this creates the primary anxiety for the survivors of these zombie worlds. In the film *Otto*, for instance, the social organization is not threatened by Otto’s existence, but the social realm itself is threatening Otto. He does not fit in and has no intention of trying anymore. At the same time, Otto keeps observing and participating in the social realm. He wanders in limbo, trying to decide whether he wants to be part of the society that he does not like or just leave it all for good. In the final scene, he eventually decides to leave Berlin as he does not want to stay with the living anymore. He heads to the North, wondering if he could find others like him there. LaBruce does not provide details regarding Otto’s decision to go to the North; however, it can be interpreted that the North may symbolize the North Pole, where it might

(presumably) be possible to survive outside capitalist society<sup>38</sup>. Even if he decides to leave the city in the end, Otto is portrayed as the zombie that survives the apocalyptic world of (metropolitan) living.

### 3. PORN ZOMBIES

The character Medea Yarn describes Otto as “lonely, empty, dead inside”, who fits the typical porn profile according to her: “the lost boy; the damaged boy; the numb, phlegmatic, insensate boy willing to go to any extreme to feel something, anything”. At the same time, Otto’s zombieness is combined with the pornographic representation of the corporeal realm. The body parts, which are sometimes disembodied, the organs and blood all over the surface, and the hardcore sex acts certainly differentiate zombie sex in LaBruce’s movie from any other kind of explicit sex scenes, for example, in vampire movies. The fleshiness of the zombie figure orients the zombie sex scenes towards a rawer sexual encounter than what we could call “erotica”. The excessive corporeality and the fleshiness of the zombies are the key features that turn the sex scenes into pornographic images. At the same time, the intense level of violence is not necessarily present in every sex scene of the film.

The figure of the gay zombie in pornography is inherently political, even when their actions are limited to sexual acts. While it is challenging to assert that zombies are fully self-conscious subjects, as a metaphor—whether human or monstrous—the figure of the gay zombie in pornographic films is both gendered and sexually oriented. Consequently, they possess a sexual agency that is politically situated within power dynamics. However, it is important to avoid oversimplifying the figure as merely representative of actual gay individuals, or, conversely, to reject the empiricist approach that assumes a straightforward opposition to homophobic discourse. The question of representation within pornography remains multifaceted and can be approached from various, sometimes contradictory, perspectives, requiring careful consideration of the claims regarding sexual representations.

Bruce LaBruce explicitly calls his film pornographic. This statement from an indie film director shall be taken very seriously. LaBruce positions himself and his work in a place where most people try to avoid being categorized. Furthermore, pornography, as an industry, is not always a welcoming space for indie productions; promoting, distributing, and screening the films are already hard enough for small-scale directors without being labelled as porn directors: potential legal restrictions might be too luxurious. LaBruce gives us some hints about his take on the effects of the labelling in the film through the character Medea

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<sup>38</sup> It may be coincidental, but the destination to which Otto heads at the end of the film corresponds to the location where the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1823) journeys: the North Pole. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the titles of LaBruce’s film *Otto; or, Up with the Dead People* (2008) and Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* exhibit similar stylistic structures, which lends credence to the intentional resemblance between the endings of the two works.

when she shows her previous works to the other zombie characters and before filming the last scene of her film *Up with Dead People*, she talks about her experience of the unfavourable disposition of the industry: “the politico-porno-zombie movie that I’ve been working on for too many years to count because no one would give me the funding” (LaBruce, 2012).

In this exploration of the figure of the gay-male-zombie in porn, it can be seen as a queer response to anti-porn feminist’s historically constructed meaning of porn. Lisa Duggan, in her book *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, tracks down the debates on sexual politics and discusses some efforts by anti-porn feminists to convince the legislators about their case (Duggan & Hunter, 1995). The anti-porn feminists showcased gay porn movies to persuade the legislator to decide against pornography, and Duggan describes how the judges defined obscenity about this event. Ironically, by showing gay porn to judges to convince them about the obscenity of these products, the anti-porn feminists were blurring the boundaries of what they want to define as obscene. The juridical decision-making process of calling a visual cultural product obscene occurs in the opposite direction of the real aim (of anti-porn feminists): by making it *on/scene*, which is “one way of signalling not just that pornographies are proliferating but that once off (*ob*)scene sexual scenarios have been brought onto the public sphere” (Williams, 2004). It is possible to see these outcomes as questionable as they do not provide an exhaustive exploration of the literature nor the issue’s historicity over the past prolific decades filled with debates on pornography. Nevertheless, the attempt to highlight the biases of specific anti-porn feminist claims could potentially be helpful as a reminder for considering how concepts such as inhuman or degrading can also be predefined and reinforced by patriarchal normativity.

LaBruce is said to be concerned with subverting the masculine stereotypes in his movies. In this regard, in *Otto*, the hyper-masculine performativity of fake zombies might be thought of as a move away from femininity. While playing the zombie roles, the body’s monstrosity is approaching feminization through the deployment of a “neutral body”: monstrosity thus leads to femininity and a lack of masculinity. *Otto* is then authentic by not escaping the monstrosity of his corporeality, by not disavowing his femininity, but becomes a rebellious zombie, as Medea calls him. It does not occur by some rebellious act but through how his flesh is situated in the political discourse of (hetero)normative corporeality. Considering the bodies in LaBruce’s movie, the scenes of zombie sex by the corpses in motion (in Medea’s movie) and at the same time, the sexual act itself, for example, the sex scenes of *Otto* with the gay boy that he meets in the club, become hard to distinguish in the actual movie. The corpse or the zombie flesh is hard to define. However, as it is considered monstrous because of its excessive corporeality, this excess distinguishes it from the normative understanding of the human body.

Disgusting, degrading, dehumanizing; the gay-male-zombies in porn movies might be perfectly obscene, but as they are male and gay, by having these identities, they are political

subjects, and instead of considering these figures as *re-presentations* of sexuality, it is more convincing to see them as an ironic response to anti-porn discourses on obscenity. As the on-scene figures of pornography, through the figure of the zombie, it might be possible to reclaim the terms “dehumanization” and “degradation” as one of the many forms of the “knowledge-pleasure” of sexuality.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Suppose humans are bound by the inescapable mortality that feeds the corporeal, individual, cultural, and political fears and desires. In that case, it is unsurprising that the theme of environmental changes comes up quite often in zombie narratives. In these fictional ecological apocalyptic narratives, the figure of the undead creatures “eco-zombies” (Lauro, 2011) reflects “anxieties about humans overreaching their natural sphere” as one of the most important contemporary concerns of civilization. Understanding humanity’s complex relationship with its own self and with the space where it exists, as depicted in ecological apocalyptic narratives in zombie films, is paramount. While the liberal humanist version of the human subject is being imposed as the Human by defining it as firmly as possible and trying to prevent any perversion or transgression which could supposedly endanger this constructed meaning of Human, the fleshiness of the human existence is considered to be endangered not by the outside forces but by the humans themselves. It is interesting to see how, in some fictional zombie narratives, the zombies, considered humankind’s worst enemy, can be seen as the embodiment of the fear of an ecological apocalyptic future. In fact, the ecological catastrophes are happening not because of the zombies but primarily because of the humans themselves.

LaBruce successfully connects the modern fears of civilization to the “civilized” humans’ failures. Garbage dumps out of sight are only one of the ignored sites of late-modern capitalism that keep growing and growing. According to Medea’s logic, maybe it is not such a problem if the zombies are the ones who will inherit a world that is no longer livable for humankind. Nevertheless, as the ironic presentation of Medea’s logic implies, we may already live in the same conditions that we keep projecting onto the future in horror narratives.

Regarding all these aspects, LaBruce uses an alternative way of evoking the fleshiness of human existence: Otto elucidates the essence of humanity, the potentialities of the human body, and its inherent susceptibilities. We are reminded of the fleshiness of humanness not by the other humans running away from zombies, vampires, or werewolves that chase them, but through the focalizing perspective of a zombie. The narration from the zombie’s perspective makes the film different and interesting. Humans can no longer cover up the corporeal realm of humanness with their higher or sometimes lower intellectual capacities. LaBruce’s change of perspective reminds the audience of the smell, the density of human

flesh, and the city where the bodies move around, which might at any moment become an open kitchen for the zombies.

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**PART IV**  
**POLITICS & IDEOLOGY**



**CHAPTER 15.**  
***THE WALKING DEAD*, THE ALT-RIGHT AND THE RISE OF  
LIBERTARIAN FANTASIES (AND DONALD TRUMP’S POLITICS)**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter highlights the discursive parallels between alt-right ideology and *The Walking Dead*. The series serves as a cultural artefact emblematic of the broader cultural war waged by the far right against progressive social movements such as feminism, environmentalism, egalitarianism, and the struggle for civil rights—movements frequently dismissed by far-right theorists under the derogatory label of “cultural Marxism”.

For decades, these theorists have advocated for this cultural struggle—what Pat Buchanan famously described as “a war for the soul of America” during the 1992 Republican National Convention (Nagel, 2017, p. 55)—believing that the path to political power lies first in the conquest of the cultural mainstream. This strategic orientation is referred to as a “metapolitical” approach by the European New Right (ENR), whose thinking is, somewhat paradoxically, informed in part by the work of Italian Communist theorist Antonio Gramsci (Lyons, 2017, p. 105).

In this context, *The Walking Dead* and other cultural products—such as its spin-off *Fear the Walking Dead* or films like *World War Z*—seem to promote, be promoted and be crafted in alignment with the ideological perspectives of Gramscian-influenced right-wing thinkers (Rodríguez de Austria, 2017). Much like John Rambo (1982, 1985, 1988, 2008, 2019), “Dirty” Harry Callahan (1971, 1973, 1976, 1988), and Paul Kersey of the *Death Wish* series (1974, 1982, 1985, 1987) embodied the authoritarian fantasies of Reagan and Thatcher supporters during the 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of heroes and anti-heroes enacts similar fantasies within the post-apocalyptic landscapes of 21st-century popular culture.

This is not to deny the complexity of these cultural products; *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022) and *Fear The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2015–2023) have evolved in opposite directions. While *The Walking Dead*—which began as openly fascist, racist, misogynist, antiabortionist, pro-death penalty, and overtly religious—has become more egalitarian, antiauthoritarian, secular, and progressive in some aspects (e.g., racial, sexual), its

prequel, *Fear The Walking Dead*, whose protagonists include not only a young drug addict but a culturally and sexually diverse cast, has become openly fascist, racist, misogynist and pro-death penalty<sup>39</sup>.

The disconnect between an increasingly diverse cast and the regressive characterisations and plots may stem more from external factors than the story's or its characters' development. While *The Walking Dead* portrays a traditional WASP social hierarchy—alpha white male(s) at the top, with people of colour and women in various less powerful positions—*Fear The Walking Dead* portrays the life of socially disadvantaged and minority groups after the zombie outbreak, those who have less presence in WASP-centric *The Walking Dead* (both the series and its audience): alpha white males are absent, and the leading figure is the white concerned mother who fights against a second disintegration of her family.

Other external factors for the different evolutions of *The Walking Dead* and *Fear The Walking Dead* may include *The Walking Dead*'s fidelity to its comic-book source material, *Fear The Walking Dead*'s targeting of diverse audiences with the inclusion of African Americans, Latin Americans, and gay characters, or a rhetorical device commonly used by cultural fascism: to co-opt the young rebels for the cause attracting them with appealing stories. Regardless of whether they start “left” (FTWD) or “right” (TWD), both series are glaring showcases for the alt-right “blended” ideology that Donald Trump incarnates.

## 2. THE ALT-RIGHT

The alt-right, short for “Alternative Right”, is a loosely organized far right movement that shares a contempt for both liberal multiculturalism and mainstream conservatism; a belief that some people are inherently superior to others, a strong internet presence and embrace of specific

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<sup>39</sup> The term “progressive” is used in a reductionist manner here: “If ‘progressive’ values are understood in terms of [recognition], we have arguably witnessed a greater societal recognition of a multiplicity of ethnic, sexual, linguistic, and other identities. Yet from the standpoint of [distribution], the past three decades have seen a dramatic reversal in ‘progressive values’, insofar as redistribution has occurred in an upward rather than downward direction” (Gandesha, 2018, p. 53). It can be stated that *The Walking Dead* and *Fear the Walking Dead* exhibit certain progressive features, specifically in recognising identities. However, in terms of distribution, both series range from conservative to fascist in orientation. For instance, actions motivated by solidarity—those aligned with redistribution—are almost universally punished within the narrative (Rodríguez de Austria, 2016). A clear example of this can be found in *Fear the Walking Dead*'s “Monster” (S02E01), where the protagonists refuse to assist a group stranded in a boat. When they later help another group, they are assaulted, suggesting that their initial reluctance was justified. Similarly, in the opening scene of *The Walking Dead*'s episode “Clear” (S03E12), Carl and Michonne disregard the desperate cry for help from a backpacker. In the final scene, the backpacker has been devoured, illustrating the brutal application of the “laws of nature” within a fascist worldview.

elements of online culture, and a self-presentation as being new, hip, and irreverent. (Lyons, 2017, p. 10)

The movement is loosely organized around websites like *alternativeright.org* and *radixjournal.com* (both founded by Richard Spencer), the neo-Nazi and white supremacist website *The Daily Stormer*, and *Breitbart News*, whose executive chair from 2012 to 2016 was Steve Bannon. Bannon left his position at *Breitbart* to become executive chief of 2016 Donald Trump's presidential campaign; following the election, he was appointed White House Chief Strategist and Senior Counsellor to the President, a position he held for seven months. Other centres for gathering, capturing, and spreading alt-right ideas are 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit web forums.

The alt-right blends the ideological currents of white nationalism, paleo-conservatism, right-wing anarchism, and male tribalism, among others. It is composed of groups such as neo-Nazis, the Patriot movement, survivalists, the Militia Men, or the misogynists and resentful men gathered around the network of blogs, forums and websites known as "Manosphere".

As expected, the alternative right is rooted in the ideologies of the traditional far right, although it differs in at least two key aspects: a new rhetoric based on "memes" spread like wildfire among masses of teenagers and people who spend most of their free time in digital ecosystems, and the awareness that only after reaching their cultural objectives will they reach their political ones. Only gathered around a figure like Donald Trump could these different groups work together and take over the Republican Party.

By the summer of 2015, the alt-right gained significant momentum as an online movement. However, it lacked a real leader—a charismatic political figure around whom it could coalesce and to whom its members could devote their efforts in pursuit of electoral success. It was the perfect time for Donald Trump to come along (Neiwert, 2017, p. 261).

On November 22, 2015, Donald Trump retweeted a false graphic about crime statistics where black men were responsible for the deaths of 81% of white homicide victims. The original tweet was sent out by a British white nationalist with a swastika in his profile; the hashtag was "#WhiteGenocide". "Two months later he retweeted another #WhiteGenocide comment [...] he would continue to retweet material from a range of white supremacists" who were, of course, jumping for joy: "Among the white nationalist of the alt-right, this was all further confirmation that Trump was their champion [...] 'You can say #WhiteGenocide now, Trump has brought it into the mainstream'" (Neiwert, 2018, p. 279). On August 25, 2016, during a rally in Reno, Hillary Clinton mentioned the alt-right for the first time in a public speech. "The de facto merger between *Breitbart* and the Trump Campaign represents a landmark achievement for the 'Alt-Right'. A fringe element has effectively taken over the Republican Party" (Neiwert, 2018, p. 299).

Dystopias like *The Walking Dead* are ideal terrain for exposing the alt-right ideology to a broad spectrum of people. In a fictional world after the Fall, the far right's beloved and desired return to Social Darwinism is the right path, the only path to survival (Biskind, 2018, p. 179). The following sections indicate how *The Walking Dead* and *Fear The Walking Dead* showcase some alt-right ideological currents.

## 2.1. White supremacy

White supremacy is one of the key aspects in the two first seasons of *The Walking Dead*, embodied in the redneck character Merle Dixon, whose racist attitude towards black character T-Dog is symbolically punished by Rick Grimes handcuffing Merle to a roof. Merle, like white supremacy, is banished from the group, and his more reasonable brother, Daryl, is straightened out by Rick. Even though Daryl still rides his motorcycle with the "Schutzstaffel" Nazi symbol (卐), Nazism is not welcomed in Rick's group.

However, the hierarchy within Rick's inner group during the early seasons reflects the underlying assumptions of white nationalist ideology. "The main idea underlying white nationalism was that it supported a hierarchy produced by what were presumed to be inherent racial inequalities" (Neiwert, 2017, p. 228). In this case, from top to bottom, alpha white men (Rick, Shane and Daryl), beta white men (Dale), and trustworthy beta Asian men (Glenn). At the bottom, women and African American males are either presented as cowards (T-Dog) or as useless.

The plot of "What Lies Ahead" (S02E01) suggests that these presumed inherent inequalities lead T-Dog and Andrea to get into trouble and force Daryl to save them. T-Dog cannot help in the search for Carol's daughter because he is injured and convalescent. Instead of helping, he talks with Dale about his feelings of being the only black man among white people ("Bloodletting", S02E02). Curiously enough, when Rick's ten-year-old son Carl compels his father to let him accompany them to the search, T-Dog is behind Rick, listening to the conversation. "I'm going with you. You need people, right? To cover as much ground as possible". T-Dog looks and listens to the conversation, but he cannot help for the moment ("What Lies Ahead"). Instead, he is positioned in a passive role, in which Daryl saves his life again by giving him Merle's antibiotics ("Bloodletting").

In the episode "Cherokee Rose", T-Dog attempts to vindicate himself when talking with Dale: "I'm not a coward. No, what I said on the highway, I don't know what that was or where it came from. That wasn't me. If it's ok, I'd rather you never told anybody about that stuff I said". During this conversation, they draw water from the well, a feminine or second-class task in *The Walking Dead* universe. "Do whatever we have to. I don't care if I have to comb the woods like Rambo [a task T-Dog has not done] or fetch a pail of water [the task he is doing]. Everyone kicks in, do their part. Am I right? Do your part, don't complain". T-Dog embodies the discourse of inherent inequality. He assures Dale and

himself that he is not a coward, with the narrative pushing him and his role in the group in the opposite direction. He has not done the first when he mentions the two tasks—looking for a girl missing in the woods or carrying water. T-Dog assumes his role at the lower levels of the social hierarchy. Further, the assumption is that he lacks the qualities to be at the top, thus: “Do your part, don’t complain”. This is reinforced at the end of the scene when he is about to drink poisoned water, and Dale saves his life again.

Finally, in “Killer Within” (S03E04), T-Dog finds the courage and acts like a hero by sacrificing himself to save Carol. However, the character’s redemption barely hides the rhetoric of hierarchy and the inherent inequalities: On one hand, the act of heroism is to sacrifice himself for a more valuable life. On the other hand, he cannot save a life without giving up his own in return. In the following seasons, white supremacy is blurred among the new characters, but hierarchy remains.

## 2.2. The Place of Women

“I am nothing without a man”. (Song “Civilian”, by Wye Oak. “18 Miles Out”, TWD, S02E10)

In the early seasons of *The Walking Dead*, women are the rest and the nest for the warriors, with season two being the most misogynistic of all. Just a few examples: After a sequence of the men fighting outside Hershel’s house, the scene cuts to women talking in the kitchen, setting a pattern throughout the season that contrasts each dangerous scene featuring men followed by a camera shot of the house from outside and then the women in the kitchen or the bedroom, talking and arguing. Women usually make food or feed the animals. “You are a housewife”, says Carl to his mother (“What Lies Ahead”, S02E01). “You are Rick’s wife. It sort of makes you our unofficial First Lady”, says Carol to Lori while they are hanging out the washing (Rick’s underpants presumably) (“Chupacabra”, S02E05). If a woman tries to do something alone, she gets into trouble, and a man has to rescue her (“What Lies Ahead”). Women cannot have guns either in or outside the house; men can (“What Lies Ahead”). Indeed, when Andrea tries to learn how to shoot, she shoots a friend (“Chupacabra”). Sophia, Carol’s daughter, is an excellent case in point. When two zombies chase her, Carol cries and waits for the two alpha males to solve the problem; Sophia’s disobedience of Rick’s instruction to hide (“What Lies Ahead”) eventually causes her death (“Pretty Much Dead Already”, S02E07).

Other subtle (and not-so-subtle) examples include Hershel giving his grandfather’s pocket watch to Glenn (his daughter’s boyfriend) rather than to her; Carol refusing to have an opinion over an important matter (“Judge, Jury, Executioner”); and Maggie’s sister, Beth, attempting suicide (“18 Miles Out”, S02E10). However, women are not always so passive: in “Bloodletting”, Maggie saves Andrea from a zombie who is trying to eat/rape her (she is on

the ground facing up and fighting, the zombie grabbing her legs). Andrea goes through the same event in the final episode of the season. Once again, the same dynamic is at play—this time, the symbolism of sexual violence is less overt—as she struggles against a male zombie until a hooded (female) figure intervenes and kills the assailant.

However, with the introduction of the hooded Michonne in Season 3, the narrative begins to offer a more empowering portrayal of women. Michonne simultaneously addresses both racial and gender dynamics within *The Walking Dead*: she is a powerful, independent Black woman—an alpha female—armed with a katana and accompanied by two mutilated male zombies, rendered incapable of inflicting harm. The psychoanalytic symbolism is unmistakable: the molester figure, the castrated men, and the woman wielding the phallic weapon, embodying reclaimed agency and control.

### **2.3. The Savivors: Male Tribalism, The Manosphere and Rape Culture**

Some of the alt-right ideological currents prey on men in crisis, particularly those grappling with feelings of social displacement, economic insecurity, or a perceived loss of traditional male authority. These movements often construct a narrative of victimhood that reimagines masculinity as being under siege by progressive politics, feminism, and multiculturalism. By tapping into anxieties surrounding identity, gender roles, and socioeconomic status, alt-right discourses offer a sense of belonging and purpose to disaffected men. They promise the restoration of a “natural” social order in which male dominance is reasserted, often through rhetoric steeped in nostalgia, aggression, and exclusionary nationalism. This ideological framing not only radicalizes vulnerability but also weaponizes it, redirecting personal crisis into political resentment and cultural backlash.

One of the dominant and consistent preoccupations running through the forum culture of the Manosphere [an anti-feminist on-line movement] is the idea of beta and alpha males. They discuss how women prefer alpha males and either cynically use or completely ignore beta males, by which they mean low-ranking males in the stark and vicious social hierarchy through which they interpret all human interaction. (Nagel, 2017, p. 89)

Resentful young beta males educated in sexuality by online pornography, and with no skills to approach women, gather around 4-chan, 8-chan and Reddit forum websites to encourage the “Beta Rebellion” and the “Beta Uprising” (Nagel, 2017, pp. 25–26). They share their antifeminism with other movements like Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), “a straight male separatist group whose members have chosen (ahem) to avoid romantic relationships with women in protest against a culture destroyed by feminism” (Nagel, 2017, p. 94), or the male tribalism theorized by Jack Donovan in books like *The Way of men* (2012) or *Becoming a Barbarian* (2016).

Jack Donovan has argued that the US is on the road to becoming a failed state and urged alt-rightists to “build the kinds of resilient communities and networks of skilled people that can survive the collapse and preserve your identities after the Fall”. To Donovan, this is an optimistic scenario: “In a failed state, we go back to Wild West rules, and America becomes a place for men again—a land full of promise and possibility that rewards daring and ingenuity, a place where men can restart the world”. (Lyons, 2017, p. 39)

Permeated by death iconography, Donovan’s cult to brotherhood, blood and violence includes a controversial detail: androphilia, sex and love between masculine men. They are not homosexuals, but the ontological distinction they make between men and women drives them to this extent.

The male gangs of *The Walking Dead* are the perfect clan for Donovan and his ilk. Negan and The Saviors are not homosexuals. They take the feminine women that they want (the masculine women fight), even in front of their husbands. Moreover, the husbands—for instance, Dwight—are forced to accept and consent if they want to live. There is tension within the alt-right between the alpha male comradeship practitioners and the beta male comradeship. The first ones are linked to violent and armed groups like white supremacists, Nazis, militiamen, or survivalists, and the second ones are linked to the internet forums where they practice symbolic violence and online harassment, preferably against women (see, for instance, the “GamerGate” controversy). Negan and Dwight would be representatives of each current and the inherent tension between them.

#### **2.4. The Saviors and the Three Free Associated Colonies: Libertarianism**

Right-wing anarchism has a long and complex history in the United States. While traditional anarchism envisions a world grounded in peace, mutual aid, and the rejection of hierarchical structures—eschewing God, the State, and institutionalized power—right-wing anarchism operates within a fundamentally different paradigm. It conceives the world as a battleground defined by perpetual conflict, where solidarity is limited strictly to the in-group and hostility is directed toward the Other. Rather than advocating for universal liberation, this variant of anarchism weaponizes anti-statist rhetoric in the service of exclusionary, often ethnonationalist, aims. It rejects state authority not in pursuit of collective emancipation, but as a means to unleash unregulated individualism, market absolutism, and authoritarian community boundaries. The world after the Fall is a place with no State where free-associated people trade and fight with other communities. There is no law beyond the law of nature and no rights other than those of the strongest. Carol states this worldview in “Twice as Far” (S06E14):

Carol: [*Farewell letter to Tobin*] We have so much here: people, food, medicine, *walls*<sup>40</sup>, everything we need to live. But what we have, other people want, too, and that will never change. If we survive this threat, and it's not over, another one will be back to take its place to take what we have.

Beneath the extreme violence by which Negan subdues other groups, he reveals a rational motive: taxes. The first time we hear the name Negan is in “No Way Out” (S06E09):

Negan's Man: “Hand over your weapons”

Daryl: “Why should we?”

Man: “Well, they're not yours”

Sasha: “Whose are they?”

Man: “Your property now belongs to Negan”.

The second reference to Negan appears at the Hilltop colony in the episode “Knots Untie” (S06E11), where the community is depicted as being coerced into paying taxes to the Saviors. This dynamic is echoed in the Kingdom, where colonies are subjected to a tributary relationship with Negan's regime. In this sense, all three colonies operate under the authority of a higher institution—Negan and the Saviors. Libertarians, much like Rick, often fantasize about a world free from such figures—without Negans, without centralized states, or politicians like Gregory or Deanna. However, the central problem lies in the show's provocative question: “Who is Negan? I am Negan. You are Negan”. In a world structured around perpetual competition between groups, the logic of domination inevitably reproduces itself. There will always be a Negan or a Rick. The absence of formal institutions does not eradicate the cycle of power and contestation; rather, it is displaced and rearticulated through informal hierarchies and charismatic authority.

## 2.5. Donald Trump as Alexandria's President?

Glenn: “There're walkers everywhere. They're migrating or something”. (“Beside the Dying Fire”, TWD, S02E13)

Alejandro: “Our parents, our brothers, our friends and our neighbours are leaving. The great pilgrimage of souls, the immense migration of the dead has begun”. (“Los Muertos”, FTWD, S02E09)

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<sup>40</sup> Carol puts emphasis on this word.

In the aptly titled episode “Them” (S05E10), Aaron approaches Rick’s group and introduces the promise of Alexandria, a fortified safe zone. He invites them to meet their leader, Deanna Monroe—an ex-Congresswoman bearing the surname of a former U.S. President (“The Distance”, S05E11). In describing Alexandria, Aaron begins not with its people, but with its wall: “Each panel in that wall is a 15-foot-high, 12-foot-wide slab of solid steel framed by cold-rolled steel beams and square tubing. Nothing, alive or dead, gets through that without our say-so”. This emphasis on infrastructure, rather than community, is telling. When Rick and his group arrive, they discover that while the wall is physically impenetrable, the people within are symbolically “soft”. They listen to music, read books, speak of sustainability, and raise children who play video games rather than handle firearms. They are doctors, architects, NGO workers, and former politicians—cosmopolitan, cultured, and liberal. In other words, they represent the archetypal Democrat in the political imaginary of the show’s more survivalist ethos. The contrast underscores a tension between frontier pragmatism and liberal idealism, between brutal necessity and institutional civility.

In the episode “Remember” (S05E12), Carol warns Rick and Daryl, “If we get comfortable here, we let our guard down... this place is gonna make us weak”. Rick, already attuned to the precariousness of the situation, responds with a calculated certainty: “Carl said that. However, it’s not gonna happen. We won’t get weak. That’s not in us anymore. We’ll make it work. And if they can’t make it... then we’ll just take this place”. This foreshadows the inevitable shift in power dynamics. The hardened, resilient survivors, shaped by their harsh realities, gradually seize control of Alexandria. Deanna Monroe, the former Congresswoman, acknowledges this shift when she tells her new secretary, Maggie, “I put another one of your people in a position of power; you vouch for them. It’s becoming a pattern”. Maggie’s succinct reply, “We know what we’re doing. It’s why you wanted us here. It’s why Aaron and Daryl are out there looking for more people. You wanted a future. You need us for that” (“Spend”, S05E14), underscores the tension between Alexandria’s idealistic vision of rebuilding civilization and the practical, survival-oriented ethos of Rick’s group. By the season finale, “Conquer” (S05E16), Rick’s dominance methods, pragmatism, and authoritarianism ultimately prevail. The narrative takes a darker turn when Pete, a jealous and emotionally repressed character, attempts to kill Rick, but instead kills Deanna’s husband, Reg Monroe. Deanna orders Rick to execute Pete, thereby symbolizing the triumph of Rick’s vision of leadership—a leadership defined not by consensus or democratic rebuilding, but by force, control, and survivalism. This act of execution encapsulates the series’ recurring theme: the collapse of traditional moral and social orders, and the establishment of a new, brutal form of governance.

On April 12, 2015—just two weeks after the airing of the “Conquer” episode—Hillary Clinton, the woman who shares a surname with a tall, thin, white-haired former U.S. president, formally announced her candidacy for the presidency. This announcement invites

a compelling parallel between Deanna Monroe, the fictional leader of Alexandria in *The Walking Dead*, and Clinton. (In Robert Kirkman’s graphic novel *The Walking Dead*, the leader of Alexandria is a man named Douglas Monroe). Beyond their shared political ideologies and similarly styled husbands, the connection between Deanna and Hillary Clinton also extends to historical symbolism. Bill Clinton’s presidency, often associated with the so-called “Pax Americana” (1992–2000), mirrors the “Era of Good Feelings” under President James Monroe (1816–1824), a period of relative peace and political unity in the U.S. If Deanna Monroe is interpreted as a symbolic stand-in for Hillary Clinton—representing establishment politics, compromise, and a vision of civilizational restoration—then the question arises: Who may Rick Grimes represent? Maybe the antithesis of Deanna, a symbol of rugged individualism and authoritarian leadership?

Rick, of course, soon realizes the peril Alexandria faces: a massive horde of zombies trapped in a quarry, threatening to breach the town’s defences. As he warns, “sooner or later, they are going to pass through the barrier and sack the town” (“First Time Again”, S06E01). Indeed, the town is ultimately sacked—not only by the undead but by the living as well, in the form of the predatory “Wolves” (“JSS”, S06E02) and later through the relentless onslaught of walkers in subsequent episodes (“Now”, S06E05; “Always Accountable”, S06E06; “Heads Up”, S06E07; “Start to Finish”, S06E08). As the events unfold, most of Alexandria’s residents are revealed to be weak, selfish, cowardly, and treacherous, unwilling to act in the face of crisis. In this collapse environment, Deanna Monroe—who once embodied the fragile hope for a return to civility—like Carol did before her, ultimately cedes her leadership to Rick. Transferring power from the “civilized” to the “survivor” marks a pivotal moment in the series. Rick’s leadership, grounded in brutal pragmatism, takes precedence over the ideals of the pre-apocalyptic world. It becomes evident that, in the post-apocalyptic reality of *The Walking Dead*, the survivalist ethos that Rick embodies sustains not only the community’s physical survival but also its tenuous claim to authority and governance.

Rick: “You need to lead them”

Deanna: “They don’t need me, Rick. What they need is you”

Once in charge, Rick’s “presidential” speech (after the commonplace “what we could do if we work together”) suggests expanding the walls:

I was wrong. I thought, after living behind these walls for so long, that maybe they [Alexandria inhabitants] couldn’t learn. But today I saw what they could do, what *we* could do, if we work together. We’ll rebuild the walls. We’ll expand the walls. (“No Way Out”, S06E09)

Indeed, Alexandria's walls are the main inanimate protagonist of *The Walking Dead's* sixth season, discussed in "First Time Again", "JSS", "Thank You", "Now", "Always Accountable", "Start To Finish", "No Way Out", "Knots Untie", "Twice as Far", and "East".

The sixth season of *The Walking Dead* aired concurrently with Donald Trump's announcement of his first candidacy in June 2016, during which he famously repeated his campaign promise to "build the wall" on the southern border of the United States. It is hard to ignore the parallel between Rick's promise to protect Alexandria and Trump's pledge to secure the U.S. border. Both figures present themselves as protectors of their respective communities, framing the promise of security through the construction of physical barriers—whether in the form of the fortified wall of Alexandria or the proposed border wall. However, *The Walking Dead's* narrative not only reflects the political anxieties of its time, but may also contribute to shaping public perception through subtle forms of embedded propaganda. The series focuses on the immediate, survival-driven concerns of Rick's group, portraying the construction of walls and barriers as a necessary—even pragmatic—response to external threats. In doing so, it refrains from critically engaging with the broader political or social consequences of such actions. This narrative omission suggests that *The Walking Dead* both mirrors and reinforces the exclusionary and isolationist discourses central to contemporary debates on immigration and national security

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## CHAPTER 16. THE MONSTER OF EMPATHY

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its beginnings, the zombie has always been a dark and twisted mirror, reflecting our Western society's sociological and political fears. Even the first zombie movie, *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), addresses various socio-political issues. Set in Haiti, the movie tells the story of a wealthy, white landowner who falls in love with the fiancé of one of his employees. In order to prevent their marriage and get the girl, he strikes a deal with a local witch doctor, who already has a group of mind—and soulless (black) corpses working in his mill. The doctor gives him a potion that makes the girl appear dead. After her burial, the doctor and the landowner dig her up again. However, the landowner recoils at the sight of the woman he once desired, for she is now nothing more than a doll, devoid of thought and—most importantly—feeling. Ultimately, the curse can only be broken by the true love between the girl and her original fiancé.

The movie was an immediate success. It has been said that the sight of the disposable corpses working in the mill reminded the viewers of themselves: the shambling, unemployed masses of the Great Depression. One could also argue that the true horror of the movie lies not in the character of the zombie per se but in the idea that a white woman could be transformed into something “reserved” for black bodies and therefore revealing and at the same time gratifying the racism that was still rampant in the audience of that time (for a more thorough discussion of these arguments see Kyle W. Bishop, “The Sub-Subaltern Monster: Imperialist Hegemony and the Cinematic Voodoo Zombie”, *The Journal of American Culture*, 2008). While these are valid (and by far not the only) readings of the movie, I would argue that the most important issue that has been at the core of the zombie narrative ever since is that of feeling and empathy.

The zombie does not feel. It has no empathy, not with humans or with other zombies. Until the beginning of this millennium, this has been the only constant trait in a monster that is otherwise as ambivalent and changeable as the socio-political developments it shambles after.

## 2. THE EMOTIONLESS ZOMBIE

The zombie was merely a tool for the first thirty years of its existence. A dead (and for the most part black) body controlled by an evil witch doctor. It had no will or instinct of its own. Not even the unquenchable desire to eat human flesh. It simply did what it was told. Precisely like the mindless, soulless factory worker in the heyday of Western industrialization. Nothing more than a (primarily human) cog in a big machine. However, after World War II, the machines did not appear as scary as those operating them. The “enlightened citizens” of Western Europe who had renounced all independent thought and had (sometimes) cheerfully committed the most horrible atrocities were the real monsters. The ease with which a few madmen had been able to entice entire nations into following their terrible and ultimately self-destructive plans had shaken the faith in the stability of democratic societies to its core. Conveniently, a profound distrust of the anonymous masses has always been a part of the iconography of the zombie. The strength of this monster lies in numbers. A single zombie is not usually a threat. A profoundly undemocratic sentiment is vividly expressed by the horror that their shuffling movements, decaying bodies, and empty gazes evoke in any Western individual. We do not want to be a part of “them”. We are above the “herd”. Furthermore, we cannot trust them, for they cannot be controlled (at least not forever). The witch doctor inevitably fails.

In the Sixties, Western societies started to question the authority and values of the established political class on a massive scale. The zombie changed accordingly, so the witch doctor (the one making the decisions and holding all the power) had to go. When we think about zombies now, we think of the monster Romero created in his cult classic *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968). A mass of undead and unfeeling bodies controlled by no one and driven only by their desire to devour humans and thereby add them to their ranks. It has almost become a cliché to read Romero’s masterpiece as a commentary on the social conflicts of the Sixties. However, the ramifications of this movie go way beyond that. It has set a robust template for countless “zombie apocalypse narratives” to come. A small group of heterogeneous survivors must find a way to coexist and work together to escape the hungry horde of the undead.

In this narrative, the government has usually already been erased. In the “evolution” of the zombie, this is the next logical step. The demise of the witch doctor is swiftly followed by the collapse of the larger entities trying to control this monster. All power must inevitably fail when applied to a being that completely lacks any feeling. The zombie cannot be hurt; it does not know pain, so it cannot be threatened or coerced. Especially “Modern states” (as opposed to medieval forms of government) are helpless when confronted with a zombie menace because they base their power mainly on what the French philosopher Foucault has termed “biopower”. According to Foucault (*The History of sexuality*, 1998), this is “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (p. 126). All these techniques are useless in a world full of

zombies. There is no way to “subjugate the body” of this monster, for it simply does not care about it. The zombie can lose limbs and organs; as long as the brain is intact, it will try to bite you. A shattered torso, oblivious of its lack of legs or intestines but still clawing its way towards a terrified survivor, is a fixed staple of almost every zombie movie.

The horror of this image is twofold. On the one hand, this violates the natural order of things. This pitiful rest of a once-healthy body should not be able to move. However, this is something the zombie has in common with every other monster, for none of them cares about the laws of nature (vampires should not be able to live forever, and werewolves should not be able to transform). Their disregard for these human boundaries makes them monsters in the first place.

On the other hand, the unique horror of this image lies in the sudden realization of the complete and utter inability to exercise any form of power over this unfeeling creature. One cannot hope to coexist with such a “thing”. One can only try to destroy it and build something new out of the smouldering ashes of the zombie apocalypse. So, it is up to the remaining few to establish a new social contract, a new “body politic”. When the enemy is not a human being but something altogether different, it is not enough to merely survive. The real threat is not primarily to their lives but to their humanity. The hit series *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022) reveals the struggle for humanity as a political issue. In the second season, the group has to decide what to do with an intruder. They do not trust him enough to include him, but they cannot let him go, for he could alert other potentially dangerous survivors to their whereabouts. So, they discuss the problem rationally and put it to a vote. The outcome is almost unanimous: they pronounce a death sentence.

The only one casting a contrary vote, the only one appealing to the group’s humanity, is promptly eaten. However, when the protagonist, Rick, is about to execute the man, he sees his son Carl. The boy does not beg his father to show mercy. On the contrary, he encourages him to kill the defenceless prisoner, ignoring his plea for mercy. Rick is horrified by the moral corruption that their attempt to deal with the situation rationally caused in his ten-year-old child. He cannot go through with the execution. This leads to a terrible conflict with his best friend, Shane, who does not accept Rick’s decision to show mercy. Shane takes the matter into his own hands (killing the prisoner in secret), and Rick is forced to kill him in return. An exasperated Rick informs the remaining group members in the season finale: “This is not a democracy anymore!”. Liberalism—the idea of democracy as a rational discourse—has failed them horribly.

However, zombies are not the only ones attacking liberalism. The rise of populist movements in Europe and the elections of Donald Trump in 2016 and 2024 are proof of a strong desire to avoid any rational discourse and instead place emotions at the centre of the political process. Trump perfectly embodies this “ideal” of politics based solely on the emotional state of the politicians in charge. Any form of rational discussion is alien to him.

He does not need science, truth or facts (beyond those that he proclaims himself to be true or at least a valid “alternative”). His political agenda is built upon a strict divide between those who share his feelings and those who do not. There is no place for compromise or empathy. Both are impossible because they would imply understanding and validating the feelings of the (political) other. This reflects a deeply divided nation that has lost all common ground. There seems to be a distinct lack of fundamental values, nothing to hold together the frail fabric of an already highly diverse society.

### 3. THE EMPATHIC ZOMBIE

Due to its volatile nature, the zombie has taken on a new form to participate in this debate. From the novel *Warm Bodies* (Isaac Marion, 2010; adapted to film by Jonathan Levine in 2013) to the TV series *iZombie* (The CW, 2015–2019); from the TV series *In the Flesh* (BBC Three, 2013–2014) to the novel *The Girl With All The Gifts* (M. R. Carey, 2014; adapted to film by Colm McCarthy in 2016) the zombie thinks, talks and most importantly, feels. These “new” zombies practice an extreme form of empathy by subverting their “old” cannibalistic tendencies.

In the American novel *Warm Bodies*, we follow the protagonist, R, through his inner and outer wasteland. The world around him is as stale and barren as his existence. He is conscious of his undead state and desperately yearns for something more. However, he is inescapably caught in the eternal loop of quenching his endless hunger by hunting humans and eating their brains. On one of these hunting expeditions, he and his posse of fellow zombies stumble upon a group of survivors. They kill and eat their way through most of them until R takes a bite out of the brains of a young man, whose—obviously—beautiful girlfriend Julie is also part of the group. By ingesting his brain, R inherits all his memories and feelings. So, he is suddenly flooded with love for Julie and manages to rescue her from the other zombies. In the end, R can even reverse his death and rejoin the ranks of the living. Not only does this cause the other zombies to change, too, but it also frees the humans from the need for the pseudo-fascist military regime they have established in order to survive—again, at the price of most of their humanity. So, both the undead and the living regain the ability to feel the “luxury” of empathy.

In the American TV series *iZombie*, the protagonist works in a morgue and devours the brains of murder victims. Just like R, she inherits their memories, feelings, and personalities. She uses this ability to help the police catch the killers, thereby reinforcing the laws of the society that the zombie usually destroys. In these new zombie narratives, one must become an undead member to become fully human. Before her transformation, the protagonist of *iZombie* is a cold, overly ambitious medical student who treats patients but does not care for them. As a zombie, she is empathic to the point where she (at least for the duration of an episode) becomes other people. The protagonist is a realtor in the TV series *Santa Clarita*

*Diet* (Netflix, 2017–2019). Before her transformation, she was a shy, self-conscious woman trapped in the routines of her petty suburban existence. As a zombie, she is sure of herself and able to fully enjoy life and all its pleasures (which includes eating people, of course).

All could be well, but these new zombies have not come to bring peace, self-fulfilment and empathy to a world full of hate and fear. Alternatively, if they do, their attempt is not entirely successful, for they carry a dark, infectious side in their (half) dead narrative bloodstreams. A bleak view of the power of empathy.

The British TV series *In the Flesh* is set in a society that has discovered a cure for the zombie plague. Former zombies are treated as patients and officially classified as “Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers”. Once their treatment is complete, they are reintegrated into society under the care of their families.

The series follows Keiren, a rehabilitated ex-zombie haunted by the memories of those he killed, struggling with overwhelming guilt. His family lives in a small town controlled by a local pastor and his followers, who defended the community during the so-called “uprising”. To them, this struggle is a biblical battle between good and evil.

When a government emissary visits the town to encourage the residents to accept the “returned”, he is met with jeers and rejection. In this isolated community, the government holds no real authority. Instead, a form of theocracy has taken root in the heart of England. Democracy, once again, has lost its power in the face of the zombie threat. The pastor and his followers refuse to acknowledge that the zombies have been cured, maintaining the division and conflict within the town. They still hate them violently. Hate seems to be the only emotion allowed in public discourse. Keiren’s father has bottled up his emotions completely and avoids unpleasant topics by discussing his “passion” for DVDs. His mother attends a self-help group for zombie relatives. This group meets in a small room in a rundown community centre. The meeting is attended exclusively by women (making a somewhat dated statement about the allegedly superior ability of the “fair sex” to express their emotions). Moreover, in this “secure location”, it is only there that all the other feelings are allowed to come out. Joy, grief and all the emotions in between are almost put under quarantine as if they were as infectious and dangerous as the zombie virus itself (which does not exist in this narrative). The only one who expresses his emotions in public—challenging the norms of society even as a cured zombie—is Keiren. In a dramatic moment, he even convinces a group of human “hunters” and his fellow zombie (and former lover) to spare the lives of some untreated zombies. Again, the only one capable of showing mercy and empathy is a (former) member of the undead.

In these narratives, humanity’s future appears bleak. In the face of extreme empathy toward the undead, humanity is ultimately unmasked as the true monster. Incapable of bridging the emotional divide between the living and the (un)dead, we instead succumb to hatred, violence, and prejudice. A trace of authoritarianism and fear-driven division seems to

reside within us all. Yet even our rational side proves insufficient to salvage what little remains of our humanity.

The British novel *The Girl With All the Gifts* is told from the perspective of its eponymous heroine. Melanie is a ten-year-old girl held in a high-security military facility. She and her classmates live in cells, and when they attend lessons, they are strapped into wheelchairs and constantly held at gunpoint by armed soldiers. Occasionally, a scientist visits the facility and takes one of the children away—those who are “chosen” are never seen again. The only source of comfort in Melanie’s life is the presence of her favourite teacher, Ms. Justineau.

It soon becomes clear that Melanie and her classmates are no ordinary children—they are a unique kind of zombie: intelligent, self-aware, and capable of thought and emotion. However, they are treated as mere test subjects. The scientists conduct experiments on them, desperately seeking a cure for the zombie virus, but in doing so, they condemn these children to death. The descriptions of these experiments evoke chilling parallels to the atrocities committed by Nazi doctors in concentration camps. The horror of the situation is further amplified by the scientist’s complete lack of empathy—she does not see her subjects as human, let alone as children, despite their desperate, heart-wrenching pleas for mercy. She is the embodiment of cold, detached rationality. Ultimately, even her death is nothing more than an intriguing process to her.

When the facility is overrun by “regular” zombies—the flesh-eating ghouls that have haunted us since *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968)—, Melanie escapes alongside the scientist, a handful of soldiers, and Ms. Justineau. As they journey through the post-apocalyptic landscape, they encounter other children like Melanie—untouched by human civilization, living in feral packs, hunting and devouring anything that crosses their path.

Meanwhile, the scientist uncovers the source of the zombie plague: a fungus that grows from the dead, its spores not yet airborne. In the end, Melanie makes a fateful decision—she burns the plant, releasing the spores into the air and effectively wiping out what remains of humanity. Only Ms. Justineau is spared, sheltered within a caravan equipped with an air filtration system. Under Melanie’s leadership, the “lost children of the apocalypse” are gathered, and Ms. Justineau resumes her lessons. Perhaps, this time, knowledge will be used more wisely.

The fate of humanity is sealed. We have tortured and killed children. In doing so, we have lost our humanity and forfeited our right to exist. The future belongs to a new species. The core mission of the zombie narrative since the 1960s—to envision a better society, a new “body politic”—has failed. The world is better off without us. Let the zombies take over.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This conclusion would undoubtedly appeal to the latent self-destructive tendencies present in Western society—an impulse that has significantly contributed to the rise and success of the zombie narrative. However, it can be argued that, despite its apparent evolution, the zombie figure has never been intended to replace humanity. Instead, it has served as a representation of the monstrous aspects of human nature rather than as a model to be followed.

This has been evident both in its portrayal of the mindless, soulless masses—often associated with democracy—and in this new version of the zombie, characterized by extreme empathy. As Paul Bloom points out in *Against Empathy* (2016), the highly valued ability to “put oneself in another’s shoes” also has a dark and potentially dangerous side. These new, overly empathetic zombies embody precisely those risks, demonstrating that excessive emotional identification can be just as destructive as the irrational brutality traditionally associated with these creatures.

First, empathy can sway us toward one over the other. We are incapable of empathizing with more than one or two people simultaneously. The masses become a cold abstraction, while the individual immediately elicits an emotional reaction. Mother Teresa once said: “If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will”. So the zombie had to become an individual. For us to feel and root for him, he or she had to leave the masses, thereby revealing our struggle with the democratic process. We are not cut out to subordinate our feelings and opinions to a group. Not even for the greater good.

Given its limited scope, empathy is also “biased and parochial”. A stronger tendency exists to empathize with those who are perceived as similar. This inherent limitation leads to extreme decisions in recent zombie narratives. In *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Melanie—endowed with intelligence and self-awareness—identifies more closely with her kind, the sentient children of the zombie apocalypse, than humanity. As a result, the decision is made to eradicate what remains of humans.

However, Melanie is not the only zombie confronted with the dilemma of where to direct empathy and which side to support. Keiren, the protagonist of *In the Flesh*, faces a similar conflict when encouraged by his best friend to join the “Undead Liberation Army”, an underground movement advocating for a rebellion of the Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers. Its members firmly believe that peaceful coexistence between humans and rehabilitated zombies is unattainable. Seeking to reject the burden of emotion and empathy imposed by the cure, they aspire to return to their untreated state.

Throughout its evolution, the zombie figure has maintained a complex relationship with emotions and empathy. In its various forms, this creature has continuously challenged

the very definition of humanity. To do so, it has consistently adopted a radical approach, perhaps offering an implicit lesson.

As Bloom argues in the conclusion of *Against Empathy* (2016), decisions should be guided by what he terms “rational compassion”—a framework that balances emotional responses with rational thought. Rather than succumbing to the extremes outlined by the zombie narrative, a more nuanced approach may be necessary. Humanity and its future remain in precarious equilibrium within these narratives, so the key to survival may ultimately lie in achieving balance.

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## CHAPTER 17.

### *THE LAST OF US: AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM IN SURVIVAL HORROR*

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Although zombies may not be as fascinating as other monsters in literature and film, the subgenre in which they play the role of antagonists has received its fair share of academic attention. In this regard, for McAlister (2012), the undead embody the excesses of capitalism. On occasion, zombies are used on the pretext of identifying selfish and tyrannical humankind as the true adversary: *homo homini lupus*. However, zombies and their pandemic and supernatural origins are usually included in the plot as catalysts for two contexts: on a global level, a fictional world in which the pre-existing civilisation and order have ceased to exist, and at a situational level, pep up scenes with a small quantity of action and suspense.

Given that their characteristics are well suited to it, it should be no surprise that video games have embraced this subgenre and exploited it much more than cinema. On the one hand, post-apocalyptic dystopias with few characters are fictional universes that are easier to represent in a credible way from a production logic. Moreover, they provide an ideal hostile environment for posing challenges and dilemmas that players must meet and resolve. Conversely, zombies, with their complete lack of intelligence and predictability, dovetail perfectly with the behavioural patterns of video game adversaries: if they acted too intelligently or unpredictably, they would pose a more significant and, consequently, frustrating challenge to players.

Although *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), the video game analysed here, belongs to the subgenre, its narrative pretensions go beyond most of those featuring zombies, such as the *Resident Evil* saga (Capcom, 1996–present). Its success with the public and its critical acclaim (Moriarty, 2013; Sterling, 2013) are due, to a great extent, to the development of a plot with several characters with whom players become emotionally involved. *The Last of Us*'s storyline, serving as a guide to connect the game's interactive features, focuses on the

journey of two characters across a United States whose inhabitants have been decimated by a plague caused by the *Cordyceps* fungus—known as the *Cordyceps* Brain Infection (hereinafter, CBI)—that deprives them of their will and converts them into vicious beings who attack anyone who has not been infected. The infected are depicted as enemies who must be confronted or avoided in specific settings. Nevertheless, in the documentary *Grounded: The Making of The Last of Us* (Area 5, 2013), the art director Neil Druckman admitted that, at a particular moment during the game’s development, there was talk of dispensing with the infected person/zombie character and using an expected lethal pandemic instead as the basis for a post-apocalyptic world. As has occurred in other examples of the subgenre like *The Walking Dead* (Robert Kirkman & Frank Darabont, AMC, 2010–2022), the infected are merely a pretext for making a clean sweep and converting the United States into a pre-governmental society that bears many similarities to the Western, for it should be recalled that the American genre par excellence is deeply rooted in the country’s foundational mythology.

We assume that this year zero, which could have been fertile ground for stimulating new political and social proposals (Navarrete & Vargas, 2018), simply raises the spectres of the United States’ former ideologies and identities. In a perpetual return, the zombie tabula rasa becomes a vehicle through which the narrators of *The Last of Us* themselves recount over and over again why individualism is a fundamental concept in which any social organization should be grounded, the defence of individual freedoms taking precedence over any common good.

Individualism is one of the central themes of American liberal doctrines (Heywood, 2012, pp. 24–63). The primacy of the individual is the cornerstone of liberalism; its most important values are as follows: individualism, freedom, reason, justice and tolerance. Individualism is “the belief in the supreme importance of the individual over any social group or collective body” (Heywood, 2012, p. 28). Consequently, society as a whole should be built in such a way as to foster the development of everyone. However, the most recent interpretations of individualism accept a slight amount of state intervention as a purported guarantee of fair play.

## 2. CONTEXT: RHETORICAL DEVICES AND LUDONARRATIVE IN *THE LAST OF US*

*The Last of Us* happens in the United States, 20 years after its devastation by a pandemic caused by the CBI. This parasitic fungal infection attacks the brain of those infected, converting them into zombies who, albeit generally in a catatonic state, react to any stimulus with visceral savagery. The army has taken command of the main cities, placing them under tyrannical martial law. Independent communities, bandits, cannibals and the

Fireflies, an organisation opposing the military that is attempting to re-establish a state government, have all been left out on a limb.

During the outbreak of the fungal infection, Joel loses his daughter, Sarah, leaving him emotionally impaired. Now middle-aged, he survives as a smuggler in Boston, a city under military control. Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies, tasks Joel with escorting Ellie, a teenager, to one of her organisation's bases. The girl is immune to the infection and appears to be the key to a possible cure. The video game's plot revolves around Joel and Ellie, who must cross several states to reach the Fireflies' base. During their journey, players control Joel, and both contend with zombies, bandits and cannibals. Slowly but surely, they strike up a paternal-filial relationship that will help to cure their emotional scars.

As noted, the characters' physical journey parallels an inner one in which Joel accepts Ellie's affection. Indeed, the video game moves through the different stages of the hero's journey (Vogler, 1998), leading to the ultimate revelation that the girl is not the elixir to save a corrupt world, but the cure for Joel, which will allow him to reconstruct the ordinary world that he forfeited following the death of his daughter (dramatic irony during the crisis in which the main character has progressively lost sight of his objective, McKee, 2009). Usually, narratives with such a strong emotional undertone would not be in a video game. Nonetheless, recourse to specific techniques helps to tackle this problem in *The Last of Us*.

In this connection, the relationship between Joel and Ellie develops very gradually, organically integrated into the game semantics: the ludic and the narrative strands. The dialogues included in the non-interactive sequences and those of exploration are exceptionally well written compared to what has come to be expected from the medium. They are hardly ever explanatory, focusing more on the impression the characters want to make than their real intentions (Chion, 2006, pp. 85–93). Even though certain parallels (Penabella, 2015) have already been drawn between *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) and *The Last of Us*, we believe that the narrative is indebted to the filmmaker as regards not only the characters and the structure but also its stylistic and formal aspects.

In scenes with a higher level of underlying emotional conflict, the characters' final gestures often define them, occasionally contradicting their previous discourse and avoiding putting their feelings into words. In *The Searchers*, for instance, Ethan cradles his niece in his arms despite having spent years searching for her with the sole intention of killing her. Similarly, when Joel and Ellie approach the refuge of Joel's brother, Ellie asks him about their relationship, to which Joel replies that they went their separate ways after a serious argument. Although players may be led to believe that the reunion between the brothers will be stormy, they instead bury the hatchet with a conciliatory embrace that serves as a counterbalance to the prior sequence—the death of their infected brother, Sam, at the hands of his sibling.

For instance, in the same chapter, there's a conflict between Ellie and Joel when the girl mentions Sarah. Surprisingly, it ends quite differently than expected (i.e. the characters' separation): Joel informs his brother that he has chosen to continue escorting the teenager on her journey. Since players have already accompanied the main characters on a long expedition, the developers can afford to reveal their sentimental side and present the plot more modestly, addressing themes usually considered inappropriate for a medium or genre like survival horror.

On the one hand, during the approximately 14 to 18 hours that *The Last of Us* lasts, Ellie develops a dramatic personality and gradually increases her value in the video game's ludic context. Initially, she needed protection, but the teenage girl now played a more important role, cooperating and providing an indispensable helping hand in overcoming obstacles. Ellie enters her own during winter when Joel is badly wounded, becoming the player's avatar and assuming a leading role. Joel's recovery is impossible without her, and she demonstrates her worth by confronting and evading zombies, a group of cannibals, and a predator like David.

### 3. "IT WAS HIM OR ME". THE LINE IN *THE LAST OF US* REFLECT THE INDIVIDUAL'S DEMONS

Joel and Ellie embark on a journey to confront the demons chasing the individual in the liberal worldview. Accordingly, this section will describe the main aspects of the cast of individual and collective characters appearing in the video game that reflect the impact of American individualist anarchism on the subject and society.

#### *The military*

Several years after the events described in the introduction, Boston, where pandemic survivors live huddled together in holes or shacks, is under strict military quarantine and martial law. This army has ceased to play the primary role that liberalism assigns it (i.e. protecting the citizenry's physical integrity and property) to declare its sovereignty over different areas under quarantine in an authentic perversion of the liberal social order defended by authors such as Rand (1996). Overwhelmed by the situation and lacking the resources or knowledge to safeguard any conceivable future, the armed forces assert their authority through superior weaponry and control of key infrastructures. Notwithstanding their bluster during the game's introduction, the absence of a civil government has not enabled them to find a cure for the infection.

It is an anonymous army without any recognisable leader or clear objectives beyond maintaining a certain degree of order by force, protecting the city walls (primarily out of self-interest) and eradicating any indication of the plague or dissension from within (even if

this involves the summary execution of anyone showing symptoms of the infection or breaking any of the rules). Therefore, it is an enemy of the classical liberal canon because it attacks the liberal order's main pillars of individualism, freedom, reason, justice and tolerance (Heywood, 2012, p. 27).

This collective antagonist displays authoritarian traits of the military-bureaucratic type as defined by Linz (2017, p. 86) and, specifically, exhibits two of its distinctive features: the constraint and control of pluralism and individual and collective freedoms (resorting to ration books and monitoring the people entering and leaving the city), and the superficial justification of being a "necessary evil" in order to guarantee collective survival (in opposition to the savagery of the bands, the guerrilla of the Fireflies and the threat of the infected outside the walls).

### *The Fireflies*

The paramilitary group known as the Fireflies are searching for a cure for the infection and struggling to re-establish a central government. These objectives bring them into confrontation with the military regime. At the story's beginning, Marlene, their leader, offers Joel and his seasoned companion Tess the opportunity to obtain a succulent bounty in exchange for smuggling Ellie out of Boston and escorting her to one of their bases.

The presentation of the Fireflies as allies to Joel, Tess, and Ellie, due to their commitment to restoring democracy in a world plunged into chaos, is short-lived when it is revealed that they believe the ends justify the means. The maxim, "the good of the many outweighs the good of the few", takes on sinister connotations when it becomes clear that a cure for the infection involves sacrificing Ellie's life.

It is not only the individual's devastation that casts a shadow over this group's identity. The final chapters of the Fireflies' story show that their behaviour mirrors that of the military with whom the narrative begins, thus suggesting that both factions are two sides of the same coin.

### *The bandits*

Even though the bandits are a collective group of characters, the video game does not offer a discourse in defence of the individual for the individual's sake. Nor does it take long for it to become clear that humans can be just as abominable as the infected, this being a leitmotif even more evident than the evil of which organisations are capable.

From the perspective of liberal individualism, irrationality, injustice, and intolerance pose threats as formidable as state tyranny, as they inevitably result in the oppression of some

by others. This threat first becomes apparent in Pittsburgh: the bandits who will emerge as a constant menace throughout the game.

In *The Last of Us*, these groups of bandits have been formed ad hoc by individuals who have chosen to reject the order established by the military. Whether they remain in the wilderness due to restricted access to the quarantine zones or because they have rebelled against the unfair distribution of resources between the army and civilians, these insurgents have been left to their own devices. Consequently, the values of reason, justice, and tolerance have been supplanted by fake arrogance, as they are barely aware of their situation and focus all their efforts on short-term survival, regardless of the cost.

The Latin proverb *homo homini lupus* is reflected in contrast between Joel's rational and protective behaviour and the selfish opportunism of what Linz calls "chaocracy"—the rule of chaos, where mobs, mercenaries, and militiamen emerge when there is no central governmental authority enforcing a monopoly on force (Linz, 2000, p. 36).

### *Bill, Sam and Henry*

It is important to note that in *The Last of Us*, Joel and Ellie are not portrayed as exceptional cases. Although the game's discourse suggests humanity's fall from grace into a state of cynicism and cruelty, several examples exist of individuals who take matters into their own hands.

The first character is Bill, a former partner of Joel and Tess, who owes Joel some favours that he must repay as the game progresses, thus representing a positive presence in the narrative. Bill has fortified a village in Massachusetts with walls and booby traps, a place he zealously defends where his word is law. He grudgingly welcomes Joel and Ellie with generosity in terms of resources. This new discrepancy between attitude and action recalls the American frontier and Western mythology: Bill is the king of the castle, an autarchic, crotchety sheriff with a heart of gold whose violence is justified by the principle of private property.

Further on, Joel and Ellie encounter Henry and his younger brother Sam, a couple of survivors who have become separated from their group and are being pursued by the hunters of Pittsburgh. Reflecting on the two main characters, these brothers help to examine other alternative behaviours for Joel and Ellie that could not be included in the plot without diverting the story. They also represent the forging of interpersonal relationships under the liberal canon.

### *Tommy's Dam and the community*

After navigating numerous dangers, Joel and Ellie, now more united than ever due to their shared circumstances, arrive at the dam in Wyoming, where Tommy, Joel's brother and

former Firefly, has created a community of survivors resisting both the infected and the bandits.

This community is portrayed as an island of civilization in the savage world of *The Last of Us*, a self-sufficient environment where people can cooperate and support one another. Here, one can witness the emergence of a stateless society established along democratic lines, where the survivors collectively work to improve their circumstances. Children are also among the community members; there is even a makeshift cinema.

It is no coincidence that a large American flag has been prominently displayed in the dam's turbine hall, serving as the community's energy source. This micro world reflects the liberal dream of an individualistic society where the role of the state is minimized: a group of people governed by reason and tolerance, capable of cooperating for their benefit and that of others, without the interference of government or military intervention beyond the safeguarding of their property and lives. A *laissez-faire* society where voluntary collaboration empowers the individual and the community without relying on government intervention is depicted as idyllic and desirable. In fact, it symbolizes the path back for Joel and Ellie.

### *The cannibals*

After Joel's accident, which has left him seriously impaired and bedridden, players take control of Ellie, who soon meets David, a friendly stranger with whom she negotiates to trade the deer she has hunted for medicine. After escaping from a group of the infected, thanks to their cooperation, David takes Ellie to his village, where she discovers the horrific truth: he is the leader of a community whose members have resorted to cannibalism to survive.

This community represents the ordeal in the hero's journey (Vogler, 1998, pp. 155–174). The analogy of the darker mirror is particularly relevant when David and his community are depicted as what might have awaited Joel and Ellie: a society that has resorted to atrocious practices for survival, yet whose ultimate objective is to protect a group that includes unarmed civilians and children.

The role of this faction in the story is to question the moral limits of both individualism and the main characters, as David has no qualms about comparing the crimes he has committed to survive with those of Joel and Ellie. When Ellie, now fully aware of the community's cannibalism, calls David an animal, he retorts, "Oh, you're awfully quick to judge. Considering you and your friend killed how many men?" When Ellie replies that they had no choice, David is categorical, "And you think we have a choice? Is that it? You kill to survive ... and so do we. We have to take care of our own. By any means necessary". Indeed, Joel's behaviour during this episode is far from exemplary, as he sadistically tortures two members of the community to discover Ellie's whereabouts.

From the perspective of American liberal individualism, this society dismisses the state and is founded on the charisma of an individual, namely, David. However, his leadership style differs significantly from that of the military and Marlene. Although like them, he is governed solely by his own rules, his followers adhere to him primarily due to his charisma and personality—qualities that, according to Linz, are characteristic of totalitarianism. In fact, it is expected that the group’s cannibalistic practices forge a deep sense of unity among its members, driven by the taboo or their feelings of guilt, which suggests an even more monolithic association reminiscent of grisly tales like those of the Manson family and the Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The denouement of *The Last of Us* is as dramatically compelling and satisfying for players as it is revealing regarding its ideological mission statement. Two conflicting possibilities arise when Joel and Ellie ultimately manage to find the Fireflies. A vaccine to protect the survivors from the infection can be synthesised from the girl. However, extracting the mutated fungus from her brain will result in Ellie’s death. Joel, opposed to this outcome, asks Marlene to find someone else. In response to his plea, the Fireflies’ leader argues that she is also very close to Ellie, having promised her mother that she would look after her. When Joel chastises her for letting it happen, Marlene doesn’t mince words: “Because this isn’t about me. Or even her. There is no other choice here”. After this, Joel confronts the Fireflies and escapes with Ellie to his brother’s community, killing Marlene to prevent her from following them.

What the designers and scriptwriters have proposed here are two completely opposing stances taken by two characters: the common good that aims to protect the *anonymous collective* of survivors from the infection (Marlene is attempting to rebuild a societal structure) versus the fundamental rights of *specific individuals* (Ellie’s right to live and Joel’s to recover his lost daughter). Nevertheless, this conflict, presented dramatically and conveniently, is tremendously decisive for players. It is difficult to view the stance defending the *common good* (finding a cure for the infection and rebuilding a state) as positive or acceptable, given that the cost of this stance is nothing less than the life of one of the main characters, a minor to boot.

In a classic climax of Hollywood scriptwriting (McKee, 2009), Joel’s moral decision (Chion, 2006, p. 138) involves rejecting his initial desire to hand Ellie over to the Fireflies for a bounty and embracing what he truly needs: to adopt Ellie and rebuild his life, which he lost after Sarah’s death. This ultimately enables him to return home, unlike Ethan in *The Searchers*.

Consequently, the apparent moral dilemma posed is entirely fictitious, concealing a rhetorical question: Would you sacrifice a loved one to re-establish a society that has largely

proven corrupt, or would you save that person to rebuild your community, regardless of the prospect of a better world? Marlene’s harsh words leave no room for doubt, evoking the Manichean and unapologetic Randian critiques of the state (“freedom or dictatorship, capitalism or statism”, Rand, 1967, p. 216). The pro-state position is thus portrayed as a ruthless agent, untroubled by eliminating individuals of exceptional value (Heywood, 2012, p. 28) in pursuit of an alleged and questionable “common good”.

It would have been very different if the dilemma had been presented less obviously and absolutely. Imagine that, after encountering Marlene, she told them Ellie would need to spend several years in observation without implying her death. Instead of being an imposition, the decision would have been left up to Joel. This would have generated an ethical and ideological debate on equal terms because either option would involve a loss.

In contrast, Joel’s decision cannot be described as selfish in the scene. Moreover, there is no genuine crisis or decision-making, only a catharsis that gives rise to a new antagonist, the Fireflies. Joel’s brother’s stateless and individualistic community, which, unlike the Fireflies, has chosen to turn its back on the world, is presented as an Eden—the home that Joel lost when the pandemic spread and his daughter died. The reconstruction of Joel and Ellie as individuals in Jacksonville, positively characterised by their symbiosis with nature and their cultural dimension, becomes the most satisfactory denouement for players: the circles and wounds are closed with a lie. Joel tells Ellie that they have found other people to synthesise a vaccine. Like the player, she is fully aware, or at least senses, that this is untrue.

Thus, we can conclude that individualism, an ideological concept deeply rooted in mainstream American thinking, is very clearly expressed (consciously or unconsciously) in *The Last of Us*’ ludonarrative approach. This in no way diminishes its virtues in a medium in which the plot’s dramatic development tends to be neglected, except perhaps in its climax, as we have seen. However, the apparent inability of contemporary fiction writers to come up with new proposals and their insistence on invoking the demons of individualism should indeed concern us.

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## CHAPTER 18.

### **“YOU HAVE TO DECIDE WHAT SIDE YOU’RE ON”: EXAMINING *iZOMBIE*’S SEASONS THREE AND FOUR AS CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL COMMENTARY**

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite *iZombie*’s (The CW Network, 2015–2019) “case-of-the-week” storylines related to Liv Moore’s (Rose McIver) work as a medical examiner, the ongoing narrative thread for Season 3 of *iZombie* was the arrival of “Discovery Day”: the day in which the human population of Seattle would realize that zombies were real. The private military contractor Fillmore Graves was preparing for this by building “Zombie Island”; a private island off Seattle’s coast where zombies could live peacefully away from humans. This goes awry when the final two episodes of the season reveal a mutiny at the core of the company; a substantial percentage of both executives and employees worked to undermine this plan, including murdering fellow employees (Bellina & Wale, 2017; Thomas & Etheridge, 2017) and framing fringe groups for it (Dearden & Piznarski, 2017). They justify that keeping all zombies in one place makes it easier for humans to attack them. Instead, they taint a flu vaccine to create thousands of new zombies (Thomas & Etheridge, 2017), under the auspices that neither the US government nor individuals would seek to eliminate Seattle’s entire population to destroy integrated zombies. Fillmore Graves CEO Chase Graves (Jason Dohring) interrupts a news broadcast to inform the city what had happened, and where new zombies can acquire brains. The images of “New Seattle” seen while Graves is talking, particularly a violent confrontation between zombies and humans, undermine Graves’ reassurances. Season 4 extends this, showing an overwhelmed Chase Graves increasingly relying on martial law and fear to maintain the situation in Seattle.

On both a visual and a narrative level, the third and fourth seasons engage with the political and social climate of the United States following the 2016 election. While there are inherent difficulties in a story of this scope being adequately covered in two 13-episode seasons on a smaller network (The CW), *iZombie* has addressed this by focusing more on the

character-level implications of “New” Seattle’s slide into corporate-sponsored fascism. Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry write in “A Zombie Manifesto” that “in some sense, we are all already zombies...for they represent the inanimate end to which we each are destined” (2008, p. 90). As “boundary figure[s]” (p. 90), zombies, Lauro and Embry assert, simultaneously embody humans’ mortality and defy it, thereby “creat[ing] a dilemma for power relations and risk[ing] destroying social dynamics” (p. 90). The fact that the *iZombie* zombies are “more”; that is, “transform[ing] the zombies’ lack into an excess” (Canavan, 2012, p. 292) by not only being sentient and retaining their human personalities, but in a bizarre kind of empathy, temporarily taking on the personalities of those they consume, make them the ideal “monsters” through which to examine the current political situation in the United States, in which certain groups are characterized as less than human, where protests are common, and in which most individuals feel pressured to “pick a side”; ie, an increased focus on tribe over country. As Jeffrey Cohen writes, “The monster is born...at [a] metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy...giving them life and uncanny independence” (1996, p. 12). *iZombie*’s zombies, as both more (powerful, impervious to illness, and a brief form of immortality for those they eat) and less (not fully alive) are not only liminal within the series, but within media portrayals of zombies more generally. While the first two seasons featured zombies who were primarily aligned with either money or power: CEOs, tech gurus, and government/law enforcement officials, the subsequent two seasons saw the zombie virus spread to the general population, leading to, in Season 4, a sharp division between those with access to the necessary resources, and those struggling and starving on short rations.

Thus, in this chapter, we will be examining the ways in which the shifted paradigm following the cataclysmic, corporate-caused event created different reactions in the central (zombie) characters and how those reactions mirror reactions within the real world, whether it is engaging in borderline criminal behaviour and dressing it up with religion (exploiting), fighting the dominant power structure (resistance), or helping maintain an untenable situation (collusion), three responses that have real-world analogues in a contemporary sociopolitical landscape of gaming the system [numerous individuals within the prior administration, including the president (Venook, 2017)]; protests for the rights of women, against police brutality, and against gun violence (Stewart, 2018); and the previous investigation into collusion and obstruction of justice by the Trump administration (Blake, 2018).

## 2. EXPLOITATION: THE MCDONOUGHES, AND RELIGION

The desire of the show to suggest real-world analogues manifests in one of the scenes in season three’s finale episode, in which newly elected zombie mayor Floyd Baracus (Kurt

Evans) is informed of the human/zombie showdown and subsequent massacre. Baracus is in a classroom, reading to children, when his chief of staff Peyton Charles (Aly Michalka), whispers in his ear, a direct visual reference to September 11, 2001, down to the way in which Baracus looks overwhelmed and scared, much as former president George W. Bush did.

Even though much of Season 3 was devoted to Baracus' election campaign, he ends up being a minor player in the unfolding drama of New Seattle<sup>41</sup>; he was elected with the support (and money) of corporate military contractor Fillmore Graves, and it is immediately clear they are the ones running the city, even building a border wall—a significant plank in the (past and present) Trump campaign—in order to keep its residents in and others out. While Chase Graves is the face and power behind Fillmore Graves, Blaine, the man responsible for spreading the zombie virus to the wealthy and/or powerful in Season 1, remains a force within New Seattle, partnering with Chase to provide information that will keep his businesses running (Thomas & Etheridge, 2018). As has been the case throughout the run of the series, Blaine's legitimate businesses (the butcher shop Meat Cute, funeral home Shady Plots, and restaurant Romero's) have continued to serve as a front for illegal activity, including murder, drug dealing, and as of Season 4, a real-estate scam. As Seattle shifts from an ordinary US city with a slight undead problem to a walled enclave where humans and zombies are pitted against one another, Blaine positions himself to benefit by any means necessary with little conscience and few negative consequences.

Literally related to Blaine, his father, Angus McDonough (Robert Kneppler), initially uses his corporation to exploit Seattle's zombie problem. While Angus' methods—in particular, brokering a deal with a developing country to import the brains of their dead—are nominally legal, he is initially as ruthless as his son, including taking over Blaine's business before attempting to kill him (Mangan & Fields, 2017). Angus, however, seemingly has a conversion experience after Blaine takes his revenge on his father by dropping him in a well on the family estate (Bellina & Wale, 2017) and severely limiting his brain supply. When he is released from the well at the start of the fourth season, he begins preaching zombie supremacy at a storefront church (Thomas & Etheridge, 2018), using Bible verses to convince a zombie populace that is struggling and (nearly) starving that they are superior, and that humans are merely food. Yet he allows his son to not only manipulate him into attacking a bus full of humans (Lorey & Weng, 2018) and play on his vanity and record his sermons for online distribution, putting Angus front and centre and therefore vulnerable (Lorey & Weng, 2018)<sup>42</sup>, but falls for Blaine's manufactured "miracle" [brains raining down

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<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Baracus is killed by the same individual who turned him into a zombie, Blaine McDonough, as part of a plan to raise capital for a real estate scheme (Gonzalez/Masoud & Hayter, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> That the episode ends with an assassination attempt on Angus by a human who saw his video is clearly not coincidental.

from Heaven, but actually two of Blaine’s associates running brains through a wood chipper on the roof (Ruggiero-Wright/Bellina & Bloom, 2018)] and leads his zombies to break out of Seattle, resulting not only in the death of thousands of zombies, but his own death at the hands of the US Army (Thomas & Etheridge, 2018).

Angus’ rhetoric throughout Season 4 seems to intentionally mirror that of Harley Johns and the zombie truthers in Season 3. Johns and company feared the rise of zombies, which they believed were created by corporate (Max Rager) and governmental [the Shah of Iran (Gonzalez/Masoud & Nguyen, 2017)] meddling. As with much of conspiracy theory, the “truthers” managed to blend some facts—that Max Rager was, in fact, responsible for the zombie outbreak (Thomas & Fields, 2015)—with a hearty dose of paranoid (and occasionally racist) fiction. Like Johns, Angus clearly has no issue going to great lengths to feed his flock religion-infused rhetoric (and human brains); yet, also like Johns, he is vulnerable to being manipulated by others because of his singular focus. In John’s case, he is framed by Fillmore Graves for the murder of a zombie family (Dearden & Piznarski, 2017); for Angus, that sense of being “chosen” for a higher purpose eventually leads to his death. That Blaine’s focus on money and power is the ultimate “winner” in this scenario paints a dark view of the contemporary conflation of religion and money.

### 3. RESISTANCE: LIV MOORE GOES RENEGADE

One of the defining characteristics of Liv throughout the series is that her work with the police department—eating the brains of murder victims and using that acquired knowledge to catch the killers—gives her life meaning (Ruggiero-Wright & Almas, 2015). In contrast to zombies such as Blaine, Liv’s liminal status—neither alive nor dead—is a source of loss and pain: being turned into a zombie meant she had to give up her career ambition as a surgeon (for fear of infecting others); end her engagement to a then-human Major Lilywhite (Robert Buckley); and become estranged from her family when she could not donate blood to save her brother’s life and could not tell them why (Thomas & Fields, 2015).

It is thus not surprising that Liv’s reaction to New Seattle is to resist. Despite the ways in which the personality traits of those whose brains she eats affect her, a consistent part of her characterization has been her desire to fight for what is right, whether it is taking on CEO Vaughn du Clark (Steven Weber) at Max Rager or demanding accountability and transparency from Fillmore Graves (Thomas & Etheridge, 2017). However, the excesses of Fillmore Graves in New Seattle spur Liv into greater action. When Chase Graves enacts a public execution of Mama Leone, known as Renegade (Dawnn Lewis)—a zombie who ran an underground organization that snuck people in and out of Seattle, as well as turning sick individuals into zombies—Liv takes over her role (Dearden & Sedillo, 2018), employing a series of “coyotes” to help those immigrating in and out, thus drawing an obvious parallel to

real-world immigration issues that the Trump administration dealt with in increasingly terrible ways, including separating children/infants from parents at the border (Lind, 2018)<sup>43</sup>. While serving as the new Renegade does put her human helpers at risk—Peyton, who uses her role in the mayor’s office to facilitate the smuggling, and Ravi, who keeps her secret—for Liv it could lead to a death sentence.

Yet, as with Major in Season 3, the series does complicate Liv’s impulse to throw herself in the line of fire. While not precisely mocking the need to resist or fight against dominant power structures, the dialogue and the score add an ironic twist in both instances. For Major, his desire to fulfil a promise to Natalie (Brooke Lyons), a woman forced into becoming a zombie prostitute, leads to him taking increasingly dangerous risks that seem less about Natalie and more about the messiah complex he’s been teased about since the first season (Kellett & Downs, 2015). Setting his breaking into the highly secure condo where Natalie is being kept to the tune of “Man of La Mancha” offers a subtle and ironic commentary on Major’s behaviour (Boss & Nguyen, 2017). (Indeed, the use of music within the series to underscore narrative and character is a topic in and of itself).

In Liv’s case, her desire to make a difference is viewed by some (Major in particular) as self-aggrandizing: “God, you’re holier than thou. You think you’re the only good zombie. The only zombie trying to make things right” (Lorey & Fields, 2018). The narrative does not entirely undercut this commentary on Liv’s behaviour; by allowing her actions to be filmed, she creates a potential record of her actions that could implicate both humans and zombies. Like zombie-ism itself, *iZombie’s* portrayal of Liv’s actions suggests that protesting and resistance can exist in a liminal state of both a sincere desire to make a difference and the need to be seen doing so. In a final turn, however, it is the release of this documentary that ends up saving Liv’s life when Chase Graves captures her, and the final moments of the episode suggest that its release has paved the way for a more peaceful coexistence between zombies and humans (Thomas & Etheridge, 2018). Regardless of motive, Liv’s resistance does more good than harm in that respect.

#### 4. COLLUSION: MAJOR LILLYWHITE SOLDIERS ON

As suggested above, Major derives a great deal of his identity from standing up for the marginalized and powerless. Liv even points out that Major understands his privilege and uses it to help others (Dearden & Fields, 2015). Yet throughout the first two seasons of the series, this quality is used against Major, first by Blaine, who nearly kills him as Major tries to discover what happened to the homeless teens in his care (Thomas & Fields, 2015), and later

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<sup>43</sup> That this occurs within the series diegesis is clear from the first episode of season four, as well as numerous references throughout the season; the Fillmore Graves wall was constructed quickly and without regard to those trapped inside or shut out.

by Vaughn du Clark, who uses Major's love for Liv to emotionally blackmail him into cleaning up du Clark's mess; that is, forcing him to kill all the zombies in Seattle (Thomas & Fields, 2015). Major's ability to find a way around this—he drugs and freezes said zombies, rather than killing them (Norris & Kretchmer, 2015)—does nothing to ameliorate his ostracization when these actions come to light: he is shunned in public, and cannot find a job (Thomas & Etheridge, 2017).

Major himself holds an interesting position within *iZombie*, in that he is one of the few individuals, prior to Season 4, who chooses to be a zombie, and one of two seen who makes that choice without the threat of imminent death<sup>44</sup>. While he is initially turned to save his life (Thomas & Fields, 2015) and temporarily cured as a test subject only to revert as a side effect (Ruggiero-Wright & Almas, 2016), he is one of only three recipients of the perfected cure developed by Ravi (Saedi & Blake, 2017). Under the auspices of feeling helpless to protect those he cares about—Natalie and several of his Fillmore Graves friends are killed in a suicide bombing by Johns, who was accidentally turned into precisely what he was fighting against: a zombie (Ruggiero-Wright/Enbom & Fields, 2017)—he begs Chase Graves to turn him, regardless of the consequences (Thomas & Etheridge, 2017). As Lauro and Embry note, the “zombie illustrates our doubts about humanity in an era in which the human condition may be experiencing a crisis of conscience as well as a crisis of consciousness” (2008, pp. 91–92). Nearly all of Major's arc throughout *iZombie* illustrates at least a crisis of conscience in the society around him; his better, humanistic instincts are constantly turned on him and used to manipulate him: first by Blaine, then du Clark, Fillmore Graves, and, even, to some extent, Liv herself, by counting on his love for her to prevent him from outing her as Renegade (Lorey & Weng, 2018). Piece by piece, his structuring beliefs are removed, zombifying him before he actually becomes a zombie, making his turning a “literalization of what has already happened: the death of the individual that continues to lumber forward” (Lauro & Embry, 2008, p. 96). Yet the “excess” suggested by Canavan is that not only are the zombies liminal—neither living nor entirely dead—within *iZombie* they “embody the violent contradictions of capitalism” (Newitz, 2006). (Literally, as a corporation was responsible for creating them).

Yet rather than continuing to fight, as does Liv, or exploit his zombie status, as do Blaine and Angus, the losses Major experiences while human seemingly push him to give up, aligning himself with Fillmore Graves agenda at the end of Season 3, and made manifest by asking to become a zombie again. There are both economic and emotional reasons for this decision. Aside from the loss of his friends in the aforementioned explosion (Ruggiero-Wright/Enbom & Fields, 2017), Major was fired by Chase Graves after he was exposed as human (Dearden & Piznarski, 2017), cutting off his only employment

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<sup>44</sup> One of Blaine's criminal associations, Don Eberhard (Bryce Hodgson), also asks to be turned into a zombie, in order to protect himself from most types of violent death associated with his criminal activities (Ruggiero-Wright & Almas, 2016).

opportunity. Yet, surprisingly, the economy takes a backseat in his plea to Chase; he considers the men in his squad “family” (a social structure minimized in the series overall). His choice of living death is thus driven by a need to belong.

This need, however, fundamentally shifts Major from Don Quixote to the “friendly” face of Chase Graves’ slide into violence and fascism, including being ribbed about precisely how close Chase and Major really are (Ruggiero-Wright & Bloom, 2018). Chase uses Major’s early work with homeless teens to handpick new recruits (Thomas & Etheridge, 2018); has him turn the overdosing daughter of a senator threatening to “nuke Seattle” to prevent said senator from carrying out that threat (Dearden & Sedillo, 2018); assigns him for crowd control when he executes the original Renegade (Regnier & Fields, 2018); and sends Major to shut down the city’s alternative weekly newspaper for its coverage of the execution of the first Renegade, Mama Leone (Saedi & Le, 2018), drawing the parallels between Graves and Trump even closer. While it is clear these actions bother him, he colludes with Chase on these and other things, including spying on a fellow employee thought to be skimming money (and brains) from the organization (Ruggiero-Wright & Bloom, 2018). It is only when Chase, frustrated by the escape of said employee from custody, kills one of Major’s recruits (Lorey & Weng, 2018) and threatens to execute Liv (Ruggiero-Wright/Bellina & Bloom, 2018) that the fruits of his enabling of Fillmore Graves actions in New Seattle become clear to Major. In seeking to protect a perceived persecuted group (zombies), Fillmore Graves becomes what the zombie truthers feared, and put both humans and unaffiliated zombies at the same risk their initial actions were attempting to avoid.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In a meeting between Mayor Baracus, Peyton, and Fillmore Graves, in which both Peyton and Baracus question Chase’s decision to shut down the weekly newspaper, Russ Roche (Giacomo Baessato), a Fillmore Graves soldier suspected of skimming brains and selling them on the black market to enrich himself, offers a defence familiar to any US news viewer: “Fake news!” While this moment is not a remotely subtle reference to Trump’s dismissal of negative coverage, there are layers of resonance beyond the on-topic term. While Roche is loud, obnoxious and offensive, he is merely a distraction. It is neither Roche nor the mayor’s office that shuts down the paper, enforces a curfew (Thomas & Etheridge, 2018), or institutes a city-wide lockdown when a killer escapes from prison (Gonzalez/Masoud & Hayter, 2018); it is corporate CEO Chase Graves. Like *iZombie*’s first two seasons, the prominence of private military contractor Fillmore Graves allows the series to make pointed commentary regarding the power of corporations on social, political, and economic levels.

Despite television's controversy-averse stance in order to placate advertisers and not alienate audiences (Barnouw, 1978; McChesney, 1999), *iZombie* is one of several recent series to comment/analyse a particular sociopolitical moment. Using metaphor—e.g., Joss Whedon's *Buffy* (WB Network, 1997–2003) using monsters as metaphors for the various internal demons of growing up—is a way to both mask and flag up a narrative's stance on contemporary issues. In this instance, *iZombie*, like its zombies, gets to have it both ways: by simultaneously using the liminal-ness of zombies and making them “more” allows the series to make serious points about the dangers of the political climate in the United States.

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**PART V**  
**GEOGRAPHICAL ADAPTATIONS**



**CHAPTER 19.**  
**CAN A ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE TRANSFORM JAPANESE SOCIETY?**  
**CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ZOMBIE'S CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE IN**  
**JAPANESE CINEMA**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The existence of local legends and rich lore with many horrific elements, as well as the influence of Buddhism in the funerary rites of the Japanese, who cremate the bodies of dead people instead of burying them as Europeans or Americans do, can explain to some extent the lack of Japanese films dealing with the figure of the zombie or the reanimated corpse. Balmain wrote that “there are not that many Japanese zombie films” (2008, p. 113) and that the most famous titles appeared from the 1990s onwards, probably under the influence of the videogame *Biohazard* (published in the West as *Resident Evil*). Since there are relatively few zombie films in Japan, especially compared to other horror subgenres, most publications studying Japanese horror cinema (McRoy, 2008; Wee, 2014; Brown, 2018) tend to ignore them. Nonetheless, among the scarce bibliography on Japanese zombie films, it is possible to point out Murphy’s work (2015a, 2015b) and some chapters or articles (Balmain, 2008, pp. 113–127; Wing-Fai, 2011).

This chapter aims to contribute to the still under-explored area of Japanese zombie cinema by offering a textual analysis of three films produced during the last two decades. Even though stylistically these films belong to different genres, they all share the presence of zombies or reanimated corpses. As we will see, a feature of Japanese zombie films is their hybridization and heterogeneity because the movies belonging to this sub-genre are influenced not only by foreign classics (George A. Romero) but also by contemporary productions from different media (Japanese comics, videogames, animation) as well as, of course, by the idiosyncrasy, history, religion, culture and society of contemporary Japan. Thus, adopting a critical perspective, this chapter aims to reflect on the image of Japanese society offered by zombie films from Japan, particularly the possibility of social change and gender issues. Do the zombie outbreak and the resulting violence usually associated with this monster contribute to destabilising the *status quo* of Japanese society? Or do Japanese authorities and people find a way to come to terms with this situation without

compromising the social system and their self-image rooted in the values of pacifism, humanism and balance? A qualitative textual analysis of three films was carried out to answer these questions, paying special attention to the symbolic characterization of zombies and the criticism of Japanese society in the narratives.

Before the analysis, we would like to introduce the three films composing this study's corpus. *Stacy: Attack of the Schoolgirl Zombie* (Naoyuki Tomomatsu, 2001) is a B movie set in the near future where all the teenage girls are turned into flesh-eating zombies by a strange disease. *Miss Zombie* (Sabu, 2013) is a black-and-white drama focused on a zombie woman who has been domesticated and must work as a servant in the house of a rich family. *I Am a Hero* (Shinsuke Satô, 2015) is an action and horror blockbuster film based on Kengo Hanazawa's manga that tells the struggles of the main character, a manga artist, to survive during a zombie apocalypse. These films belong to different genres (action, horror, drama, gore) and have different production values (they range from low-cost movies for niche audiences to commercially successful films) to offer a showcase of the variety of images and uses of the zombie as a character in Japanese cinema. Through analysing these films, I aim to demonstrate that, despite their apparent superficiality, Japanese zombie films criticize certain aspects of contemporary Japanese society and that the zombie, as a monster, possesses a malleable symbolic dimension that allows its integration into non-Western cultures.

## 2. JAPANESE ZOMBIE CINEMA

The transformation into a zombie can be seen as liberation from the constrictions that socio-cultural attributes such as race, gender or social class impose on the members of a society. Becoming a zombie would mean leaving behind these markers of individual identity in order to join the homogenous mass of zombies that attack humans. However, in the films *Miss Zombie* and *Stacy*, we can observe that this liberation does not apply to Japanese women because, even after having become a zombie, they are still defined and treated by the traditional social values that link femininity with domestic work, male sexual desire, and sentimentality.

The main character of *Miss Zombie* is a woman called Sara who has a low level of infection, and despite looking like a zombie, she retains a certain level of reasoning. She is docile and passive and does not show aggressive reactions even when she is attacked, so Sara is placed in the house of a rich family to work as a slave/servant. She cleans the floors all day, and receives a bag of fruits and vegetables as payment. In the film, we get to observe, through the gaze of male characters, that though Sara's face is quite bad-looking due to scars, her legs seem fine. Two construction workers look at her body while she is cleaning, and soon they find a way to lead her to a dark storage room where they rape her. Doctor Teramoto, head of the family and "owner" of the zombie, watches the situation from a distance but does not intervene. Fascinated by her submission, he will also take the zombie woman to his bedroom

to have sex with her. In both cases, due to her zombified state, Sara does not oppose rape. Instead of acting violently and devouring the abusers, as could be expected from a zombie, Sara's zombification only serves to emphasize the women's powerlessness and subjugation to men. Steve Jones (2013) wrote about the rape of female zombies and pointed out that from the 1980s onwards, zombies started to be represented not as reanimated corpses but as subjects. From this perspective, "zombie-rape involves a powered relationship then, since the zombie's desires are negated, and the violator's are prioritized. This power bias is evinced by the rapist's perception that only their desire is a valid expression of subjectivity" (p. 528). The perception of the zombie as a mere object to satisfy male sexual desires and the non-resistant attitude of the victim during the abuse reinforce the patriarchal power and support the generalized idea of the female body existing merely for men's pleasure. However, *Miss Zombie* criticises this androcentric view by reversing the traditional roles of zombies and humans. Traditionally, the spectator tends to identify with human characters and reject the monsters attacking them, but Sabu's film inverts this principle by placing the abject zombie woman as the protagonist whom the audience relates to. Therefore, while the human characters act cruelly and immorally, the zombie is portrayed as a victim deserving of our empathy and support. In this sense, the film offers a different image, more complex and challenging, of the sexual relationships between humans and zombies than the ones found in erotic or porn films (Ward, 2015). By presenting the female zombie as an assaulted and mistreated creature because of her gender, *Miss Zombie* poses a strong criticism of patriarchy and links the figure of the zombie with other icons of subjugated women such as servants, slaves or immigrants. Additionally, this film also questions the figure of the housewife and family mother through the character of Teramoto's wife, who starts to feel displaced when both her husband and child prefer to spend their time with Sara. Thus, paradoxically, the zombie woman ends up embodying many of the values that Japanese society demands from women, such as obedience, submission, sexual availability, maternal instincts and housework.

From a different approach and based on a novel by Kenji Otsukim, the film *Stacy: Attack of the Schoolgirl Zombies* also uses the figure of the female zombie to criticize or mock some aspects of Japanese society. This film shows a near future where a strange disease makes girls between 14 and 16 years old suddenly die and then come back to life as "Stacies", that is, flesh-eating zombies. Japanese society soon reacted to solve this "problem" and established a law stating that only relatives and close people, such as boyfriends or relatives, are allowed to eliminate them. In order to do so, it is necessary to totally dismember them, but those fathers or boyfriends who are not strong enough to do it can call the Romero troops, a special police section specialized in exterminating zombie teen girls. This low-budget B-movie combines comedy, sentimental drama, and horror, offering an exaggerated view of some ideas associated with female teenagers in Japanese society. The process of death and transformation into zombies starts with a phase known as Near Death Happiness, in which

girls become joyful, giggly and relaxed. Their youth, beauty, high-school uniforms and childish behaviour clearly refer to the concept of the *shojo*, a typically Japanese construction of female teens. The *shojo*, prominent in comics, animation, games or novels, is a complex archetype that evokes images of purity, virginity or romanticism, as well as female strength, decadence and mysterious powers (Sugawa-Shimada 2014, p. 199). In *Stacy*, *shojo* zombies are characterized by their clothes (school uniforms or white dresses), their innocent approach to love, and their sexual inexperience because even though they have boyfriends, they are not physically intimate. Napier (1998, p. 94) explains that the *shojo* can be seen as the archetype of the girl who never grows up, always maintaining a virginal state and never turning into an adult woman, remaining always non-threatening to men. If in *Miss Zombie* the undead woman was used as a domestic and sexual object submitted to the desires of men, female zombies in *Stacy* can be understood as a sentimental fetish that idealizes the cliché of the frivolous, romantic and pure teen girl. Even though the Stacies do not have sex with men, the film shows the dismembering and killing of the zombie as a metaphor for intercourse. In *Stacy*, the teenagers accept and wish to die by the hands of the men they love, so their romanticism ultimately leads to a grotesque version of the virginity loss through the transgression and annihilation of the female body. Therefore, both in *Miss Zombie* and *Stacy*, we can appreciate that, for Japanese women and girls, becoming a zombie does not imply liberation from the gender ideologies present in contemporary Japan. The patriarchal values that link female subjects to submission, male pleasure and fetishism seem to be so strong, so assimilated within Japanese society, that even after a zombie apocalypse, women are condemned to deal with them.

In many films, TV series or comics featuring zombies, the unexpected emergence of these beings usually leads to the destruction of human society. Whether through the contagion of a new type of virus that transforms people into zombies or by the violent attacks of reanimated corpses who feed on human blood and flesh, many zombie narratives present some sort of apocalypse or violent situation that ends up with the destruction of core principles and systems that regulate human society. Determining elements in our everyday lives, such as laws, state institutions, social classes, national borders, or capitalism, lose their importance during or after a zombie apocalypse and, in their place, new types of social relationships and moral principles emerge. In the case of the Japanese films analysed, it is noteworthy that the zombie invasion does not totally destabilize the organization of Japanese society. In fact, in two of the three films, we observe the assimilation of the zombies into the social order since Japanese authorities rapidly react to contain, neutralize, and manage them through new laws and control systems. As we saw in the films *Stacy* and *Miss Zombie*, humans coexist with zombies who, far from destroying society, ended up integrated and submitted to the laws and cultural principles of Japan.

These two films previously discussed are set in a post-zombie-apocalypse Japan, and the spectator does not get to see the events leading to the new situation. *I Am a Hero*, however,

starts its narrative exactly at the beginning of the zombie attack and allows us to observe the initial decline of Japanese society. Even though its origin is never explained, the plot focuses on a 35-year-old manga creator called Hideo who tries to survive a zombie pandemic. He runs away from Tokyo while being chased by the ZQN, the name given to the people turned into violent, irrational, flesh-eating beings, and meets Hiromi, a high-school girl who joins him. After travelling for days, they both reach a shopping mall where several survivors are gathered under the leadership of Iura, an arrogant youngster who accepts to take Hideo and Hiromi in exchange for Hideo's shotgun. When Hideo replies that it is against the law to let people without a license use weapons, Iura answers: "What law? In this place, I am the law". As happens in many other zombie narratives, when some survivors are isolated in a place, instead of achieving a peaceful co-existence through collaboration, several factions or groups compete over the power to rule this community, and leadership usually ends in the hands of a strong male character. We can interpret this as a failure of the state institutions to guarantee the protection of the citizens, who can only count on themselves in the case of a big disaster. Thus, though we can glimpse military planes and cars during the first third of the film, we do not get to see the Japan Self-Defence Forces fighting the ZQN or helping people. As the character evolution of the protagonist of *I Am a Hero* evidences, the lack of social control or support from national institutions (army, police, politicians) allows for the rehabilitation of the male as a hero. In the beginning, Hideo is presented as an unsuccessful man who did not triumph as a manga creator and cannot save his girlfriend. However, after finding Iura's group, Hideo is reactivated as a powerful man thanks to his shotgun and his willingness to help others. In the climax of the film, he kills most of the zombies and saves two female characters, Hiromi and Yabu, leaving behind his failed self from the pre-zombie society and reaching the status of "hero" mentioned in the title of the film. This restoration of marginal or socially subjugated men is a recurrent motif throughout the film. Minata, another manga artist, happily announces while sadistically beating up his boss that the zombie apocalypse has arrived, the chance that "losers" were waiting for. Similarly, when Iura calls Santo a NEET (a person Not in Education, Employment, or Training), he proudly replies that now, in the zombie era, all the Japanese are NEETs. Thus, *I Am a Hero* transmits the idea that the arrival of zombies and the erasure of the social categories ruling our lives (laws, social class, economic hierarchies) bring the revalorization of male subjects that do not fit into the traditional models of "successful masculinity" that, in the Japanese context, we can identify as the *salaryman* with stable job, high incomes, graduated from prestigious universities, married or with girlfriend, and possessing certain features (authority, prestige, appeal).

### 3. FINAL REMARKS

Though three films are a small corpus, the analysis of these works allows us to observe in which ways Japanese zombie films deal with several social issues, such as gender inequality,

the efficacy of social institutions, or the power of the State. It must be highlighted that, according to the plots of these films, the zombie apocalypse would reinforce even more the privileged positions of men in society since, in all the discussed films, power and control are held by men in different social contexts such as the family, the group of survivors or the nation. In *Miss Zombie*, the father in the family owns the pistol that can end the life of the zombie servant, and he guarantees his neighbours that he will kill her if she becomes violent. In *Stacy* we see many male characters (boyfriends, fathers, or the members of the Romero troops) killing zombie teen girls. Despite being a loser, the protagonist of *I Am a Hero* ends up rescuing the two female characters who had been submitted by the male leaders of the survivors' group. Against this background of male power, women are portrayed as weak, secondary, and directly connected with the monstrosity of the zombies. Both in *Miss Zombie* and *Stacy* we find mainly female zombies suffering violence at the hands of the male characters around them, since the transformation into a zombie justifies aggression towards them. And in *I Am a Hero*, the teenager Hiromi becomes a mixture of human and zombie after being bitten by a zombie baby. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the complaints that some feminist authors (Patterson, 2008; Brooks, 2014) raised about the representation of female characters in Western zombie narratives also apply to Japanese cases.

Far from ending Japanese society, the zombie apocalypse seems to bring a radicalization of certain elements already dominant in contemporary Japan, such as capitalism, the power of the State, and gender inequalities. Japanese zombies, rather than destroying these economic, social, and cultural systems, end up being absorbed into them and being bought, sold, regulated, exploited, confined in cages, or subjected to sexual violence. Considering this, it seems obvious that the figure of the zombie can be used to represent not only chaos and monstrosity but also victims of social injustice, and probably this semiotic richness is one of the reasons for their increasing popularity in contemporary media all over the world.

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**CHAPTER 20.**  
***JUAN OF THE DEAD: THE SCENARIO AND SOCIO-POLITICAL***  
**CRITICISM IN ZOMBIE MOVIES**

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**1. INTRODUCTION: FILM GENRE AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CRITICISM**

The first important question is whether a country's social and political reality can be approached using a specific film genre, even if it is irrelevant or concealed. The answer seems to be positive. Most movies, including those with a more commercial purpose, allow different levels of interpretation. This shows that even in a genre as predefined as the zombie genre, one can highlight the social, political, and economic system in the place of action from a critical point of view (Añón-Lara, 2016; Rodríguez de Austria, 2016; Urraco Solanilla, García-García, & Baelo Álvarez, 2017).

The initial hypothesis tries to distinguish if one can speak of a concealed social criticism by using the mixed film genre, in this case, the horror-zombie-comedy. Let's look at the extensive film production in this genre. We can appreciate the comparison game in some films between zombies and citizens of societies stalled in a reality seen as negative, but they nonetheless accept with compliance due to the perceived impossibility of change. Drowsy and easy-to-manipulate citizens, depending on the interests of the circles of power, live their lives in hard conditions and even, as in this case, consider taking advantage of the zombie plague for their benefit (Rodríguez, 2015; Salinas Flores, 2017). The vision of the political system as an absurd dimension, utterly remote from social reality, is used to underpin the implausible story and is clearly present in the film *Juan of the Dead* (*Juan de los muertos*, Alejandro Brugués, 2011).

It is a Spanish Cuban co-production, with the participation of official institutions, such as the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC). In the movie, both the Cuban political system, as well as the appearance of traditionally censored social aspects, such as homosexuality, sex tourism from Spain and the Americans as a hope for a better

future instead of being the great foreign enemy, are questioned. The story is guided by the fanciful main characters, led by Juan, who nicknames himself “of the dead”. He has supported the prevailing regime since the arrival of Fidel Castro, despite the permanent criticism of the mentioned system in his conversations (Eljaiek-Rodríguez, 2015). The participation of the ICAIC is a surprise, given the criticism of the film presented as a zombie comedy. The criticism may have gone unnoticed during the shooting. Or it may have been allowed from the beginning or before its broadcast, as a sign of openness towards major freedom, thus being allowed as the lesser evil. It seems as if they try to ignore the social and political criticism in the official media, which is clearly shown in the film.

## 2. THE FILM

*Juan of the Dead* is presented as the first Cuban zombie film and a comedy horror film. A Spanish-Cuban fiction co-production, written and directed by Alejandro Brugués (2011), a co-production between La Zancoña Productions (Spain) and 5th Avenue Productions (Cuba), and with the participation of the ICAIC, Canal Sur and Spanish Television (TVE). The director, born in Buenos Aires, although he has Cuban nationality, studied at the International School of Cinema and Television of San Antonio de Los Baños (Cuba). He shot his first feature film in 2008: *Personal Belongings*.

Despite its irregular distribution, the film has been shown in some festivals and has reached a wide audience through its broadcast on television in several countries. The movie has won awards of some importance at the Fantastic Fest film festival in Austin (the United States, 2011), the Phenomenon Audience Award at the Leeds International Film Festival (United Kingdom) and the Goya Award for the Best Spanish Language Foreign Film (2013).

The crazy script revolves around Juan (performed by Alexis Díaz de Villegas), who lives in Havana and has no defined occupation. He lives on the edge of society, accompanied by his bizarre social circle and misfits of different kinds, caricatured to accentuate the comic situations. He receives a visit from his daughter, who emigrated to Spain and is very critical of her father’s life. Events are moving fast for this group. The neighbours and the citizens of Havana become violent; they attack and eat each other alive. When he realises they are not “dissidents” or an invasion by the external enemy, Juan concludes that people are becoming zombies. He decides to take economic advantage of the situation and starts a company with the slogan: “Juan of the Dead: we kill your beloved ones”. Despite this and the extreme situation, the antihero will become, against all odds, a hero. The reality is not transformed or improved by fleeing and searching for an imagined “foreign paradise”, but by fighting in the city, as the main character says.

### 3. THE CONTEXT: THE ZOMBIES, THE SPECIAL PERIOD AND “THE THING THAT CAME LATER”

It is not the first nor will it be the last time; in fact, it is quite usual that a genre film, in this case of *zombies* or the living dead, criticises more or less openly or conceals the political, social and economic system of the region in which the action takes place. The comparison is even more precise if the scenario is no less than the city of Havana, and the walking dead genre is used. In this case, comparing the walking dead with the citizens of a particular socio-political reality of whatever kind may be easy and predictable. And even more, if the scenario is the chipped landscape of the old and battered city and the bland, grey and one-way communication of the public radio of the island, unable to change the pace, or the outdated official speech of the external enemy, even if it is facing the end of times.

The outlook can only be comical, directed towards the black humour, *gore* tainted and highlighting the funny part of the *zombie* genre, from a rogue perspective, almost grotesque, where nothing is safe from the vulgar stroke and its impertinent and sarcastic look. Some characters illustrate the role of the antihero, particularly the main character, who becomes a hero by the force of circumstance and by an inner ground that resists desperately and abandons his origins without fighting for them. It represents the fight against oneself, against destiny, against despair, through personal transformation, from which one can positively influence the improvement of your setting, despite everything, beloved city.

The reality of the characters' lives and the outburst of the zombie invasion is stark, stripped of any future, and from a present that only moves them to survive with the few possibilities and opportunities provided. A survival that even leads them to try to take economic advantage of the situation created by the *zombies*. Undoubtedly, we find a hilarious black and hopeless comedy, which could refer us, in Spanish cinema, to the Berlanguian style, comedies in chipped and grim urban environments. This is particularly the case with *Placido*, who chooses vulgar humour and leaves aside the tenderness in treating the characters, who are victims of a depressing socio-economic reality. For example, some of Buñuel's Mexican films also use degraded urban landscapes as stage actors. After all, beyond supposed liberating ideologies, totalitarian regimes tend to resemble each other too much in their ways of informative manipulation, repression of dissents and their aversion to change. Even if the reality of the situation is even worse for long periods, it comprehends several generations of citizens, as can be seen in the film. The movie also claims the relevance of those social sectors marginalized by their opinions, proclivity or lifestyle.

Havana lends itself to a unique scenario and becomes an actor itself. The beautiful city of the past, which has come down shabby, sets the scene where the characters appear, and it is very difficult to distinguish who is the walking dead and who is not. The intentional

criticism is evident, although not openly declared, except for some dialogues and reflections of the main character. In fact, it can be seen from a crazy comedy perspective by the average audience. In fact, this seems to have been the official reaction of Cuban cinematography, which barely mentions the social criticism it entails and ignores any reference to criticism of the political system. This happens not only in Cuba but also in Spain, where the critics of the specialized media and the publications of general information refer to the critical aspects of the system only in a few cases.

Little was known in Cuban cinematography about the satirical comedy in horror movies. Now the international premiere of the first Cuban zombie movie is announced at the prominent festivals of Sitges (Spain), Toronto (Canada) and Havana. The second feature film, written and directed by Alejandro Brugués, is titled *Juan of the Dead* and tells the story of the spread of a plague of voracious *zombies* or undead in the Cuban capital. Panic gets hold of the people, but then the saviour and hero arrive, who discovers the only way to kill the monstrous creatures. He realizes this situation has an advantage: he can make money relatively easily (Del R o, 2017).

Perhaps the director tries to avoid future problems in the continuity of a promising film career. Either way, criticism arises throughout the film. The characters are defined as survivors of the many difficulties they must face since the establishment of the communist dictatorial regime, starting with the 1959 revolution and during the so-called “special period.” The movie evokes the different stages of the Cuban political and socio-economic system: The early stages of the post-revolution, starting in 1959, and the inclination towards a communist regime, with a single political party and lifetime leadership. The country became a part of the Soviet setting within the Cold War framework, which led the country to intervene in several armed conflicts, particularly in Africa. The dependence on Soviet aid in oil, the imports and export markets, and military aid left Cuba during a conflict between the two great powers. This opened a long period of commercial blockade on the island, as well as political and military harassment on behalf of the United States. The United States thus becomes the foreign enemy to blame for all evil in the country, discharging all responsibility of the Cuban government, which uses these threats, real or invented, to continue the internal repression and limitation of individual freedoms. The director himself seems to try to downplay the critical component:

It seemed to me that taking over Havana with zombies had to be absurd and fun[...], the main character becomes a hero against all odds [...]. I don't expect an utmost reading on the social part of the plot, as the aberrated interpretation usually appears in films dealing with certain ethical collapse, social deprivation, a crisis of values, and talk about people who can't and don't want to change anything [...]. Although it is a film that does not avoid a certain drama in the treatment of some characters and situations, in no way this is about disenchantment or the crisis of values [...]. What I most want is for the public to have fun, because despite the very bleak nuances, we envisage everything as a comedy. (Del R o, 2017)

Foreign aid allowed Cuba to maintain acceptable standards of living for its population. Despite this, there were several episodes in which the population fled to the United States and other countries. This indicates the existence of an opposition, not so much political but more socially based on economic deprivation. The fall of the USSR gave way to the “special period”, which highlights the external economic dependence and the downfall of the Cuban socio-economic system, giving way to a time of scarcity, hunger and widespread hardships among the working classes, during the final decade of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century. The way out of this situation has been slow, with ups and downs. There have been moments of certain economic openness to private initiatives and the boost of foreign investment, particularly in the tourism industry, which partially leaves the local population aside.

References of the main character and some other characters of the plot, to the impossibility of enduring another 50 years living like this, the memory of having fought in the war of Angola, the repeated references to the difficulties of the special period and the brilliant definition of the subsequent period: “The thing that came later”, with a hopeless tone for the future that awaits them, mark the development of the plot. Sometimes, the official story is accepted (the *zombies* are “dissidents” on the enemy’s side ...). In other cases, a total lack of trust leads them to think about emigration, something the main character finally regrets.

The characters are from socially deprived backgrounds, survivors outside the law who seek the benefit of the new situation and have lost hope of improving their living conditions. Political cinema has always had difficulty making films based on previous hypotheses or a certain political position, without thus becoming predictable and Manichean. Too many of these examples can be found. Seen from this perspective, the possibility of distribution is usually limited, as we can see now in the digital media, to those viewers previously lined up in the same political wave, who hope to confirm their ideological, or pseudo-ideological positions, as most of the time they do not deepen beyond the political slogans of the parties.

Commercial cinema, however, is shown to be much more effective in the diffusion of social, political and economic ideas by interleaving films of mainly commercial content with this type of material. In this way, it reaches easily, and in many cases unnoticeably, the great majority of the audience through cinema and mostly television. The diffusion of American socio-cultural models is obvious, even among the population that is the most critical of the North American hegemonic role and its geopolitics, and the contribution of cinema and television series to this process is undisputed.

From this point of view, *Juan of the Dead* is an uncontrolled, acid, and vital comedy, with a transformation of tough guys, *bon vivants*, into heroes in the struggle against the invasion of the city by the living dead, who end up being most of the population.

Meanwhile, the official television, the only one existing, given their inability to control the situation created by the zombies, repeats the slogan of the day and identifies the national enemy as responsible for all evil.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

It is not easy to make a critical socio-political film in a one-party state, with tight information control and the inability to have diverging opinions. It is even more difficult to do so from the inside, disguised by a film genre, such as the zombies who take over Havana. The urban landscape acquires special significance in action through the destructive play of the main urban landmarks and the decoration of dilapidated buildings. The film allows us to envisage, along with crazy and hilarious scenes, an intended critique of the country's political, economic and social system without interfering with the story of a *zombie* movie. Thus, it allows for several readings, depending on the viewer and their expectations, in the face of an unusual and surprising argument in Cuban cinema, which is usual in other film industries and the North American one. This confirms the initial hypothesis stated. The hopelessness of the characters, who move around in an absurd official political and informative setting, and the urban and social environment that surrounds them does not hinder the development of a casual, cheerful, irreverent and, very dynamic comedy, and also contrasts with the confused messages of radio and television broadcast, who fulfil their mission of media coverage, but are far removed from reality. We can see *Juan of the Dead* as a film genre between a crazy comedy and the reborn zombie genre, but which also provides an occasionally subtle and at times overwhelming criticism of social, political and economic reality as particular as the Cuban one is.

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**CHAPTER 21.**  
**A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE REPRESENTATION OF**  
**ZOMBIES IN NOLLYWOOD: A STUDY OF C. J. OBASI’S *OJUJU* AND**  
**BANJI OYEMAJA’S *OUTBREAK 2020***

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to some popular myths, films highly represent the societies in which they are produced. They tap into all the idiosyncrasies of the society and thus reflect the socio-cultural and political realities of their society of origin. In tandem with this understanding, films technically represent a trustworthy window into their respective societies of origin. Going by this myth, many critics have hastily regarded Nollywood films as a good representation of contemporary Nigeria (Barrot, 2009; Saro-Wiwa, in Hugo, 2009; Garritano, 2012; Usman & Uhwovorirole, 2016). This has meant that Nollywood films have been popularly viewed as acceptable representations of Nigerian cultures, Nigerian tribes and their worldviews, among other ontological features of life in Nigeria. Despite the popularity of this assumption, it remains axiomatic that this myth, bordering on Nollywood films’ ability to represent Nigeria, should be digested with utmost care. This is so as various cultural and ideological currents have shaped production in the Nollywood industry over the years. For instance, many filmmakers within the industry have non-hesitantly embraced foreign influences as a form of newness and singularity. Thus, many films within the industry have displayed the capacity to re-contextualize and indigenize specific forms and styles associated with the global mass culture, including Hollywood horror films and the zombie genre.

Thus, there have been at least two principal ways of representing zombies in Nollywood films. While most Nollywood films have depicted zombies according to local African or Nigerian myths, several recently produced films have displayed representations of these undead creatures (zombies), which are visibly inspired by Western imagination. This thesis could be illustrated through a critical study of two recent Nollywood films, C. J. Obasi’s *Ojuju* and Banji Oyemaja’s *Outbreak 2020*. Using the two above-mentioned films as case studies, this chapter specifically seeks to answer the following three research questions: How are Western myths about zombies different from those prevailing in Nigeria’s

socio-cultural space? How has the zombie film genre evolved in the Nigerian film industry, and how are Western myths about zombies informed or reflected in Nollywood films?

## 2. PROFILING THE LIVING DEAD: WESTERN VS. AFRICAN ZOMBIES

Often portrayed in Western popular cultures as an undead person, a decaying corpse and a flesh-eating creature, the zombie has become a popular phenomenon in cultures across the globe, giving birth to a plurality of myths. According to most authoritative sources, the zombie phenomenon originated from some West African and Central African tribes and became fully fledged in the plantation society of Saint Domingue (today's Haiti). In effect, the zombie emanated from some West and Central African cosmologies but was later exported to the New World through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which led to the massive deportation of Black Africans to American plantation economies. This theory follows the fact that, while tales of the living dead originated from Africa, the monster character often associated with the zombie was shaped by the terrible and inhuman conditions under which Black slaves lived and laboured in sugar and coffee plantations in the New World. The zombie archetype or myth has thus transcended time, periods and cultures; today, popular perceptions of zombies vary from one culture to another. In this section, specific attention is given to comparing the Western and the African/Nigerian zombies.

Western zombies differ from their African/Nigerian cousins in at least three ways: (i) their physical appearance and survival strategies/instincts, (ii) the procedures or accidents through which they became zombies and (iii) the socio-cultural symbols for which they stand. In terms of physical appearance and survival strategies, Western zombies have rotting skin; they appear weak with a robotic way of walking and are ravenous flesh-eaters (cannibals). Meanwhile, African/Nigerian zombies are generally strong enough to execute the bidding of their owners. It is important to underline that the conception of the zombie as an immaterial being may practically be unthinkable in the Western imagination; meanwhile, in the African/Nigerian imagination, there are spiritual entities which could serve as zombies. This thesis is justified by the popular belief among Africans that there exists (evil) spirits or roaming souls (the perfect equivalent of *nzonbi ancestral* in Haitian Vodou), that sorcerers successfully capture, manipulate, and circumstantially send on specific missions. Khan (2011) explains that though these typologies of spiritual servants or slaves may circumstantially be efficacious, they are no match for physical zombies. As he puts it, because of their lack of physicality and belonging, spirits or roaming souls of the dead can be tamed by a sorcerer for evil purposes. "But even when the living can control the spirit of the dead, its potency cannot be equal to the physical powers of a human being because the spirit is supernatural; it has crossed the boundary of the living to enter into a metaphysical world" (Khan, 2011).

In terms of their origin, the Western zombies are thought to be the biological products of exposure to radiation or accidental contamination. They are beings that have been rendered infected by a zombie virus. Meanwhile, African zombies are cursed people who die and return as zombies through the agency of an opportunistic and capitalist sorcerer or group of sorcerers (Kgatla, 2000; Van Wyk, 2004; Mildnerová, 2016). As explained by Hamilton (2007), for a zombie to be created in Africa, sorcerers will need to “seize your spirit from your body, influence it by a charm, then when you are buried, they will come back reinstate the spirit into your body; you wake up, but you are influenced and directed only by the charm in you”. Through these charms, the sorcerers control the bodies and spirits of their victims and send them to the underworld to work in invisible plantations or various other industries to make money for their captors (the sorcerers or a secret society). In Cameroon, for instance, this system of zombification is manifested through the phenomena of *Nyongo* (among many English-speaking ethnic groups), *Famla* (among the Bamilekes) and *kóng* (among the Fan Beti)<sup>45</sup>.

In Nigeria, similar tales of zombification are purportedly motivated by men’s insatiable quest for material possessions. There are unsettling stories of ambitious personalities (mostly politicians, rich businessmen, false prophets, among other influential socio-political figures) who contract sorcerers to seize the spirits of their relatives and get them biologically dead and zombified via black magic. The zombified relatives are subsequently sent to the underworld, where they toil daily and generate money for those who sold them out (Biodun, 2004; Ukpabio, 2007). There are equally tales of very ambitious people who, in a bid to succeed in life economically, spiritually or politically, trade their souls and part of their life span to “demonic powers”. Such people contract sorcerers who introduce them to some spiritual entities desirous “to buy” their souls and part of their lifespan. When all the rituals are scrupulously performed, the sorcerer’s client receives his request but dies at an appointed date, just to be expedited to an underground world where he is doomed to serve as a spiritual slave (the Haitian equivalent of the *zombi astral*) for the spiritual entity with which he sealed a covenant. In tandem with this, McNally (2011) notes that “in Nigeria, newspapers carry reports of passengers on motorcycle taxis, who, once helmets are placed on their heads, transform into zombies and begin to spew money from their mouths, as if they had become human ATMs” (p. 232). Finally, in terms of the symbols they stand for, Western zombies are a metaphor for the culture of mindless American consumerism while their African cousins are a symbol of both spiritual and physical alienation as well as a metaphor for the dispossession of self through the “reduction of the self to a mere source of labor” (McNally, 2011).

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<sup>45</sup> Beti and Bamilekes are two dominant ethnic groups located in Cameroon (Central Africa).

One of the few characteristics Western and African zombies have in common is that both are reawakened bodies and soulless creatures, which could be very aggressive and terrifying. Furthermore, both types of zombies have compromised brains. Another very important—but arguable—characteristic commonly shared by the Western and African zombies is that they represent human enslavement to their mortal flesh as well as to the capitalist system. Tapping into various aspects of Western popular culture, Matteo (2023) corroborates this position thus:

[...] [I]ndividuality in a capitalist system is a fiction that gives us the illusion of freedom, thus preventing us from rebelling. Capitalist workers and consumers alike have been compared to zombies in that the first performs mindless work, and the second consumes without the physical need to do so. Both worker and consumer are constructs which are necessary for the system to exist. [...] [T]he zombie preserves the original meaning of both slave and slave rebellion. Capitalist zombies—the worker and consumer—are slaves to the system. In the figure of zombie, we can see the inhumanity and monstrosity of the capitalist system. However, those slaves have the potential to rebel.

### 3. THE ZOMBIE GENRE IN THE NOLLYWOOD FILM INDUSTRY

Since its inception in 1992, the Nollywood video film movement<sup>46</sup> has arguably accorded the most significant part of its attention to the production of supernatural and dramatic thrillers, exploring locally popular themes such as witchcraft, black magic, sorcery, blood money, voodoo, ritual killings, the afterlife, and cultism. Following this thematic focus, critics have variously profiled the industry as “voodoo romance” or the site of a “voodoo economy” (Garritano, 2012; Passchier, 2014). As noted by the British tabloid *The Economist* (2010), many alarmist schools of thought have described Nigerian directors and producers as “voodoo priests casting malign spells over audiences in other countries”.

Screening or deconstructing the undead has thus been a dominant—or at least visible—cinematic paradigm in the Nollywood industry, starting from Kenneth Kebue’s *Living in Bondage* (which launched the film movement) and *Billionaire Club* to Banji Oyemaja’s *Outbreak 2020*. Kebue’s film *Living in Bondage* chronicles the life of an unfortunate businessman who, after experiencing numerous entrepreneurial failures, resorts to sacrificing his wife through mystical rituals as a means of achieving economic prosperity. His sacrifice provides him with the expected prosperity, but this prosperity is accompanied by trouble as he is soon incessantly haunted by the ghost of his wife. Like *Living in Bondage*, many other Nollywood films feature the undead in the form of ghosts, vampires, or zombies. Most films produced on the undead in the ‘90s and early 2000s had a serious religious undertone. They tended to portray vampires, ghosts and zombies as malefic entities that are

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<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that the Nigerian film industry has its genesis in the colonial period. Nollywood is arguably considered a genre of filmmaking principally based on the use of video technology. Films within this cinematic movement are directly shot using video cameras and are edited using personal computers.

exclusively surmountable by God (Christianity) or relevant *Babas laos* (traditional doctors or oracles) (Kumvenda, 2007; Omolola, 2009; Passchier, 2014). However, some of these movies—notably *Billionaire Club*—presented ghosts as avengers on self-imposed missions to mortally punish human agencies responsible for their premature death or as messengers returning from the afterlife to warn humans (loved ones) of impending dangers (see Obi Emelonye’s *Thy Will be done*). According to many observers, these films on the undead, like most Nollywood spiritual thrillers—tried to remain unaffected by conventional Hollywood thrillers. Tayo (2017) is even persuaded that zombie, ghost and vampire movies were very rare during the first decade of Nollywood’s existence. As he puts it,

The movies that dominated the scene were spiritual thrillers. These movies (straight to video releases) were a mix of Nigerian Christian beliefs, indigenous myths and diabolical themes. [...] A lot of them leaned towards Christianity battling ancient demons or mermaids in the ocean. On this side of the world, there [were] hardly any movies on vampires, zombies or serial killers lurking in the woods to kill white college students. (pp. 3–4)

Although spiritual thrillers and the zombie genre constitute some of the industry’s foundational movements, films that explicitly feature zombies are relatively recent. It is, for instance, widely believed that C. J. Obasi’s *Ojuju* (2014) is the very first zombie film produced in the industry. The immense success recorded by Obasi’s *Ojuju* has inspired many similar productions, including *Zombie and Pastors* (2016), *Zombie Kingdom* (2017), and *Outbreak 2020*, among others. A critical look at most of these productions reveals that though set in ancient, traditional or modern Nigeria and though aimed at depicting African realities, these films mostly deployed the living dead in a Hollywoodian style. They are, in many respects, indices of Nollywood filmmakers’ appropriation of Hollywood tropes, if not a sign of Hollywood cultural imperialism on Nollywood. Obasi’s *Ojuju*, for instance, cheekily refers to George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (Hollywood zombie thriller) from the profile of his zombies to the names given to his characters (the film’s leading character is called Romeo). This observation will be explicated in ample detail in the subsequent section of this discourse.

#### 4. REPRESENTATION OF ZOMBIES IN C. J. OBASI’S *OJUJU* AND BANJI OYEMAJA’S *OUTBREAK 2020*

##### 4.1. C. J. Obasi’s *Ojuju*

*Ojuju* is a 2014 zombie thriller written and directed by C. J. Obasi. The film is a minuscule budget production, starring Gabriel Afolayan (as Romeo), Omowunmi Dada (as Peju) and Kelechi Udegbe (as Emmy)—its main characters. It tells the tale of Romeo and his

two friends, Emmy and Peju, who, overnight, are compelled to survive a mysterious epidemic that has transformed their neighbourhood of residence (an isolated Nigerian slum) into a minefield of flesh-eating creatures. The monstrous transformation begins after the main source of water in the slum is infected. Most slum dwellers (including Romeo's girlfriend) are contaminated. They develop strange symptoms. Romeo and his two friends track the disease to the slum's sole source of water supply and try to understand its genesis to find a solution.

From many indexes, *Ojuju* is a subtle replica of most Hollywood zombie movies. It is, in effect, an Africanized Hollywood zombie movie. The physical appearance and natural instincts of the zombies deployed in the film are no different from those observed among Western zombies: they are robotic bodies with signs of biological and chemical contamination, even though they are initially mistaken for simply being tipsy. They feed on human flesh and have no owner(s), master(s) or captor(s), as is the case in Haitian and Black African spiritualities and myths. As noted earlier, the characteristics mentioned above contradict African myths about zombies.

*Ojuju*'s zombies are not (spiritual) slaves sent to work in (invisible) plantations or other lucrative industries for the profit of their captors or masters. They are far from being the unfortunate labour or engine of a "night-economy" as it is popularly believed in traditional Africa. *Ojuju*'s zombies are presented as the ugly consequences of bad governance or poor management of natural resources in Nigeria. It could be implied that the cause of the infection depicted in the film is bad management of water supply—a quotidian reality in urban towns in Nigeria and a symbol of widespread corruption in the country. The zombies could thus be technically viewed as the product or possible outcome of various insidious victimizations of the poor populace in Nigeria. Although such symbolism could illustrate the film's objective to censure social injustices in Nigeria, it remains clear that how it profiles and deploys its zombies visibly departs from the Nigerian imagination about the living dead (zombies).

The only zombie-related feature that somehow squares with African imaginations concerning the living dead is the film director's choice of local nomenclatures to reference zombies in the film. It is observable that the word "zombie" is carefully—but flagrantly—avoided in favour of "*ojuju*", which is the indigenous slang referring to zombies. Through this linguistic choice/bias, the film's director attempts to reflect local colour. However, C. J. Obasi's choice leads to a situation where Nigerian slang is technically used to paradoxically refer to beings which, anthropologically or ontologically speaking, are dominantly Western and somehow stand as an index of Hollywood cultural impact—nay imperialism—on Nollywood.

#### 4.2. Banji Oyemaja's *Outbreak 2020*

Written and directed by Banji Oyemaja, *Outbreak 2020* is a 2014 Nollywood zombie film about a company that designs a two-stage capitalist ploy. The first stage of the ploy consists of creating a virus to infect people. In contrast, the second stage involves developing an antidote that will be sold to the infected ones and generate millions of Naira. Unfortunately, the company's plan dramatically fails: while producing the virus, an irremediable accident occurs. This accident leads to the contamination of many people in the community. These contaminated people mutate from humans to dreadful and dreaded flesh and blood hungry-and-thirsty zombies. The hungry zombies prey on the other inhabitants of the town, who have no other option but to defend themselves, using machetes and firearms against their monstrous predators.

Like in Obasi's *Ojuju*, the zombies deployed in *Outbreak 2020* are Western-like in their physiques: they result from chemical contamination; they are made to have rotten skin and be flesh-eating creatures. They exhibit a robotic way of walking, and they dementedly prey on non-contaminated humans. Apart from the colour of their skin (their race), Oyemaja's zombies have virtually nothing in common with the African zombies imagined to be kinds of slaves and labourers for a night in the underworld economy. They are represented as the victims of powerful commercial or capitalist entities, or rather as the ugly consequence of a capitalist system which has no place for humanism or African communalism.

One clear evidence of the westernization of Oyemaja's zombies is the fact that the latter is represented in the film as creatures which can be neutralized just with the use of firearms and machetes—a myth which is often exploited or reflected in Hollywood zombie films. This way of dealing with zombies contradicts the African anti-zombie defence system, which rather gives primary attention to esoteric means. This could be attributed to the fact that zombies are widely believed to be the fruit of mystical and occult practices. Thus, instead of facing a zombie with firearms or other physical weapons, Africans will resort to the help of a well-experienced oracle, a mystic or mystical power to tame the undead, not necessarily to mortally neutralize it. Many Africans thus believe in the possible deliverance of a zombie with well-applied mystical powers.

Therefore, it could be argued that *Outbreak 2020* replicates a dominant trope in Hollywood zombie films: powerful scientific institutions that, driven by egoism and unrestrained financial ambition, exploit their technological and scientific expertise to create dangerous, incurable viruses—curable only by the antidotes they produce. By importing this Hollywoodian trope and presenting it as socio-scientific pathology, which is to be envisaged in post-modern Nigeria, Oyemaja simply Nigerianizes a Western myth. He superimposes a Western concept on an African zombie story.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Supernatural/spiritual thrillers based on themes such as witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, the undead and voodoo have, for long, been a dominant cinematic trend among Nigerian filmmakers, causing a good number of both endogenous and exogenous critics to derogatorily profile Nollywood film directors and actors as voodooists. The desire to diversify directorial and ideological currents within the industry has driven many Nollywood dudes to import various cultural concepts and production paradigms from Hollywood and from the global mass culture. This has led to the popularization of zombie thrillers styled *à la Hollywood* or dominantly shaped according to the Western imagination. This study has attempted to illustrate this theory with the aid of two Nollywood zombie thrillers C. J. Obasi's *Ojuju* and Banji Oyemaja's *Outbreak 2020*.

The study argued that the two films portray Western/westernized zombies in African settings or rather new “races” of zombies which are not typically African and may rightly be described as hybrid: they have a black colour and may have African origins, but behave very much like—or rather mimic—Western zombies. The zombies portrayed in the two films considered in this study do not really constitute symbols of spiritual slavery and key players of a night economy as most Nigerian myths would have presented the living dead. They do not, for the most part, have captors or masters (*Bokors*) and do not work in invisible plantations or in mysterious industries for the economic prosperity of their masters. They could rightly be regarded as a blind deconstruction of the African zombies and the product of Nigerian “videastes”<sup>47</sup> adoption or adaptation of exocentric myths and cinematic paradigms.

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<sup>47</sup> It has become a common practice among African cinema critics to derogatorily differentiate “cineastes” (who are believed to be good adepts of conventions guiding film production and who produce their film on celluloid) from “videastes” (whose filmic production are mostly considered to be of lower quality, given the fact that they are packaged in video format).

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**CHAPTER 22.**  
**“WHEN THE DEAD COME OUT OF THEIR GRAVES, THE LIVING WILL  
BE THEIR BLOOD...”. ZOMBIE ITALIAN STYLE<sup>48</sup>**

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“The Italians knew how to make zombie cinema an unstoppable machine”. (Gras, 2010, p. 131)

1. INTRODUCTION

**Figure 1**

*Putrid zombie*



*Source: frame from *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979).*

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<sup>48</sup>This is the slogan that accompanied the advertising materials for the film *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979), serving as a response to the slogan of *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978)—released in Italy under the title *Zombie*: “When there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth”.

On more than one occasion, Bava, an important creator of the modern horror film, has stressed the difficulty of establishing the character of the *undead* in the national imagination: “When I was little, the nanny used to scare us by telling stories of Sardinian outlaws, but nothing about vampires as in Italy we have the sort of sun that makes them all flee” (Bava, 1979, p. 87). There is, therefore, a certain resistance to linking the contemporary success of the zombie in its transmedia set-up with the iconographic origins on the big screen and, specifically, its evolution in Italy. The zombie, therefore, will be understood as a fictional character that, even in its more exotic narratives, tries to respond to very specific political situations: in the case of the United States, for example, there has been a wish to denounce a dangerous homologation caused by political-cultural totalitarianism. With a questionable desire to overcome this at all costs, Martínez considers *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) a foundational film on the figure of the *revenant*. In his opinion, the figure of the undead inhabits the collective imagination from the paranoid climate typical of the McCarthy era, even though the excellence of Siegel’s film moves this type of character beyond the precise historical and geographic referential link. In this way, the metaphorical reading of the film displays an intrinsic relationship between totalitarian alignment and domination: a new feature that, in various forms, will accompany many subsequent representations of the undead (Martínez, 2010, p. 69). Thus, the zombies as a terrifying institution are alienated, who, by multiplying themselves, increase the might of a secret totalitarian power: a mysterious and infallible force in its design to eliminate all traces of independent humanity. In this direction, the development of these *new* monsters receives an important contribution from the Italian cinema that, despite its essentially realistic *imprinting*, eagerly and expertly adopts the figure of the *revenant*. It is important to establish this tendency of transalpine film sensibility as a methodological principle, strongly linked to reality (to the tangible and immediately verifiable referent), because Italian zombies are characters that constantly challenge the limits of visibility. Monstrous beings who perform ignominious acts have multiple interpretations of the allegorical impossibility of pacifying nature with a hypothetical post-mortem humanity. The Italian horror genre, inscribed within a purely fantastical paradigm, constitutes a minority line, a marginal productive phenomenon. Thus, at the end of the ‘50s, the unexpected appearance of a constellation of films with a Gothic rationale and atmosphere was welcomed with surprise and enthusiasm. Italian audiences can finally enjoy a film genre that had been forgotten and censored by Croce’s school of aesthetics for decades, as well as Marxist historicism and Catholic moralism (Venturini, 2014, p. 7).

The preponderance of attention on the social promoted by Neo-Realist militant excellence had found its main conciliatory vulgate in comedy. Everything repressed and expropriated to the *modus ridendi* has been derailed within the melodrama that, in its cinema version, with great difficulty supplies repressed impulses such as eroticism, violence, the oneiric and the fantastic: themes already present in the *fin de siècle* publishing industry,

whether cultured or popular. The Italian cinema had assumed the inheritance of the *Scapigliatura*, of some pages of Fogazzaro, Capuana, even Pirandello, but also of para-literature, popular illustration and the transalpine Grand Guignol theatre (Foni, 2007, p. 7). The recovery of the dark and Dionysian dimension coincided with the *exploitation* of the successes of the Hammer Gothic revival: *I vampiri* [(Riccardo Freda, 1957); see Figure 2], some months before *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957), without the organizational support of the British producer. On the contrary, drawing from a production structure close to the artisan workshop concept, Italian horror cinema is characterized by a marginal distribution system (of depth) in which spectacle predominates over the narrative thread, with a predilection for sadism and necrophilia and a certain revival of classical mythology, as well as the deadly heroine of lyric-opera (Hormigos, 2007, p. 56).

**Figure 2**

*Vampire*



*Source:* frame from *I vampiri* (Riccardo Freda, 1957).

This baroque, heterogeneous fusion, brought together from the contrast with the metonymic (neorealism), pacifying (comedy) and cathartic (melodrama) viewpoint, gives shape to two opposing tendencies: the centripetal, which tends to keep the representation of horror within the limits of the genre (only in popular appearance and in the Italian case, without a codified homegrown tradition); the centrifugal, or *auteur*, which sublimates said limits in the expression of a personal and non-transferable world (Losilla, 1993, p. 128). In a

continuous and stimulating recovery operation of very popular productions, often marginalized (and forgotten), it is interesting to consider *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979) as a confluence of the two lines the historian Losilla drew. Inserted within a sequence of preceding film texts, we can consider the contribution of the transtiberine filmmaker to the zombie genre as an example of mannerism of the manifestation: that is, a text that captures recombines and *revitalizes* the most obvious styles of the genre, arriving at brilliant solutions, and which formally, are almost avant-garde. At the same time, thanks to a new critical perspective on Fulci's *opera omnia*, it is possible to display a sort of mannerist concept in the film: a combination of heterogeneous patterns according to an autonomous and personalised discourse (see Figure 1).

## 2. ALARM ACROSS THE GLOBE: THE WIND CARRIES THE DISEASE IN EUROPE

Figure 3

*The alarmed press*



Source: frame from *The Last Man on Earth* (Sidney Salkow & Ubaldo B. Ragona, 1964).

Modern cinematographic iconography of the zombie takes shape in Europe, particularly Italy. “Italy, a country of cinematic cannibalism, did not take long to jump on the bandwagon of excesses and the list of unscrupulous *exploitations* is extensive” (Crespo, 1998, p. 69). Thus, just south of the Alps, the new duplication of the terrifying is definitively emancipated from its Haitian origins. In the Antilles, indeed, the *Zumbi* (according to a

Congolese term) were undead figures who belonged to voodoo rituals: beings who, without souls or their own will, could withstand any situation of slavery. These Afro-Caribbean creatures had found transposition in the seventh art thanks to *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* [(Jacques Tourneur, 1943); see Figure 4]: the storyline of these films derived from the travel literature of the occultist Seabrook and particularly for his novel *The Magic Island* (1929), which covers the context of the American occupation of the island of Haiti (1915–1934). However, *The Last Man on Earth* was shot in Italy (Sidney Salkow & Ubaldo B. Ragona, 1964): the first film version of the post-apocalyptic novel by Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (1954).

**Figure 4**

*Haitian zombie*



*Source: frame from I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur, 1943).*

The same author (with the pseudonym Swanson) had written the script and had proposed it to Hammer. But the British production company, immersed in its spectacular (and colourful) revival of Universal's Gothic corpus, ceded the project to Associated Producers Inc., which requested the collaboration of Produzioni La Regina (Battaglia,

2018). The Italian production company joined the project and appointed its own technical and artistic crew to work with the leading actor and star of the film, Vincent Price. The direction was shared between Salkow (probably with the role of American supervisor) and Ragona, who, with the invaluable help of Franco Delli Colli (cousin of the more famous Tonino), transformed the Roman neighbourhood of the EUR within a gothic, spectral, post-catastrophic setting into the remains of a cold, unreal, apocalyptic city. The dim and uninspiring texture of the black and white and the intensely melancholic soundtrack contribute towards transforming the dearth of resources into a plausibly grim dystopia. Unlike the vampire iconography of Universal and Hammer, the undead's awkward and whitish look resembles *The Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) (Díaz, 2008, p. 8).

Although a large part of the contemporary criticism was initially sceptical of a black and white horror film, and even more ludicrous, made in Italy, the film anticipates some themes typical of the modern zombie subgenre. The main idea involves illustrating the fallacy of human beings who, by overcoming their deepest fears, proclaim themselves saviours of humanity. In fact, their most Manichean and conservative part ends up executing them. A bitter reflection appears on the inhumanity of the human being: the survivors, when placed in a limited situation, will show signs of irrationality as dangerous as that of the *revenants* themselves, and the vilest instincts will sprout forth in a peak of selfishness, intolerance and authoritarianism, more harmful than the bite of a zombie (García, 1994, p. 28). Collaterally, the importance of the origin of the undead fades into the background. Only now, in the central flashback, does a newspaper clipping appear announcing a deadly plague coming from the winds of Europe (see Figure 3). As a scientist, the protagonist rejects superstitions, but the news is diluted after the drama of the protagonist, who gradually loses and buries his loved ones. Even less information is dedicated to the reason for the protagonist's immunity: almost *in passing*, he attributes his immunity to the bite of a Panamanian bat that had acted as a vaccine. Conversely, a conceptual zombie environment is established reminiscent of the myths of Lovecraft's Cthulhu, which, three years later, will be developed by Romero. Indeed, the total absence of consciousness in the film's creatures reflects two deeply disturbing archetypes for the Western psyche: the bloodthirsty crowd in the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution (1793–1794) and the mechanical and unstoppable nature of the automaton (the robot, the machine, ...) that performs its mission without any possibility of choice or understanding (Palacios, 1996, p. 57). Ragona's films feature characters that are more like monsters previously seen in genre movies like *The Walking Dead* (Michael Curtiz, 1936), the later *Invisible Invaders* (Edward L. Cahn, 1959) and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Ed Wood, 1959). Abbot confirms that the reinvention of the undead is the most interesting element of this *unfaithful* adaptation of Matheson's volume: "In the novel, they are fast and ferocious vampires, whereas in the film, they are the

pitiful-looking living dead, slow in pace and indecisive in movement, slow on the uptake and reckless morons” (2013, p. 110).

It is no longer about the *Body Snatchers* by Siegel (1959); they walk like the Frankenstein brute with an uncertain gait, looking for humans to devour. They have no other aim, nor any kind of thought. They have no soul, no vision of the future. Defiling their only sources of sustenance, they condemn humanity to its complete destruction. An apocalypse is foreshadowed, although, in this text, disturbing references (paranoia about post-atomic fallout or communism as a movement that dehumanizes the individual) are subtly kept in the background. The film’s focus of interest is centred on the protagonist’s adventures and emotional ups and downs. On the other hand, the *Romeroian* debut presents the threatening power of the zombies as a metaphor against the war in Vietnam, the ubiquitous racism in the cultural substrate and the political power of the arms-producing lobbies. With the hippy movement in full swing, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) alludes to the protest against a war that seems to have no end and anticipates the first military defeat of the United States.

### 3. “WHEN THERE IS NO MORE ROOM IN HELL”: THE IRONY OF FULCI<sup>49</sup>

The *liaison* between Romero and Italian cinema returns ten years later with the terms reversed. Even if Ragona’s film had practically fallen into oblivion, *Night of the Living Dead* was circulating in the movie clubs and the transalpine counterculture circuits. Although his first work had achieved the status of a cult film, Romero had not yet obtained funding to carry out the sequel *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). The chance is offered by the encounter with Argento (who will be in charge of the editing and soundtrack of the European version) and with Cuomo, an independent distributor who will facilitate contact with the long-standing Italian production company Titanus. Romero’s second film, thanks to the use of colour, paroxysmally increases the violence of its images. Without any concession to satire, the Canadian filmmaker attacks the incipient triumph of hedonism as the latest consumer thrill. Large shopping centres had become the new sanctuaries: cathedrals with multiple chapels, where the new faithful wandered aimlessly, captivated by disturbing colours and music (Frusciante, 2015). However, the new religion does not consider the concept of sharing; there is no idea of a new community. Everyone greedily and indiscriminately grabs what they can: dresses, jewellery, luxury items, with no chance of bringing out the best in anything.

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<sup>49</sup> This is the title (which includes the first part of the advertising slogan of *Dawn of the Dead*) of a short documentary that includes interviews with Alfredo Cuomo, the Argento brothers, and the musician Claudio Simonetti, about the production of the 1978 Romero’s film, written and directed by Michele De Angelis.

Because outside the mall, apart from the starving *revenants*, no life remains. The goal is very promising, especially because Argento's backing (who throughout the decade has become a home-grown master of the thriller) is a guarantee. That is why the producer, De Angelis (executive producer of the *Variety Film*<sup>3</sup> and Couyoumdjian) had already registered the *Zombi 2* title, anticipating the exploitation of a possible sequel or prequel (as Fulci's film seemed to represent). Fulci admits that by following the productive routines of transalpine cinematography, his project came into existence to exploit the success of *Dawn of the Dead*. However, the result is totally different. While the Canadian filmmaker had accomplished a social metaphor (where the rebellion of the *revenants* represented a cry of desperation from the marginalized), his film contains more adventures; it redirects the zombie figure to its voodoo practices of Jamaican origins (Albiero & Cacciatore, 2015, p. 233). It is true that the pre-production team came together just three days before the *Romerian* premiere, and that it was only after its extraordinary box office success that it effectively took off; but just following the productive trail gives a highly reductive image. As a healthy evolution of the Italian cannibal films, the zombie spaghetti genre knew how to take over easily, filling the screens with graphic spectacularity and sadism, often surpassing their American counterparts in bloodiness.

According to Gras (cartoonist and pop culture scholar), *Zombie 2* represents the founding text of the *Italian zombie movement*, because its author manages to combine in one new terrifying subgenre, the most extreme and lurid solutions of the *mockumentaries* (ante litteram) *Mondo Cane* (Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti & Franco Prosperi, 1962) and of its fictional imitators *Il Paese del Sesso Selvaggio* (Umberto Lenzi, 1972) or *Ultimo Mondo Cannibale*, (Ruggero Deodato, 1977): films that represent episodes of anthropophagy with intense graphic violence (2010, p. 131). The legacy of this false-documentary cruelty (which Gras rightly defines as “graphic”) is indeed completed with influences from the world of comics. In 1974, Sergio Bonelli Editore published four issues of *Tex* (an Italian comic series about a character, Tex Willer, linked to the world of the American Old West) with Gothic themes: “Il figlio di Mefisto”, “I quattro amuleti”, “Magianera” and “Il veliero maledetto”. Then, four years later, in conjunction with the premiere of *Dawn of the Dead*, the same company republished “All'ultimo sangue”, “Vudù!”, “La note de imagli” and “Zombie”: comics, this time, starring *Zagor*, an adventurer who fights to defend the rights of the Native Americans. The same scriptwriters Briganti and Sacchetti suffer the influence of this contamination between *revenants* and *pulp* comics. Fulci is entrusted with the direction after Castellari's rejection: both of whom were responsible for its eclectic filmography. Genre film champions of the seventies, exponents of a generation of directors: often brilliant perhaps, but almost always forgotten by blind and deaf critics.

The Roman filmmaker ironically takes up and transforms the *Romerian* legacy. He only adopts the American zombie iconography outwardly; in reality, his undead cannot even

be minimally confused with their human prey: pale and putrid. They are not just social outcasts, victims, or antagonists of a dramaturgy of adventures. Fulci's zombies are agents of an incipient abjuration of rationality. They discover, exemplify, and show everything the public prefers to forget. Thanks to the relevant use of the subjective camera, the viewer shares with the monsters a direct vision of the horror of power and the cruel colonialism of positivist culture. In the twilight of reason, superstition is rekindled: a subversive fantasy that allows us to conceive the tainted world without going crazy. At the time of resurrection, Fulci adopts the vision of the conquerors. The subjective (wide angle upward view) reaffirms its reacquisition of the fierce discretion over the world: the eye sockets, freed from the tomblike darkness, see the light again, the same light they had sold as evangelical (Albiero & Cacciatore, 2015, p. 242).

**Figure 5**

*Zombies contaminate New York*



*Source:* frame from *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979).

Fulci's stylistic decisions respond to his sardonic desire to distort genres and systematically make low-budget films to preserve creative freedom. Defend it strenuously from the omnivorous *blockbusters*, destroyers of any experimentation. Fulci, a brilliant student of the Experimental Center (and perfect connoisseur of all film rhetoric), gives his audience an apotropaic closure: a sequence of zombies staggering forward on the Brooklyn Bridge to invade New York.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS: “ROME, SEPTEMBER 5: WE SAW *ZOMBIE II*, SCIENCE-FICTION HORROR FILM, GHASTLY; REPULSIVE TRASH”<sup>50</sup>

While the zombies advanced towards the Big Apple, the film triumphed in cinemas worldwide: in Iberian cinemas alone (according to Ministry data) it reached 595.137 spectators. Despite being savaged by the critics, Fulci inaugurates the *Spaghetti Zombie* genre since his *Zombie 2* is more successful than its precursor, *Dawn of the Dead*. Fulci’s touch, simple and spectacular simultaneously, gives the zombie character an added extra of violence and luridness, depriving him of any trace of humanity (Gras, 2010, p. 133). Thus, *Zombie 2* inaugurates a line of resistance of horrendous and foul-smelling monsters against the triumph of sculptural beauty: the models of Reaganian hedonism. The beginning of unbridled individualism that dissolves all ethical axes in a liquid-like society. A behavioural flow that barter the consumerism of possession with the phobia of the obsolete: the realm of appearing, at all costs, young and healthy in an unending bulimia (Eco, 2015). This resistance has been organized according to a terrifying itinerary that includes other Fulci texts such as *Paura nella città dei morti viventi* (1980) *Quella villa accanto al cimitero* (1981), Lenzi with *Incubo sulla città contaminata* (1980), Bianchi with *Le notti del terrore* (1980), Marino Girolami with *Zombie Holocaust* (1980), Fragasso with *Virus* (1980) and *After Death* (1989), Lamberto Bava with *Dèmoni* (1985) and *Dèmoni 2* (1986), Lattanzi with *Killing Birds* (1988). Productions of taste and erratic expressive resolutions that have managed to prolong the long agony of the B series thanks to their worldwide distribution through *home video*. Cursed movies that have come back to inspire the all-powerful *mainstream*. It has happened with *Zeder* (Avati, 1982), which inspired the plot of Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* (1983): the novel brought to the big screen by Mary Lambert (1989). Or even more so with *Dellamorte Dellamore (Cemetery Man)* (Soavi, 1994) a film inspired by a novel and the lucky comic series *Dylan Dog* (Bonelli again) that almost instantly had its homonymous North American version *Dead of Night*, (Munroe 2010): a sort of pun of Romero’s first feature film.

The ebbs and flows await Hollywood’s lack of inspiration (teeming with remakes, reboots, sequels and prequels) to revive the cheap but remarkable transalpine productions: “When the dead come out of their graves, the living will be their blood”.

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**PART VI**  
**SOCIAL & CULTURAL MANIFESTATIONS**



**CHAPTER 23.**  
**THE ZOMBIE: A METAPHOR TO LIVE (AND DIE) BY? A FOLK MODEL  
OF FAMILIAR MONSTERS<sup>51</sup>**

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1. INTRODUCTION

How and why is the zombie metaphor applied in efforts that seek to alert and prepare citizens of potential threats and disasters? And what are the consequences of applying this specific metaphor in attempts to govern populations? This chapter examines the real-world applications and adoptions of a particular pop-cultural figuration (i.e. the zombie) as a guiding, and sometimes even governing, metaphor, and explores how the zombie has been used to promote a necessity for “preparing” for the future in specific ways. While much has already been said about the zombie, this chapter adds to the current body of knowledge by looking at how the zombie metaphor has been applied for governing purposes—to frame the future in specific ways. As such, the chapter provides analytical tools for studying how pop-cultural metaphors are used as “premeditations” (Grusin, 2004)—that is, as tools for practical governance in relation to both current and future threats—and for studying the potential implications that come from such premeditations.

Over the last decade, the academic interest in the zombie has increased significantly, producing a vast body of scholarly and popular discussion. Since the zombie is a fictitious creature, it is also inevitable that its modern incarnation has become a highly mediated figuration (in that it practically always uses a medium for its cultural distribution) (Cameron, 2012). This chapter explores how the zombie is now also used as a very practical

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<sup>51</sup> An extended version of this chapter was previously published in *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* [cfr. Rahm, L. & Skågeby, J. (2016). Preparing for monsters: governance by popular culture. *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, (15), 76–94].

and political metaphor in, for example, civil defence courses and government information campaigns. These applications of the zombie metaphor differ from more fiction-oriented pop-cultural depictions, as their underlying and expressed purpose is to govern—to make people more aware of societal contingencies and to generate a corresponding behavioural change, and, on a more fundamental level, to promote a particular view of the future and future threats. This chapter, therefore, takes a specific interest in how the zombie metaphor is used to govern and promote certain practical and emotional preparations for future catastrophes. As such, this chapter examines how the deliberate, practical and political application of the pop-cultural zombie metaphor legitimises a profoundly regularising view of the future, one that excludes all but “properly prepared” individuals.

## 2. THE POP-CULTURAL ZOMBIE

The zombie has a rich history consisting of variations on the theme of a living being that returns from the dead (Boluk & Lenz, 2010). One of the primary and most important recurring themes is what we may refer to as the rules of the zombie, rules which determine what they are and what they can do. As this chapter demonstrates, such rules are very important both in pop-cultural adaptations in general and in the case studies this chapter examines. A specific piece of fictional work that highlights the rules of the zombie is *The Zombie Survival Guide*, where author Max Brooks (2003) provides very precise instructions and rules for how to survive the zombie apocalypse. The reason for starting with this particular book, apart from its huge popularity and cultural attraction, is that the very concept of a “zombie rulebook”, we argue, has come to colour not only many pop-cultural narratives (perhaps most notably the movie *Zombieland*), but also to frame how the zombie metaphor has subsequently been adopted in crisis awareness politics (it is, for example, used as course literature in the zombie-survival course examined below).

*The Zombie Survival Guide* was published in 2003, but it was not until 2010 that sales started to increase rapidly (Ogg, 2011). A sequel entitled *World War Z* was published in 2006 and was made into a movie starring Brad Pitt in 2013. *The Zombie Survival Guide* begins with a chapter entitled “The Undead: Myths and Realities”, in which Brooks debunks “myths” about the zombies by answering questions such as “What is a zombie? How are they created? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What are their needs, their desires? Why are they hostile to humanity?” (Brooks, 2003, p. 1). According to Brooks, the fictional Solanum virus is the underlying cause for zombies to exist. This virus, in Brooks’ formulation, effectively transforms an infected living human being into a member of the living dead over twenty-four hours. Under the two headings “Physicality” and “Behavioural Patterns”, we learn that a zombie is essentially a dead, reanimated human without cognitive faculties; it is incurable; it wants to eat (and thereby infect) living humans, and the only way to kill one (which is the only way to deal with one, basically) is to destroy his or her brains.

We also learn that the ultimate goal of a living human being who encounters zombies is to survive and “not to be a hero” (and try to help others before themselves). A noteworthy rule is that the zombie state cannot be changed or cured: “It will exist as is, or it will not exist at all.” (Brooks, 2003, p. 19). This last phrase is significant; it essentially states that one principal rule of the zombie is that the rules cannot be changed. This is also the case more widely in the cultural adaptation of the zombie. While both fans and academics certainly discuss interpretations of and details relating to the zombie, it is also very much the case that the elementary rules presented by Brooks often persist unchallenged.

Interestingly, Brooks constantly calls on a somewhat vague notion of “science” as evidence of his claims. We are not so much questioning the rather liberal citation techniques used here (we are fully aware that the guide is a work of fiction), as calling attention to the repeated use of “scientific” explanations and alleged studies as support. As an extension of the “scientifically proven” zombie at the centre of his work, Brooks also highlights how “fake” zombies, such as the voodoo zombie (a zombie created through drugs and/or asphyxia-caused brain damage) and the Hollywood zombie (a trendy cinematic depiction, which, he insists, has little in common with the scientifically corroborated zombie) can be separated from what he positions as the real thing. Brooks asserts that the voodoo zombie is not genuine since it is more human than the viral zombie (in that it can communicate, feel pain, think, and show emotion). Meanwhile, the Hollywood zombie is merely a popularised version of the “real thing”, and, he states, can only ever be “a source of temporary, light-hearted entertainment and not a visual aid to your survival” (Brooks, 2003, p. 23). This latter statement is, however, only partly true as the pop-cultural zombie, as this chapter argues, has become a vital source material for more serious and practical preparations for actual disasters.

### 3. ACADEMIC ANALYSES OF THE ZOMBIE

Before we attempt to answer this question ourselves, we need to survey previous attempts to respond to similar queries. From an academic point of view, the zombie can be seen as a specific subcategory of monsters, and monstrosity is a theme that has received much scholarly attention (Haraway, 1992; Creed, 1993; Puar & Rai, 2002). Monstrosity has been described as a subversive position from which a theorisation of resistance and a challenge of anthropocentrism can emerge—“a transhistorical site of challenge to the rational, autonomous, masculine subject and to the category of the human itself” (Shildrick, 2002, p. 121). As a subcategory of the monstrous, the zombie generally integrates the destabilising qualities of monstrosity. For example, Burcar (2010) shows how the zombie can work to dissolve commonly dichotomised categories such as gender or sexuality. Contrasted against the cyborgian other, the representation of the zombified other “calls for the destruction of

the old order by rethinking the ways post-industrial economies conceive of gender and sexuality today” (Burcar, 2010, p. 403); in other words, the zombie functions as a more positive alternative to the rational chilliness and hyper-artificiality of the cyborg. Hassler-Forest (2011) offers similar arguments, claiming that the zombie is commonly associated with the destabilisation of patriarchal or colonial imperialist power.

The zombie’s subversive potential has, however, also been interrogated. In a number of close readings of zombie texts, several scholars raise issues concerning the zombie’s recent positioning as a subversive monster. Coonfield (2013) evokes the idea of the *zombie imaginary* as an umbrella term for the representations generated by the very idea of the zombie. He further proposes that the zombie is a “perfect stranger”, suggesting that zombies are the polar opposite of humans in many ways (through, for instance, the dichotomies of dead-alive and us-them). However, Coonfield also acknowledges the human history of the zombie (as *someone* turned into *something*) and proposes an ethical consideration of how the zombie engenders a view of difference that is essentially unjust (i.e. the zombie as a thing that must be killed by people who are still “real” people). Murray (2013) examines two literary cases [Lily Herne’s *Deadlands* (2011) and *Death of a Saint* (2012)]. He states that, while the zombie metaphor opens up to some alternative constructions/readings of gender and sexuality, it also maintains traditional patriarchal and heteronormative dichotomies (such as the vulnerability of women, homophobia, and prescribed gender roles). Jones (2013) presents a similar case, highlighting how patriarchy seems to linger in zombie narratives.

However, unlike Jones’s assertion that “when gendered female, the undead fittingly symbolize this discursive history of femininity under patriarchy” (Jones, 2013, p. 530), this chapter argues that the gendering of the zombie in itself is not necessary for patriarchal structures to emerge due to the application of the zombie metaphor. Instead, the most problematic binary is created through the othering of the zombie itself, as “it” is *specified, estranged, and stamped* for clear separation in the discourses discussed here. Feshami draws attention to this desire to clarify what the zombie is and does. He states,

Its lack of identity ensures its easy dissolution into the faceless mass of a zombie horde while nevertheless inviting, even demanding, fans, critics, and filmmakers to provide it with identity, with purpose, to manage the horror its lack of identity entails. (Feshami, 2010, p. 400)

When publicly disseminated and consumed, the separation of the zombie as Other engenders both discursive and material power differentials. The theoretical nuances and potentially disruptive capacities of zombies-as-monsters are thus lost due to a fundamental rupture and subsequent hostility between humanity and what is now something else. This separation, we argue here, is maintained by the arbitrary, but specific “rules of zombies”. Indeed, the edited volume *Zombies are Us* (Moreman & Rushton, 2011) begins by clarifying how the rules relating to the zombie comprise a recurrent necessity for practically all zombie narratives, and although some nuances are debated, the general thrust of the rules remain the

same throughout the genre (zombies are brought back from the dead; they consume the living, thereby turning them into zombies as well; and they can only be killed by destroying their brains).

So, while there is a large body of work identifying and positioning the zombie as a troubling and ambiguous in-between representation that can be fruitfully mined for subversive purposes, there is also a consistent return of more-or-less precise rules that need to be followed—rules that, when read through a cultural-political lens, are profoundly problematic. For example, Rahm (2013) has examined the rules of “prepping” (practically preparing for the apocalypse), where the zombie is a recurring metaphorical threat, and has identified a predominant view that the physical body best predicted to survive an apocalyptic scenario is one that resorts to military skills, military tactics, military outfits, and military arms. In other words, this means that independent, resourceful, sceptical *men* loaded with “proper” gear and “proper” skills are often seen as the ones best equipped to outlast “the rest”. Following Rahm, one could therefore argue that one important reason why zombies have become so popular as a practical metaphor is that they *do not* challenge or upset many current power differentials—the zombie metaphor corresponds well to the normative model of the “best prepared body” and reinforces the development of skills and mindsets that are fundamentally sexist, ageist, and ableist.

#### 4. PREMEDIATION AND FOLK MODELS

How can we understand this preoccupation with monsters in general and zombies in particular? Premediation theory offers one possible way in. Premediation can be defined as the way we, as media-consuming citizens, increasingly desire media representations of potential futures. This desire works through a double media logic consisting of both a longing for security and safety (by preparing us for as many future scenarios as possible) and a concurrent limitation of the possible options in the future (as a way to deal with the overwhelming prospect of *all* potential futures). That is, there is an emotional element to premediation in that it seeks to foresee likely events in order to reduce anxiety. However, there is also a political element at play, as the delimitations of potential scenarios obscure other ways to think about the future. This mutually reinforcing combination of emotional comfort and the limitation of options is at the heart of premediation.

In light of the discussion above, the current attraction of the zombie as an all-purpose model for envisioning future threats can be fruitfully analysed via the premediation concept. Under this framework, the underlying logic of the zombie is to induce comfort in the face of the overwhelming and potentially demoralising complexity of the future, allowing us to know more precisely what we are dealing with to develop the “correct” corresponding coping plans and thus reduce anxiety. However, this strategy is by no means neutral or

disinterested. Rather, this chapter argues that the zombie, in its practical application, can be a deeply unjust and limiting metaphor that too often perpetuates power differentials. As outlined above, the zombie comes with a very clear set of rules as to how it should “work”. As such, the zombie is depicted and conveyed as a specific cultural figuration, one that is employed to induce a very particular kind of response. These premediations also have more fundamental political consequences in that they effectively also determine who deserves to live and who must die [what Mbembe calls necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003)]. The zombie, therefore, occupies a cultural nexus of meanings. Taken together, the prevalent use of the zombie to premeditate the future, the specific rules it follows, the specific kind of responses it induces, and its necropolitical underpinnings combine to produce what we may call a *folk model* of the zombie.

Put simply, a folk model is a culturally shared cognitive model—an everyday, commonplace explanatory framework. As such, folk models are clearly related to the notion of the conceptual metaphor (that is, the understanding of one idea, or conceptual domain, in terms of another); indeed, the two notions are arguably interchangeable [Lakoff & Johnson, 2008 (1980)]. However, for this chapter, the folk model is the more useful of the two, since it highlights the significant difference between the academic interpretations of the (pop-cultural) zombie metaphor and the practical public application of the metaphor in hands-on disaster preparation. The conceptualisation of what constitutes a folk model is rooted in early cultural anthropology, which includes dimensions of perception, thought, feeling, desire, intention, and even action (D’Andrade, 1995). A folk model is not necessarily “accurate in the real world”, but the fact that it recurs in a specific culture means that the phenomenon lends itself to study. This chapter investigates the mechanisms through which the zombie folk model operates in society (rather than meticulously describing the multitude of representations and variations on the theme in popular culture). Another way of putting it is to say that this chapter explores the connection between premediation (as a cultural media logic) and preparation (as the material practices that premediation encourages), using the folk model of the zombie as a significant example. To this end, it is useful to examine two cases of how the zombie folk model is applied in practically oriented contexts.

#### **4.1. The Zombie Folk Model in Practice**

In this section, we describe how the zombie metaphor is applied in two practical cases of crisis preparedness. As mentioned, these cases are viewed here as exceptional since they are underpinned by a very clear purpose—to change people’s behaviour, or at least to make them think of the *real* implications of an actual zombie outbreak. Both examples can thus be regarded as cases of premediating folk models.

### *Learning to Survive the Zombie Apocalypse*

ABF is Sweden's largest adult liberal-education association. The abbreviation stands for the Workers' Educational Association (*Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund* in Swedish). ABF is one of Sweden's ten liberal-education associations; it organises courses for approximately 1.7 million students annually. As part of the data collection on the proliferation of the zombie folk model, we have taken part in a course entitled "Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse" provided by ABF in 2014 and in two different Swedish cities. Each course consists of six seminars or lectures, complemented by suggested readings. Brooks' *Zombie Survival Guide* is a fundamental part of these readings and the definition of the zombie underpinning the course. We want to emphasise that we are not interested in critiquing ABF or the courses themselves—we find them very inspiring and well-organised. Rather, we are using the courses and our participation as examples of the circulation of the zombie folk model.

We deployed an autobiographical method when reporting our findings from these courses. This brand of reflexive writing tries to make the connections between biography and social structure more explicit (Hearn, 2005). Combining the autobiographical approach with participatory observation generates what we may call an autoethnographic approach. As Tami Spry puts it, autoethnography is "the convergence of the 'autobiographic impulse' and the 'ethnographic moment' represented through movement and critical self-reflexive discourse in performance, articulating the intersections of peoples and culture through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity" (2001, p. 706). As such, we aim to connect *ourselves* more clearly to the zombie folk model's cultural politics and taken-for-granted rules. For reasons relating to space, we focus here on certain key moments in the application of the zombie metaphor. The first example occurred during a practical fire-crafting exercise, where the course leader reflected on how there are rules and laws about where and how to build a fire. In response,

One participant quickly remarks, "once the zombies arrive, we don't give a shit what you say". The entire group bursts into laughter. Cheerful from the comment, all of us jointly walk back to the classroom.

This statement indicates an expectation that civilised procedures will effectively be ignored in a real crisis. The zombie is arguably used here as an inclusive metaphor for many types of crises; nonetheless, it is also a metaphor with very specific connotations, one that can generate a rather drastic response (a disregard of more civilised rules regulating behaviour).

Another interesting moment occurred when participants discussed how the zombie metaphor has been applied by (Swedish) public agencies:

We sit in a circle formation in a classroom. The topic of the day is crisis preparedness on a societal level. The teacher tells us that the Public Health Agency of Sweden lists 27 risks, where a pandemic is the most serious one. “Pandemic is the word they are using for the zombie apocalypse”, he says, and the group laughs. “How do you think the governmental agencies would act in the case of a zombie outbreak?” One participant says that the authorities would probably not tell the truth, but soften their information. “Maybe even misinform us”, someone says. Assenting, murmuring and nodding follow. “Nobody would dare to take THE decision”, someone says. “I mean, who would face up to the decision of bombing an entire suburb if it’s infected? Or an infected hospital?” “Nah, authorities will maybe try to isolate the infected, but they will devote more time to thinking of a non-offensive term for the undead”. Everyone laughs again. The group then starts discussing how the level of preparedness was much higher during the Cold War and how things have only gotten worse since. Public state-managed food storage and weapons storage are discussed. “Everyone should be a little more paranoid. Then we would be better prepared as a society”. The teacher adds, “I think we have to take on the mission of creating paranoia”. More laughter.

Our final example moment comes from the very end of one of the courses:

At the end of the course, everyone is presented with a diploma and a free copy of the first issue of the graphic novel *The Walking Dead* in Swedish. On my way out, a co-participant joins me. I asked what she thought of the course. “Superfun”, she says. “But it is always the same—no one dares to speak up in the group. Only a few were actually contributing to the discussion”. “Maybe that’s why there were so many couples there? Because it is hard to speak up on your own?” I add. “No”, she replies, “I think the woman in the relationship just wanted to do something together, and this is the only thing the guy would come along to”.

Our abridged autoethnographic account of these courses illustrates not only practical applications of the zombie metaphor but also the proliferation of a specific skill set and mindset, which is justified, valorised, and legitimised through the completely arbitrary, yet specific rules that have become attached to the figure of the zombie. For example, the courses become an outlet for people’s desire to return in both time and place, either to return to a better-prepared time or to return to nature and survive in the wilderness in harmony with it. This desire to return to “the good old times” or to a “natural” state of things also relates to the way in which the zombie is regarded as something profoundly unnatural and disconnected from nature. The very idea that a zombie virus could spread through contaminated water, toxic downfall, infested animal meat, the air, or another integral part of nature is considered “breaking the zombie rules” and would ruin much of the preferred solutions to the zombie (such as acquiring survival gear and skills). In other words, adding too much complexity (and thereby changing the rules) to the metaphor kills what is referred to as the “natural joy of skilled and gear-driven life in the great outdoors”.

As the above quotations indicate, the courses nurture a paradoxical relation to public information and authorities. While survivalists generally distrust governments and

authorities, they also maintain a certain sense of the benevolence of these institutions, one grounded in the increasing governmental recognition and propagation of the zombie as a universal metaphor. It is therefore important to examine further the application of the zombie metaphor as employed by governments and public agencies.

### *Government Information and the Zombie Folk Model*

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention admits that their zombie-preparedness campaign started as a jocular satire (CDC, 2011). Nevertheless, they now also acknowledge that it provides a great platform for communication. The director of the Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, Dr. Ali S. Khan, has gone so far as to say, “[i]f you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack” (Khan, 2011). While we are not critical of the use of the zombie metaphor as a marketing tool that is employed in order to reach new audiences, as we argue here, the fact that government authorities also choose to use the *zombie* so uncritically, and in such a generalising manner, may have unintended consequences.

Shortly thereafter, a news story surfaced revealing that the US military keeps unclassified documents containing plans for “counter zombie dominance”. In a familiar move, “military planners [...] looked for a creative way to devise a planning document to protect citizens in the event of *an attack of any kind*. The officers used zombies as their muse” (Lubold, 2014). Naturally, officials emphasised that this document was intended for training purposes only and not a real contingency plan. Nevertheless, the way in which the zombie is generalised here, allowing it to encompass any conceivable hazard, is salient.

In essence, this information tells citizens that, in the case of a catastrophe, the thing one should be most worried about can be boiled down to other(ed) people. The message is that if you prepare to defend yourself against people who *were* like you, but have now turned into *something else*, you will be safe against anything. However, the zombie is easy to spot, and its monstrosity ensures that you do not have to feel guilty for defending yourself against it (by killing it). As such, the required skill-set for dealing with the zombie is unsurprisingly identical to military weapon techniques and combat survival skills. The seamless match between the strongly masculinised ways of preparing for disruption (in effect, training for battle) and the war-like future of the zombie apocalypse is, of course, no coincidence. These phenomena seem to co-develop and feed off of each other, almost to the degree that you could regard them as attempts to make citizens more akin to the military.

American authorities are, of course, not the only ones to apply the zombie-apocalypse metaphor. As mentioned, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency has also addressed its preparedness for the zombie apocalypse (Krisinformation.se, 2013). The agency’s reasoning

employs an identical rationale, asserting that being prepared for a zombie apocalypse makes one prepared for *any* other disaster or contingency, again using the popular zombie as a conflating metaphor. The adoption of the zombie metaphor in governmental campaigns indicates an opportunistic approach, as they piggyback on pop-culture hype.

## 5. A FOLK MODEL OF FAMILIAR MONSTERS

As the zombie has become the metaphor we prepare for, it has also come to conflate and oversimplify many possible (complex) threats. The zombie has become a folk model aimed at producing a specific brand of fear and offering subsequent comfort and transparency in overcoming the source of the fear. Emerging from the cinema screens, synthesised by scholarly analyses of its disruptive and/or stabilising potential, the zombie is now employed in governance, such as civil defence courses, edutainment, and governmental information. At the same time, the zombie is one case of a larger, more theoretically grounded category of monsters. Leaning on premediation theory, we have argued that the zombie is part of a folk model that limits future scenarios severely. This limitation occurs due to a specification of rules relying on pseudo-science. Such specification aims at moving an unknown monster (which is genuinely disconcerting) into the realm of the familiar, while still retaining a distinct otherness.

Through civil defence courses and governmental information campaigns, we also witness a dissemination of the folk model of familiar monsters, of which the zombie folk model is one case. To summarise this development, we argue that folk models of familiar monsters emphasise a worldview where complexity has become too overwhelming to handle, implying that we, therefore, need to go back to a simpler model of the world. It also proposes a solution to the complexity in the application of an anthropocentric metaphor that makes specific what was previously unknown through arbitrary ruling and othering. Following this, once complexity is reduced, the metaphor is easily overgeneralised to contexts far beyond its initial reach. However, as such rules and generalisations are applied, the metaphor comes to legitimise certain agencies and limit others in what is basically an attempt to maintain power differentials in the future. Finally, the folk model is also protected from debunking by relying on pseudo-scientific explanations.

The logic of the zombie apocalypse envisages society relapsing by (somewhat paradoxically) stepping back in time to an imaginary future characterised by primitive instincts and survival rather than multiplicity and deliberation. Zombies have no potential to change, and thereby, neither do we—we just persist by exterminating them. The zombie apocalypse metaphor is, therefore, clear-cut and apparently dispassionate. Of course, it would, if it occurred, disrupt everyday life, but, as a way of thinking about the future, it hardly unsettles the current distribution of power. Thus, the zombie is a dangerous metaphor since it suggests that the potential threat is, in fact, other people (or people turned

into “others”), and the only solution is to annihilate them completely (or give up). There is little room for discussion, cures, or alternative solutions. In many ways, the zombie is immune to external falsification, since it is a simplification that leaves a diversity of assertions (such as biological variations, gender-related norms, power distribution, socio-economic factors) about socio-material reality in relation to the zombie underspecified. The zombie apocalypse legitimises a response to the monstrous hordes of “others” by relying on “logical” selfishness and violence. Such tendencies to politically argue for who can be saved and who must die can be observed in, for example, how news media have reported on the Ebola virus outbreak and on refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea. These characteristics are summarised in Table 1, below.

**Table 1**

*A structural comparison of the zombie (a familiar monster) and the unknown*

<b>The Zombie</b>	<b>Dimension</b>	<b>The Unknown</b>
Visible; transparent; exhausted	Visuality	Hidden; opaque; entangled
Comfort in knowing; certainty; reassurance	Confidence	Discomfort in not knowing; uncertainty; disorientation
Familiar and othered	Socio-emotional relationship	Strange and uncharted
Stabilises delimitation; supports identification	Delineation	Destabilises delimitation; supports anonymity
Reactive	Initiative	Proactive
Reinforces the desire to go back—“things have gone too far”; conservative; old guard	Temporality	Reinforces the desire to go forward, towards the “not-yet”; unfixed in time/space
A clear threat to humanity; horror; apocalypse	Anticipation	A potential good; hopefulness; a different future is possible
Simple; reductionist	Materiality	Complex; holistic

*Source:* Own elaboration.

Theoretically and practically, we should aim to retain conceptual fogginess rather than condense the existing nexus of signification surrounding the zombie into the shape of a familiar monster. As soon as the monster emerges from the fog, a false sense of relief and security enters. This relief can be problematic since it reduces complexity, erasing nuances in

favour of a more rigid norm. In this sense, the zombie is reactive (not proactive)—it does not allow for an imagined future where anything else is possible. Rather, the zombie is an example of how we could imagine anything (the choice of metaphors being infinite), but fail (as the choice lands on a very limited metaphor). Everything that does not fit the zombie metaphor is tidied away (as too complex, obstructing desires, impeding individual agency, and so on). A telling example of this would be the tension between the desire for outdoor activities (camping, hunting) as a solution to the zombie threat. The possibility of nature itself being a threat (since the rules stipulate that the virus can only ever be spread through contact with zombies themselves and not through other “natural” paths). In this example, nature posing a threat would make the implied necessity of preparing to go out in the wild impossible, which is therefore seen as an infraction of the rules. The specification of the zombie supports the present hegemony of the monster. That is, if we reduce the semantic and figurative potential of the zombie to nothing more than a metaphor for specific power structures and attitudes towards otherness, we will only perpetuate power differentials in the future. A truly subversive monster, then, must be a not-yet and an unknown.

As such, this chapter extends on the idea that the zombie can be recuperated, that this familiar threat can be rendered unfamiliar; doing so would mean that it would represent “the ultimate uncanny” (Cirucci, 2013). In the courses and guidelines discussed in this chapter, the zombie becomes knowable and killable, more of a comfort than a threat. However, our model proposes that the previously estranged zombie (the zombie as something mystical and unknown) has turned towards the familiar again by being a thoroughly exhausted metaphor that we, through pop culture, know more and more about. The ultimate uncanny is now instead the unknown, broadly conceived, and the transparent and simple rules attached to zombies exist primarily in culture to obscure complex substructures. Both the monster and the unknown spring from a lack of knowledge, but the zombie has recovered from the unsettling unknown and been brought into a realm of ubiquitous, comfortable transparency, where its rules are being codified. Furthermore, as this chapter illustrates, by bringing something out of the unknown and into the realm of the familiar, the comfort of transparency initiates other processes. Therefore, we argue that the unknown is a better metaphor for the unsettling, destabilising, and unknown/obscure future aspects. So, instead of putting our trust in a metaphor that can make us sleep at night (as Brooks phrases it), maybe we should try to take comfort in the unknown.

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**CHAPTER 24.**  
**TECH-COMM VERSUS ZOMBIES: A POST-APOCALYPTIC PEDAGOGY**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Technical communication (tech-comm) is a required course for many college students, particularly those in engineering, medical, and research science fields. Its objective is to teach how to convey technical information to diverse audiences—usually to achieve concrete, pragmatic goals in the modern workplace—by adhering to fundamental principles of accuracy, clarity, conciseness, readability, usability, and correctness when designing documents and other media (Tebeaux & Dragga, 2015). As a class, it can also be notoriously dull. To make it more interesting, some instructors have begun to set their assignments in fictional worlds inspired by popular culture—from “*The Hunger Games* style” dystopias to zombie-infested wastelands. For instance, a typical writing prompt like: “Pretend you work for this organization. Write a memo addressing this boring, corporate situation”, can be transformed into something more compelling and engaging, such as: “Imagine you’re the leader of a group of survivors during the zombie apocalypse. Write a procedure for what to do if someone is infected with the zombie virus”. Other courses beyond tech-comm have adopted similar concepts as well (see Langtangen, Mardal, & Røtnes, 2013, for Mathematics and Computer Science; Kimber, 2013, for Media Education; and Wadsworth, 2017, for Political Theory). While appearing to be a blatant effort to inject excitement into mundane coursework, the zombie theme proves to be more relevant to tech-comm than it might initially seem, and it may help address one of the most challenging ethical dilemmas in the field.

**2. ETHICAL PARADOX**

While tech-comm helps maintain an orderly world where numerous people can feel safe and comfortable, it simultaneously serves interests that contribute to environmental destruction by embodying the widespread belief in expediency as a moral imperative. This belief has invited a range of disastrous outcomes in the context of neoliberal capitalism. The zombie apocalypse represents a logical extension of a real-world trajectory: the collapse of the technological, global city because of something—rising sea levels, economic collapse,

nuclear bombs, EMP, a viral pandemic—it hardly matters which—and the inevitable regression to individualism, utilitarianism, and survivalism for humans in the aftermath. In this context, technical knowledge and the ability to communicate become means of fending off the monstrous hordes that will inevitably threaten your property, life, and loved ones. The phenomenon of survivalists—also known as “doomsday preppers”—and their survival guides, from which Max Brooks’ 2003 *Zombie Survival Guide* derives its format, exemplify this. A study of these individuals and their literature reveals that authors blend practical, technical information (some accurate, some less so) with ideological rhetoric. Some readers are highly influenced by the latter due to the powerful ethos of tech-comm, grounded in objective rationality (Mitchell, 2002). The survival guide genre appeals to authors because it offers a means of outlining a political and/or cultural program for reshaping a devastated, collapsed world; these can range from *The Turner Diaries*-inspired (William Pierce, 1978), white-supremacist state-crafting manuals, to communist strategy guides based on the works of Marx and Mao. The potential power of such documents raises the question: What ideologies are embedded in the forms of tech-comm that we commonly teach our students? How can we encourage students to confront and think critically about them?

As a tech-comm teacher, I recognize that the history of this field is deeply problematic. To this day, technical communication finds ways to serve an ethic of expediency at the expense of the environment and, of course, those less fortunate individuals who disproportionately bear the burden of such degradation. Technical communication is powerful—it reflects the ethos of science, orderliness, and civilization; zombies have always threatened these ideals. By confronting zombies in the classroom, students have an opportunity to apply theories of tech-comm to preserve humanity’s future. By the end of class, they may scrape by with their lives intact, but can they avoid becoming worse than the monsters they fear? Or will the zombies be the heroes, tearing down what tech-comm has erected, thus saving the environment from humans’ hubris of expediency? This ethical challenge provides a much-needed means of exposing tech-comm—far from being the pure, innocuous form of communication that students often believe it to be—it is ideological rhetoric that produces harmful environmental outcomes.

### 3. TOPICS

In my experience teaching “tech-comm vs. zombies” to college juniors and seniors (mostly aged 20–23), they all immediately recognize the cannibalistic, savage, undead monster as a common overused trope in pop culture. Our initial class discussions revolve around themes they associate with zombie media: viral pandemics, extreme bodily violence, loss of self, wilderness survivalism, urban scavenging, defensive tactics, reasoning before emotion, repopulation, technologism, group dynamics, and resource management, all of which contribute to unpacking tech-comm’s many functions, manifestations, and histories.

For example, in discussing the role of tech-comm in epidemiology, I direct them to consider the U.S. Centers for Disease Control’s “Zombie Preparedness” campaign, which encourages American families and schools to prepare emergency kits and plans for disaster situations. Here, the zombie apocalypse theme promotes a multifaceted approach to thinking about emergency preparedness, suggesting that preparations should be extensive and involve multiple potential scenarios (such as viral pandemics, radioactive fallout, extreme weather, active shooters, fire, etc.), with proper communication being essential to success (CDC, 2011). We discuss the types of technical documents designed for real-world disaster situations. I like sharing the U.S. government-issued 1950s pamphlet, “Survival Under Atomic Attack”, —and then imagine variations that could exist in a zombie-filled world. This activity gives us hands-on experience reading and analysing technical documents while allowing students to draw upon and develop practical knowledge. It also prompts ethical considerations: whose safety do these documents prioritize? Whom do they make “the other?” As observed by Pfau (2013), “Zombie narratives often teach prejudice towards people who embody negative traits, such as contagion, illness, strangeness, otherness, or savagery” (p. 311). Tech-comm is guilty of the same; indeed, perhaps no other discipline is more responsible for creating and reinforcing otherness and thus enacting violence against the other (see Katz, 1992). We then explore ways contemporary technical communicators can remedy the situation, including strategies Palmeri (2006) suggested that draw upon perspectives in disability studies.

Zombies have always been subjects of violence, as shown by the term’s etymological transformation through European colonialism and the African diaspora (Lauro, 2017). One cannot discuss the zombie without evoking a troubling string of signifiers, made even more pronounced by the commodification and exploitation of the zombie in popular culture as a prime target for extreme brutality in films, graphic novels, and video games—and indeed, in real life, as the U.S. military has experimented with using zombies in training simulations to avoid depicting the enemy as belonging to any specific nationality or ethnicity (Totten, 2014). Thus, their inclusion in a tech-comm course underscores the violent potential of communication within organized institutions, such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade or the Holocaust, which employed technical categories for groups of people (“Negro”, “Erbkrank”), based on scientific racism, to justify inhumane acts. The apocalyptic zombie, relentless and contagious, compels people to fight for survival; this often leads to their reclassification as something other than human (terms like “walker”, “biter”, and “cold body” are all used in *The Walking Dead*) (Tung, 2015). While extreme reactions of violence against analgesic zombies, particularly in self-defense, may appear justified, individuals typically hesitate initially because they seem human—and may actually be transformed versions of friends or loved ones. This is where tech-comm plays a role in zombie media: to justify (fictional and theoretical) violence against these beings, they have undergone more scientific scrutiny and theorization than perhaps any other popular monster, and thus are

described in technical terms suitable for a wide range of survivors. This has manifested in tropes such as “removing the head or destroying the brain” (à la 2004’s *Shaun of the Dead*), which the popular website TV Tropes notes relies on the scientific logic that an “undead” being with no pain response can only be halted by severing its nervous system or damaging its brain, thereby preventing its body from sending signals that allow movement and the ability to sense humans to devour (“Removing”, 2018). Moreover, zombies are often classified based on the origin and transmission method of the virus they spread or by the physical and behavioural traits that set them apart from the ideal, civilized human being. For instance, a pivotal moment in *The Walking Dead* S01E06 features revelations from Dr. Edwin Jenner, a scientist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, whose experiments with the zombie virus provide the show’s post-apocalyptic survivor protagonists with irrefutable proof that infected humans, once reanimated, exhibit no brain functionality indicative of human consciousness (“TS-19”, *cfr.* The Walking Dead Wiki, 2018). This leads to the unveiling of some protagonists’ repressed violent tendencies towards the “walkers”, effectively transforming them into more efficient killers and, presumably, survivors.

Zombie apocalypse survival guides and plans require ethical considerations regarding other survivors as well. At the most fundamental level, there is the utilitarian idea of “survival of the fittest”. Beyond that, people draw from various ideological frameworks to determine whose survival to prioritize. The novel *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (Max Brooks, 2006), a fictional history of a zombie outbreak that nearly wipes out humanity, illustrates an example of tech-comm used as a zombie contingency plan, prompting an intense ethical debate. “The Redeker Plan”, also known as “The South African war plan”, is introduced in the first chapter of a section titled “Turning the Tide”. It is the brainchild of Paul Redeker, a brilliant statistician—described as completely devoid of emotion—who is recruited by the apartheid South African government in 1984 to create a technical plan in response to the “doomsday scenario” of “an all-out uprising of [the country’s] indigenous African population” (p. 106). He considers a wide range of variables, including:

Population figures, terrain, resources, logistics... Cuba’s chemical weapons and its own country’s nuclear option [...]. [And] the determination of which Afrikaners would be saved and which had to be sacrificed... [including their] income, IQ, fertility, [and] an entire checklist of “desirable qualities”, including the subject’s location to a potential crisis zone. (p. 107)

After the fall of apartheid, Redeker is labelled a war criminal and goes into hiding. However, during the so-called “Great Panic” that marks the beginning of the zombie outbreak, he is recruited by agents of the new South African government to adapt his plan to address the rising undead threat. The Redeker Plan fundamentally involves preserving essential personnel for a functioning state apparatus within a well-defended and supplied “safe zone”. All citizens are ranked strictly based on their technical functions, after which

they are either admitted to the safe zone, left to fend for themselves, or confined to one of several fortified positions to serve as “human bait”, distracting and dividing the undead’s attention from the safe zone (p. 109). Although initially controversial among top-ranking officials, Redeker’s revised plan received approval from none other than Nelson Mandela, who insisted that Redeker would be the saviour of South Africa. Ultimately, many nations that survived *World War Z*, including the United States, Germany, and South Korea, adopted some variation—some more humane, others less—of the Redeker Plan. As they regain a foothold and begin the process of rebuilding, surviving nations conduct total war against the zombies, driving them out of human-inhabited areas to eventually expunge, eradicate, and erase the zombie virus from existence. But what has this plan, rooted in the principles of tech-comm, wrought upon human culture? How might we envision a less violent response to the zombie apocalypse?

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

I pose this challenge to my tech-comm students: compose articles for a collaborative zombie survival guide that avoids treating the zombies, or any surviving humans, with violence, but instead with respect. Though some students are taken aback or dismissive of the notion—after all, this goes against the essence of much zombie media—group discussions quickly uncover potential entry points. Whatever the reasons zombies may exist for, whatever they symbolize, we can learn from them. In *The Walking Dead*, Dr. Jenner refers to them as humanity’s “extinction event”, possibly resulting from a biological change in humans, an evolved or alien pathogen, or even human creation; in any case, they represent an epic global environmental catastrophe that demands some form of human response. Survivalists of all stripes are already preparing for “them”, believing that sufficient technical knowledge (and/or prepared resources) will be their salvation; indeed, some are hoping for the zombie apocalypse or another major catastrophe to provide an opportunity for them to establish a new culture based on their preferred ideology (Mitchell, 2002).

I’m certainly not saying that there’s anything wrong with being fascinated with zombies—they reflect numerous contemporary anxieties that are hard to invalidate. But tech-comm students can be given a unique opportunity to intervene in and change the narrative when it comes to post-apocalyptic survival. By teaching tech-comm versus zombies as a unit in class, as I have done, instructors may facilitate post-hermeneutical<sup>52</sup> activities and

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<sup>52</sup> Post-hermeneutics is an area of academic theory related to post-structuralism, involving approaches to scholarly inquiry that resist traditional methods of literary-style criticism. Proponents of post-hermeneutical pedagogy, such as Holmervik (2012), argue that achieving an understanding of commonly-accepted hermeneutic logics is too-often the end-goal of collegiate education, whereas invention—the generation of new ideas—is given little space. Playful, creative classroom activities/discussions, which the unit

discussions focused on ethical disciplinary practices, providing an oft-neglected space for critical, creative thinking in a course that's far too notorious for rote, tedious coursework.

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“tech-comm versus zombies” aims to be, offer a means to extend hermeneutic understandings of course material.

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**CHAPTER 25.**  
**ZOMBIE RECONSTRUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: THE**  
**ZOMBIE MERMAID**

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We exist in a sea of powerful stories: They are the condition of finite rationality and personal and collective life histories. There is no way out of stories; but no matter what the One-Eyed Father says, there are many possible structures, not to mention contents, of narration. Changing the stories, in both material and semiotic senses, is a modest intervention worth making. (Haraway, 1997, p. 45)

The Internet is a boundless sea of creativity, and it is perhaps no surprise that various curious new fictional mermaidly entities have surfaced from its depths. While exploring fan art, I came across a series of eerie aquatic hybrids which I tentatively grouped under the label of “monstrous mermaids”, giving them informal names such as the Frankenstein Mermaid, the Vampire Mermaid, the Robot Mermaid and, most notably, the Zombie Mermaid (Mussies, 2020). A cursory search for the term “zombie” on social media swiftly reveals that the Zombie Mermaid has emerged as a distinct subgenre within the realm of the undead. Thousands of users on platforms such as Tumblr and Instagram now employ the hashtag #zombiemermaid, primarily to showcase their costumes, cosplay, and makeup artistry. Once more, the zombie archetype has been reimagined—reshaped to suit shifting cultural and contextual landscapes—just as the mermaid figure has undergone its own metamorphosis (Mussies, 2024). The result is a striking hybrid: two once-separate mythic beings fused into a fresh, imaginative construct embraced by creative communities across the globe. This chapter explores the origins and evolution of the Zombie Mermaid, and situates her within the broader traditions of both zombie and mermaid tropes.

**Figure 1**

*Still from Mermaid Zombie Video by Ana Cedoviste*



*Source:* <https://youtu.be/M3ZuryoThwk> (Cedoviste, 2019).

## 1. HORROR MERMAIDS

To qualify as a Zombie Mermaid, the figure must embody both a mermaid’s anatomy and a zombie’s defining characteristics. Notably, many themes traditionally associated with the living dead—such as the absence of a soul—also appear in mermaid folklore. Moreover, in line with the classical portrayal of zombies, the Zombie Mermaid is categorically “undead” (Mussies, 2022a). As with other members of the undead, she “symbolise[s] that which cannot be revealed: distorted or lost memories, the experiences of the deceased, and the horrific reality” (Ceraso, 2006, p. 207). Although there is still little scholarly discourse about this phenomenon, the depiction of the Zombie Mermaid seems to fit in the well-researched larger and older traditions of horror mermaids. The differences between those two categories

will be explored by looking at examples of these historical horror mermaids, such as those in Japanese folklore. Noteworthy, Japan is not the only source of these fantastic beings: According to Lucy Fraser, “many stories of human and fish hybrid creatures came to Japan by way of China” (2013, p. 181). Horror mermaids also appear in Greek mythology (like the Sirens), the Inuit religion (especially goddess Sedna) and within the Fiji tradition as constructed “hybrids” of mummified fish and ape parts.

In addition to the historical creatures, more recent examples can be found in the 1988 movie *Mermaid in a Manhole* (Hideshi Hino, 1988)—which is firmly rooted in Japanese folklore about *ningyo* and other horror mermaids—in the television film *She Creature* (Sebastian Gutierrez, 2001), in the American exploitation horror film *House of 1000 Corpses* (Rob Zombie, 2003) and in the Japanese action comedy film *Ob! My Zombie Mermaid* (Naoki Kubo, 2004). Also, many books and modern media nowadays feature Zombie Mermaids as protagonists.

## 2. THE NINGYO 人魚

Nearly every culture has its interpretation(s) of the “water woman” (Mussies, 2022b), and Japan is no exception to this rule. Because of the geography of their country, the Japanese have a close relationship with the ocean surrounding their islands. This inspired many tales about fantastic aquatic beings, like the Ningyo. Ningyo can be seen as a traditional Japanese female water creature, which means, literally, “human fish”. This fish-like creature from Japanese folk beliefs does not fit the format of beautiful Western mermaids but resembles a sea monster. According to the descriptions, her mouth resembles a monkey’s; her teeth are as small as a fish with gold-shining scales. At the same time, she has a calm voice similar to that of a lark or flute. Their meat is savoury and is said to give immortality to anyone who eats it. The capture of a Ningyo is to cause storms and disaster. It was, therefore, said that if one accidentally catches one, they should be thrown back into the sea. A Ningyo, flushed to the beach, was considered an omen of war and great misfortune.

Mermaids changed their appearance according to various Japanese eras. In the Kamakura era (鎌倉時代 *Kamakura jidai*, 1185–1333), Japanese mermaids were described as fish with human-like faces, like in Studio Ghibli’s Japanese animated fantasy film *Ponyo* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2008). In the latter part of the Edo period (江戸時代 *Edo jidai*, 1603–1868), the picture adapted more to European mermaids, with the upper body of a human being and the lower body of a fish. An example from the Edo period is a Ningyo in *Konjaku Hyakki Shūi* (今昔百鬼拾遺, Supplement to The Hundred Demons from the Present and the Past, around 1781), the third book of influential supernatural bestiaries by Toriyama Sekien (pseudonym for Sano Toyofusa). The Ningyo is found on the fourth image

within the first volume (which is called cloud (雲). The figure is settled in the sea between waves and features a beak and claws. Many horror films that include mermaids involve creatures like these Japanese monsters.

**Figure 2**

*Konjaku Hyakki Shūi (Toriyama Sekien, 1781)*



Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ningyo#/media/File:SekienNingyo.jpg> (Toriyama Sekien, 1781).

### 3. MODERN MEDIA

Judging by the many re-emerging creatures in modern media, the idea of the Ningyō has been reincarnated in today's society. This is in agreement with the Japanese culture of many other fantastic beings, as, in the words of Deborah Shamoon, “[m]any Japanese anime

and manga narratives draw on Japanese folklore, reimagining tales for a modern audience, and contain references to or examples of supernatural creatures” (2013, p. 276). A recent example that can be encountered on social media is the short film written by Miguel Ortega and Tran Ma called *The Ningyo* (Miguel Ortega, 2017). This film takes place in 1909 and is about “cryptozoology”—the search for mythological or unproven creatures. Described by the makers as a “Faustian tale about losing oneself in the process of achieving our goals”, the story is about a professor called Marlowe (named after the 16th-century writer of *Doctor Faustus*) who finds a piece of a map with directions to where the mythical Japanese Ningyo should be found. As explained above, the Happyaku Bikuni legend claims that whoever consumes the flesh of the Ningyo will attain remarkable longevity. Tempted by this thought, Professor Marlowe presents the project to his peers. Unsurprisingly, his colleagues mock him and start dismissing him as a fraud, corroborating Professor Marlowe’s decision to look for the Ningyo himself. Two other examples of modern media Ningyo are *Mermaid in a Manhole* (Hideshi Hino, 1988) and *Siren* (Keiichiro Toyama, 2003).

These present-day Ningyo stories are fascinating because of their rich afterlife on the Internet. Take, for example, the 2012 horror mermaid fan art (Figure 3) found on Tumblr but originated from DeviantArt. It is based on the 1988 movie *Manbôru no naka no ningyo*, translated as *Mermaid in a Manhole*. Being part of the *Guinea Pig* horror series, its story is a retelling of a manga by Hideshi Hino (1946), a specialist in horror stories who also directed this part of the series. The story revolves around an artist who, while trying to overcome the death of his wife, encounters a wounded mermaid in the sewage system of Okinawa. He takes her home with him and sees her injuries, but after a while, she begins to bleed from her wounds again. Being an artist rather than a doctor, he draws a portrait of the bleeding mermaid, but her condition worsens. The mermaid dies, and the artist dismantles her body when the police storm into his apartment. It turns out that the portrait he painted represents his wife instead of a mermaid, and that he has dismembered the body of his wife. It remains unclear whether he has killed his wife.

Figure 3

*Mermaid in a Manhole* (daddy-likes-men11, 2012)



Source: <https://www.deviantart.com/daddy-likes-men11/art/Mermaid-in-a-Manhole-326094118>  
(daddy-likes-men11, 2012).

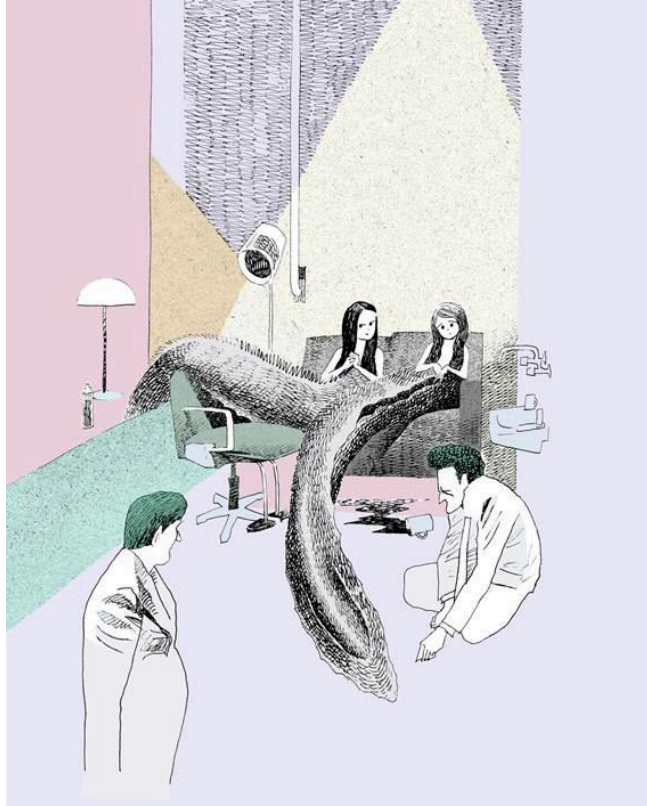
Another example of the Ningyo in modern media that became popular in Europe and the USA is *Siren*, a 2003 horror video game re-released in 2016. Even though it bears the name of the Ancient Greek variant of the water woman, the mermaid figure is closer to the Japanese Ningyo. However, there are similarities between the two creatures. These similarities are based instead on agency rather than terms of appearance, as the sirens are described as either very beautiful or with bird-like body parts. However, regarding agency, both creatures are victims of their nature. The Sirens might be seen as more powerful but still lack agency, for they only do as their nature and instinct tell them. In the game, the Siren of the title is the god's call, summoning Hanuda's residents to immerse themselves in the red water, thus creating an army of subordinates called "shibito" (しびと), the undead or literary "corpse people". The primary antagonist of the video game is based on the character Yao

Bikuni, and the story's background is loosely based on the Yao Bikuni legend about a fisherman who catches a fish with a girl's face.

More monstrous mermaids are featured in *Ningyo Shirizuru* (人魚シリーズ, Mermaid Saga, 1984) and *Ningyo Hime Den* (Legend of the Little Mermaid, 2002) by Mizuno Junko. Murai describes these mermaids as “grotesque-cute” (Murai, 2011, p. 145), a term that connects cute/adorable to unnatural/creepy elements. More concretely, Mizuno's mermaids might look cute, but they are—in the words of Marc Sebastian-Jones—“bloodthirsty prostitutes bent on killing and eating humans to avenge their mother's death” (Duggan, Haase, & Callow, 2016, p. 659).

In Peter Dendle's *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia: 2000–2010* (2012), the archetype of the Zombie Mermaid is mentioned once, in the context of the 2004 Japanese action-comedy film *Ob! My Zombie Mermaid*, directed by Naoki Kudo. This movie, originally titled *Ob! House of Wrestling*, is about a fighter, played by professional wrestler Shinya Hashimoto (1965–2005)—who has to obviate that his wife transforms into a mermaid-like monster. Within the classical interpretation of a Zombie Mermaid, there is no “real” Zombie Mermaid in the movie, but more a horror mermaid analogous to the one in *Guinea Pig: Mermaid in a Manhole*. Closer to Zombie Mermaids are the creatures in two films from 2017: *The Lure* [Agnieszka Smoczyńska, 2017 (Polish release 2015)] and *Cold Skin* (Xavier Gens, 2017). The first is a very peculiar film set against the background of an '80s nightclub in the Polish communist era. The monsters in this mermaid musical-cum-horror are Siren-like dancers and singers who cannot go against their nature of craving for human flesh (Mussies, 2018). The French-Spanish sci-fi horror movie *Cold Skin* is just as odd in a Lovecraftian tale of isolation and madness. Set in 1914, a young meteorologist shares an island with a weird old man. At night, they get attacked by strange creatures from the sea: horror mermaids.

#### Figure 4



Source: <https://tsuchika.exblog.jp/238412139/> (Nishimura, 2018).

#### 4. FANFICTION

Even though all these horror mermaids may have inspired the Zombie Mermaid cosplay, they do not quite match the characteristic image of a Zombie Mermaid hybrid. Thus, to find “real” Zombie Mermaids, we must return to the Internet—the “wonderfully sprawling repository of arcane fiction and crypto-*everything*” as Sheila Hallerton describes it (2016, p. 112). “Its fragmentary and often inter-generative texts thrive and gain momentum with the slightest (and often most erroneous) of pretexts, generating threads of online mythology that variously intersect with older folkloric and mythological stories or else develop independently” (Hallerton, 2016, p. 112). Online, the “genuine” Zombie Mermaids can not only be found in cosplay but also in fanfiction, such as Michelle McCrary’s “The True Story of the Little Mermaid” (2011), in which even Andersen’s mermaid eventually becomes a Zombie Mermaid (Turgeon, 2011). This fits perfectly in the tradition of various

young Japanese writers, who published a series of “open-ended and nonlinear” variations on Andersen’s fairy tale (Fraser, 2017, p. 13), thus blending European mermaids with Ningyo elements. A recent example is “The Zombie Mermaid” (2018) by Katelynn E. Koontz, in which the mermaid kills out of a desire to eat (Mussies, 2022b).

Adele cannot go home to the ocean without transforming into this vicious beast, and she both hates it, and loves it, and can’t even begin to fathom it. The ocean song is something that she cannot ignore and it surges, now, fuelled by the storm, telling Adele what she must do. She listens to it. Talons dig into the man’s skin and with one sharp wrench, she has his head pulled to the side and her sharp teeth digging into his neck. The ocean cannot be ignored. Neither, thinks Adele, distantly, as the tang of copper floods her mouth, can the hunger. (Koontz, 2018)

This underscores how the Internet works as a source for new mythologies. We not only gather around the campfire in a restricted social environment to tell the latest adventures of our heroes, but also expand to find and connect to each other on the Internet. As Jenkins (2006) proposes: “fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in creating and circulating central cultural myths” (p. 289). This participatory approach takes on fan studies from a different perspective. First, fandom is considered a social network culture, thereby leading to the observation of fan practice (Gilbert, 2015). Second, there is the perception of viewing the fans as individual agents who contribute to the infrastructure of specific works, similar to the Renaissance and Baroque rewritings of Classical Mythology (Mussies, 2013). Lastly, participation also entails involvement in fan activity that is not necessarily creative but engaging in the sense of fan-made creations, such as commenting on other fans’ work (Duffet, 2013). Since the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a significant increase in published literature, which has also accelerated in parallel with the exponential growth of the internet. New media have fostered a “phenomenally increasing proliferation of fairy-tale transformations in today’s ‘old’ and ‘new’ media” (Schwabe, 2016, p. 81). According to Sheenagh Pugh, the fastest-growing way of writing in the world is “fiction based on a situation and characters originally created by someone else”, aka fan-fiction (Pugh, 2005, p. 9). Besides the new stories written online, the web as a platform for ideas also provides us with new views on old stories. On the popular website Quora in February 2018, a contributor under the name of C. R. Sierra wrote an elaborate answer that qualifies Inuit goddess Sedna as a Zombie Mermaid:

Though not always explicitly stated, her being cast into the sea and sinking to the depths implies drowning; this is followed by her rising again as a spirit, which can be safely called undeath. You might think this would qualify her more as a ghost than a zombie, but just you hold your horses. If simply rising from the dead isn’t enough for you: She is sometimes described as a hag, missing not only her fingers but also an eye; her body bloated with wrinkled, peeling skin, deathly pale,

perhaps tinged with green or blue—the way a corpse looks when it has rotted awhile in water and been picked at by marine life. This image is certainly in line with that of a zombie.

Ame Papatsie adapted this myth as a stop motion animation short *Qalupalik* (2010). Besides confirming *Qalupalik*'s identity markers as found in written myths of the story, Papatsie remediated the myth into a film by adding a layer of audio. The film's music strongly resembles the well-known American SF action horror film *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987). This confirms the mermaid's reclaiming of agency. Being a predator, the mermaid is not owned; she owns. As Bram Dijkstra (1989) writes about, the "woman as man's exclusive and forever pliable private property, on the one hand, and her transformation, upon her denial of man's ownership rights to her, into a polyandrous predator indiscriminately lusting after man's seminal essence, on the other" (p. 334). This new composite character of the zombie mermaid might be read as a metaphor for a new form of metamorphosis: from sweet, submissive, beautiful mermaids to monstrous predators.

## 5. CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT BOOKS

Perhaps inspired by the many stories online, the Zombie Mermaid recently appeared in various children's and young adult books. Via Amazon, one can order *Death Under the Sea. Fables of the Undead* (Dina T. Seth, 2015), *Zombie Mermaids From The Deep* (Chris B., 2017) and *The Zombie Mermaid of the Haunted Loch* (Gemma Clark, 2017). In the first book, *Dead Under the Sea*, the story starts with the mermaid going for a new experience. She meets a prince and falls in love with him. After rescuing her when she becomes a Zombie Mermaid, she is portrayed as craving human meat. Some properties of a classical European mermaid are given within the story: she is wonderful, curious, and excited. Unfortunately, and perhaps due to the book's shortness, the character portrayal is very shallow and thus lacks an adequate description of the features of the later Zombie Mermaid. Also, very little light is thrown into the mermaid's life, although we do learn about some qualities of the mermaid. The book does not include a significant amount of violence, but in the end, the Zombie Mermaid becomes evil when she attacks her family. This particular ending may also put a question mark behind the recommendation of this book as a story for children.

*The Zombie Mermaid of the Haunted Loch* is about Lachina, a 14-year-old mermaid haunted by sea ghosts who has turned into a Zombie Mermaid. The book offers more comprehensive knowledge about the mermaid's life and why she feels lonely. Although the mermaid transforms into a zombie in the early parts of the story, she does not seem evil. She is portrayed with many human qualities, creating an instant connection to her, even for teenage kids. As for kids looking for, the Zombie Mermaid also looks for a friend to share her life with. The book explains why living in a secluded part of the waters with few colours and

lacking social interaction has made her life dull. The book elucidates in great detail why she made the decisions she did, comparatively in-depth and dwells within each character longer. Moreover, the book does not portray the Zombie Mermaids as evil or beastly: the Zombie Mermaids are more human.

*Zombie Mermaids from the Deep* was written by Bobi Christina under the pseudonym of Chris B. The book was announced to be part one of a series, started as online fan fiction (published on Patreon and Facebook since 2017; and a second part was published in 2025: *Zombie Mermaids From The Deep 2. Escape From the Bay*). The first story takes place about a century from now, when humans have destroyed Mother Earth through immense pollution after World War IV. The book's central theme is post-apocalyptic fiction and survival against all odds. Like in other apocalyptic movies and books, humans have destroyed nature and exploited every piece of Earth. The resulting climate change has made living even more complex, and many areas are already submerged under water, which is the habitat for new mermaid-like life forms.

The book includes many ideas as well as concepts from different movies, like the idea of a show featuring virtual reality through holograms and the overall artificial setting—something we have been confronted with in *The Hunger Games* (written by Suzanne Collins, 2008; adapted to film by Gary Ross, 2012) but which was already present in the Japanese SF thriller *Battle Royale* (Koushun Takami, 1999; adapted to film by Kinji Fukasaku, 2000). Then, there is the part in which the cities are shielded from the outside world by enormous walls, and the insiders are encircled, which was also used in *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013), where Jerusalem was protected the same way. The author has wittingly referenced 21st century recent events like Donald Trump trying to erect a wall between Mexico and the USA (Chris, 2017, p. 60). Also, the movie shares the idea of noises attracting the zombies.

The portrayal of zombies and mermaids offers a compelling dichotomy. Mermaids are typically depicted as enchanting sea creatures, embodiments of beauty and allure capable of mesmerizing humans. In stark contrast, zombies represent the grotesque and decaying, horrifying amalgamations of bone and muscle, stripped of humanity and aesthetic appeal. The book does not limit the description of mermaids as explicitly beautiful but also includes their evil features, much like the descriptions of the Sirens. Thus, something very popular in pop culture, like the zombie apocalypse, is elegantly linked with something relished by kids and adults alike.

The Zombie Mermaids (or mermaid zombies) are fast at turning people into zombies: Just a few seconds after the bite, their victims are transformed. The pace with which the mermaids attacked contrasts with the slow “undead” movements that were typical for zombies before the paradigmatic film *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002). Although beautiful, the mermaids had a peculiar growl and sound that zombies make. Also, they

mostly looked like bones and muscles, and chunks of muscle would often just fall off their bodies, similar to the dissimulation shown in *Mermaid in a Manhole*. Interestingly, bitten victims did not instantly lose all of their human qualities, as they frequently called for help even after getting attacked. The crossover between mermaid and zombies implies an underwater habitat, unlike normal zombies who would dominate on land, hence escape is almost impossible. The book thus illustrates how mankind is destroying the Earth at its current rate, while the author not only voices concerns about the future but also intertwines that theme with the Zombie Mermaid Apocalypse.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The new composite character of the Zombie Mermaid arose around the turn of the 20th to the 21st century, in the context of media-lore—present-day media-based folklore (Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics, 2014)—or “digital storytelling”, which can be regarded as our modern way of creating myths and legends. Thousands of users on Tumblr and Instagram use the hashtag #zombiemermaid, mostly to show their costumes, cosplay, and makeup art. Thus, stories of mermaids and zombies have changed again, which gives way to novel interpretations by creative minds all over the world. This new composite character fits in the well-researched larger and older traditions of horror mermaids such as the Ningyo. The horror mermaids are very much alive in film and computer games, whilst the Zombie Mermaid is more present in fanfiction, fanart and books for youngsters. This new trope offers new ways for scholars to engage in cultural analysis. The rise of the Zombie Mermaid occurs against a backdrop of severe social crises experienced by Western Society in the first decade of the 21st century. The economic crisis, political instability and disenchantment, and the War on Terror are some of the major causes for a lingering sense of instability and fear that has manifested itself. Moreover, as a very feminine variant of zombie types, this new trend raises questions about female agency and empowerment (Mussies, 2018). Future research should address how (co-)creators reflect upon agency and politics through their Zombie Mermaids, and what this tells us about the world we live in.

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## CHAPTER 26. ZOMBIES AND MUSIC

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

An intriguing scene occurs midway through *Night of the Living Dead*, George Romero's 1968 film that gave birth to modern zombie mythology. Besieged along with several others in an abandoned farmhouse by flesh-eating ghouls, a young man and woman volunteer to make a help-seeking run for it in the farm's pickup truck; their attempt to pump fuel into the truck goes awry, and they end up setting fire not just to the vehicle but also to themselves. Accompanied by a loud and appropriately anxious underscore, the third member of their party fights his way back to the farmhouse and violently expresses his displeasure with another of the farmhouse denizens. Then the film gets quiet, with the camera returning to the now smouldering truck and showing the zombies, as if at a sausage sizzle, sitting on the grass and calmly munching on the entrails of the couple who had just burned to death.

It certainly seems as though the zombies in this scene eat their meat with relish. Yet one has to wonder: Are the zombies *aware* that their food on this occasion is not raw but cooked? If they are aware, is it possible that they *prefer* a hot meal over their normal fare? If they do have such a preference, do they explicitly exhibit it *anywhere* in the now vast corpus of zombie cinema?

After viewing dozens of zombie films and searching through the academic literature that comments on them, one might conclude that—as most people likely would have suspected in the first place—hungry zombies care about nothing other than that their food be fresh. For zombies at a “picnic” or anywhere else, a charred forearm is, in essence, the same as a thigh that drips with blood. Zombies eat constantly but without discernment or discrimination.

This provokes a comparison with several modern cultural phenomena. With zombie lore past as well as present as its backdrop, and with music as the always foregrounded theme, this essay explores the role of taste in Western society. It suggests—with pessimism, alas—that mindless consumption of a certain kind of music can be regarded as zombie-like

behaviour. In an up-beat conclusion, however, the essay makes the case that at least one form of “music of the living dead” is perhaps not such a bad thing.

## 2. MUSIC IN ZOMBIELAND

Music mattered to pre-Romero zombies, and so it is no surprise that films featuring these unfortunate creatures are rich in plot-related music of the sort that persons involved in movie-making have long called “source music” (because its supposed source is visible, or at least implied, in the on-screen imagery) and what film scholars since the 1980s have called “diegetic music” (because the music is not superimposed upon the storytelling but actually belongs to the story’s narrative world, or diegesis).

Cinema’s early zombies, it should be remembered, are not risen corpses of cannibalistic persuasion; they are living human beings who have been cast, employing drugs or hypnosis, into a state of mindlessness that typically is coupled with slave-like subservience to some sort of master. Although these zombies’ anthropological origins are African, their manifestation in Western culture, thanks largely to the 1929 publication of William B. Seabrook’s *The Magic Island*, is distinctly Haitian. Seabrook reported in his colourful travelogue that the Haitian religion popularly known as voodoo, which, in fact, had very little to do with zombies, was sonically characterized by chanting and drumming. Thus, chanting and drumming—hardly “authentic” but nonetheless indicative of a mysterious cultural Other—resonates throughout most of the early zombie films. In some cases (for example, in Victor Halperin’s 1932 *White Zombie*, the first film to capitalize on interest in zombie culture) this clichéd musical exoticism serves primarily to conjure a general atmosphere and to lend credence to specific scenes; in other cases (most strikingly in Jacques Tourneur’s 1943 *I Walked with a Zombie*) the music figures importantly in the narrative, heard from afar and serving as a signal for zombified persons to cease their quotidian activities and come straight away to whomever might be issuing the zombie “call”. Even if only for nostalgic reasons having to do with how they came to be, zombies in the early films tended to be keenly sensitive to music.

Zombies in the later films, on the other hand, are, for the most part, numb to music. This is not to say that they lack a sense of hearing; Romero’s zombies and their offspring certainly have ears, and they are often shown to use them—like their eyes and, perhaps, their noses—to locate prey. Being able to hear, of course, is not the same as being able to listen or understand whatever it is that one might hear or listen to<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, in his 2002 monograph *À l’écoute*, attempts to distinguish between what is meant by the verbs “entendre” and “écouter”. Nancy makes his points clearly enough, but only when he embellishes the tricky words with full explanations. Just as in conversational French, “entendre” and “écouter” are interchangeable by and large, so in everyday English, the verbs “hear” and “listen” are interchangeable. Following Nancy’s lead, in this essay, “hearing” means the unconscious act of

Rarely is the modern zombie depicted as having the slightest interest in, or even awareness of, music. Exceptions are found in two of the Romero films, both of which explore—not just in isolated images but in their overall plots—the possibility that at least some zombies might retain fragments of memory. Deep into Romero’s 1985 *Day of the Dead*, a more or less gentle zombie known as “Bub”, isolated from his fellows and used as a guinea pig in experiments having to do with a hoped-for zombie rehabilitation, is shown to react—mostly with bewilderment, but also with a faint glimmer of awe—to a recording of the “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s ninth symphony that he hears via headphones. At the very start of Romero’s 2005 *Land of the Dead*, after a long title sequence whose montage of news reports explains how the zombie apocalypse happened “some time ago” and then a shift to the situation “today”, both the camera and its microphone focus briefly on a trio of zombies who huddle in a park gazebo; one of them can do nothing more than erratically bang his trombone against the gazebo’s wooden railing, but his two colleagues are apparently more successful in their efforts to “recall” their pre-zombie lives as musicians: one of them taps out an erratic beat on a tambourine and the other makes fart noises on a tuba.

Although perhaps he draws titters from some members of the audience, Romero’s tuba-playing zombie is not comic but pathetic. Alas, the idea of putting music in the hands of zombies and then having them play it for laughs—an idea as sophisticated as making fun of disabled persons—seems to be gaining popularity (Twohy, 2008, pp. 32–33). Likely inspired as much by Bollywood as by the 1983 video with which horror-film director John Landis accompanied Michael Jackson’s recording of the song “Thriller”, Matthew Leutwyler has a mob of zombies erupt into a dance routine at the end of his 2004 *Dead and Breakfast*; likely inspired both by “Thriller” and the 1973 *Rocky Horror Show*, in 2003 a Canadian team headed by George Reinblatt put forth a rock musical based on the various films in Sam Raimi’s *The Evil Dead* series. One could add to this list such efforts as John McLean’s 2007 *Z: A Zombie Musical*, John McPhail’s tune-filled 2017 *Anna and the Apocalypse*, and Ty Mabrey’s 2018 *Zombies* (a musical romp based on Todd Strauss-Schulson’s 2012 TV movie *Zombies and Cheerleaders*), but these—along with the above-mentioned examples from the Romero films—would only help prove the point: in *serious* modern zombie lore, zombie-related diegetic music figures hardly at all.

Apropos the relationship between music and the typical modern zombie, an iconic scene occurs early in Edgar Wright’s 2004 zombie spoof film *Shaun of the Dead*. Having heard via the television that the best way to deal with zombies is to remove their heads, the title character and his besotted friend attempt to defend themselves by hurling vinyl LP discs at a pair of zombies they discover in their garden. Even as they battle for their lives, Shaun and Ed comment critically on the musical content of each of the albums that they hopefully

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taking in audible signals through one’s ears, and “listening” means one’s active paying attention to those signals.

send spinning towards the zombies' throats. A shard of a shattered disc is momentarily embedded in the forehead of one of the zombies, but otherwise, the discs have no effect, just as whatever music was recorded on these discs—were it to be played within the zombies' earshot—would by the zombies go not just unappreciated but unnoticed.

Surely the more alert members of the audience for Zack Snyder's 2004 remake of Romero's 1978 *Dawn of the Dead* will both notice and appreciate the choice of popular songs that are boiled down and transformed into sugar-coated instrumentals that ooze from the loudspeakers of a shopping mall that has been overrun by a horde of zombies. Clever moviegoers will note the irony, and thus the dark humour, in a stumbling zombie walk accompanied by uniformly insipid versions of Debbie Boone's originally exultant "You Light Up My Life", Bobby McFerrin's originally upbeat and insouciant "Don't Worry, Be Happy", Disturbed's originally demoniacal "Down with the Sickness", and Air Supply's originally cloying "All Out of Love". But for the zombies exposed to this saccharine music, as for their prototypes in Romero's 1978 film, it all goes in one ear and out the other. And this raises a bothersome question.

Hinting at the idea of latent memory that Romero would explore more fully in his later films, one of the humans who has taken refuge at the mall suggests that the suburbanite zombies have gravitated toward the enclosed, air-conditioned shopping centre because it is a place that, for them, seems familiar, and that their mall-walking is, in essence, a replication of a familiar routine. And so, one wonders: The zombies in Romero's film, as well as in the remake, are, of course, oblivious to the piped-in music, but were they not oblivious to this music even *before* they became zombies?

### 3. ZOMBIES IN MUSICLAND

"Muzak *is* zombie music", writes a Canadian musicologist at the very start of an essay that analyses the soundtracks of both versions of *Dawn of the Dead* (Carpenter, 2013, p. 1231; emphasis added). The psychologists involved in the popularization of Muzak® in the 1930s would have disagreed, for their plan involved not lulling listeners into states of somnambulance but, rather, stimulating them to work—in offices as well as in factories—at maximally efficient rates. Over the years, however, as the company's product migrated from busy workplaces to venues where activity tended to be more passive, Muzak®-style arrangements developed a reputation for blandness. In the introduction to his history of the genre, Joseph Lanza argues that the standard condemnations of what is now generically known as muzak—"as 'boring', 'dehumanized', 'vapid', 'cheesy', and (insult of insults) 'elevator music'"—are all "based more on cultural prejudice than honest musical appraisal"; however connoisseurs might judge it, he attests, muzak serves a purpose in our hurried and harried culture, and he reminds us that "not every musician should be obligated to reassure us that we are not zombies" (Lanza, 1994, pp. 2–3).

That Lanza, in a book that, in essence, is a defence of “easy listening” music, should use the term “zombies” at all is interesting. Many commentators have likened muzak to an anodyne that, especially in stressful environments such as airports and dentists’ waiting rooms, indeed has a calming and thus beneficial effect on its hearers. Relatively few have compared muzak to a narcotic, or worse, that actually deadens its hearers’ sensibilities. One of the harshest critics was the British comic writer Spike Milligan, an outspoken champion of peace and quiet, who allegedly said, somewhere, something along the lines of “whereas tranquillity liberates the soul, muzak destroys it”.

It is going too far to suggest that mere exposure to muzak *turns* its audience into the equivalent of zombies. But it is not unreasonable to suggest that mall-walkers’ indiscriminate absorption of muzak is a zombie-like behaviour. Just as the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* depend on fresh meat for their survival, so the visitors to shopping malls—like diners at fine restaurants, attendees at art galleries’ opening receptions, guests checking into hotels, etc.—depend not on music but on muzak for their satisfaction. They expect the environments in which they spend their money to be sonically decorated with music loud enough to mask incidental noises but not so loud that it calls attention to itself; more importantly, they do *not* expect—they do not *want*—to be confronted with music they might actually care to listen to.

What would happen, one wonders, if the sound system suddenly failed at the mall? The result would not be pandemonium, but neither would it be the beautiful chaos that, with its buzz of buskers and energized conversation, gives flavour to street markets. Most likely, the muzak-less mall would simply be a less crowded place, populated by persons determined to visit particular stores but not much inclined toward browsing. Browsing would not be actively *discouraged* in a relatively quiet environment, but it would certainly not be *encouraged*, and thus also not encouraged would be the impulse buying on which shopping malls thrive.

Alternatively, what would happen if shopping centres and the like offered their patrons not muzak but music that counts as interesting? From a commercial point of view, the results would be disastrous.

If readers can accept the idea that no musically sentient person can ignore the fact that pieces such as, say, John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme” or Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 5 are rich in content, they must also accept the idea that mere recognition of that content, let alone an intellectual grasp of it, cannot be equated with affection for those pieces; precisely *because* it is music of substance, serious Coltrane and Tchaikovsky is not everyone’s cup of tea, and doubtless proprietors who filled their sound systems with such inarguably “worthy” music would find that it drives away more customers than it attracts. But the results would be equally disastrous in situations where *all* of the clientele favours whatever “background” music is at hand; in such cases, proprietors would likely find that

their patrons want the music to be *not* in the background but in the foreground and that instead of spending money they would spend both time and energy in active listening.

The purveyors of muzak worked through these questions long ago, and it seems that they came up with the right formula. They make no attempt to manufacture and issue music that appeals to everyone, for they know that such music does not exist. Nor do they offer music that might hold special appeal for certain members of the crowd, for they also know that what appeals to some might not appeal to others. Instead, they traffic in music that (they hope) is offensive to no one. And for the most part they succeed.

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Christmas shopping is always difficult for me, perhaps because I grew up in an extended family that took most forms of holiday music seriously; when I hear such music in the malls, I cannot help but pay attention to it, and upon paying attention, almost always I find its homogenized treatments to be highly irritating. Otherwise, I hardly notice a mall's pervasive muzak. Having no emotional/intellectual investment whatsoever in the pop/pap that makes up the bulk of muzak's repertoire, I find that—to my surprise, but only when I stop to think about it—I can simply ignore the sound system's output as I go about whatever mundane business has brought me to the mall in the first place.

Although with my ears, I cannot help but *receive* the muzak, with my brain, I can easily decide not to *perceive* it. I do not pause to wax metaphysically about this. If I did that, I suppose I might conclude that I was, at least for a while, transforming myself into a “cognitive zombie” [i.e., “a creature with the capacity for cognition but with no capacity for consciousness” (Smithies, 2012, p. 343)], or a “constitution zombie” [i.e., a being that is conscious, but only partially (Olson, 2018, p. 220)], or a “philosopher's zombie” [i.e., a human being for the most part “normal” yet nevertheless, in some way, “dark inside” (Lyon, 2011, p. 9)]. And that would put a serious damper on my visit to the mall. I'm there, I have to remind myself, simply to buy some fresh underwear or to get a new band for yet another cheap wristwatch, and it's only for the sake of short-term psychic self-preservation—not as an intellectual exercise—that I switch off a certain part of my sensory mechanism. Unlike most of my fellow shoppers, I do not *need* muzak to keep me going; I know I'm not a zombie when I go shopping, but I also know that I can't visit the mall without making myself at least a little bit brain-dead.

#### 4. MUSIC ZOMBIES

“Jazz has a zombie problem”, warned Phil Freeman in a column for the online music magazine *Stereogum* (Freeman, 2016). He was not writing about Thelonious Monk, the jazz pianist who in the late 1940s and early '50s played what was familiarly known as “zombie

music” because its “screwy chords reminded us of music from [horror films]” (Mary Lou Williams, 1954, p. 11). Rather, he was simply calling attention to what he felt was almost a truth, that “when the average person thinks about jazz”, he or she thinks about the likes of Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Charlie Parker, all of whom have in common not just the fact that they were great musicians but also the fact that they are dead. “Musicians who’ve been dead for decades continue to stalk the commercial landscape”, Freeman complained; they represent “the mouldering, dusty face of jazz”, and they are the main reason why “jazz’s image is that of a museum exhibit”.

Similarly negative thoughts pervade the arena of “classical” music, or what is sometimes pretentiously labelled “art” music or “serious” music, but which I prefer to think of—because it obviates value judgments—simply as music that nowadays is presented mostly in the concert hall. In the case of classical music, however, the audience’s preference for works by dead composers is not just a matter of opinion. In an impressively thorough survey of the repertoire of the New York Philharmonic over a period of no less than 175 years, statistician Eric William Lin recently demonstrated that the orchestra’s programming has pretty much *always* favoured music by composers who, at the time of the music’s performance, were no longer alive (Lin, 2017). Anyone who doubts Lin’s statistical conclusions needs only to spend six or seven daylight hours listening to a classical music radio station—commercial *or* government-supported—in virtually any city in the Western world. Some stations will indeed present “adventurous” music by living composers, but usually only on “ghetto” programs aired late at night, and for political reasons, even in the middle of the day, they will pay a modicum of attention to music by “local” folk. Overwhelmingly, though, what the classical-music radio stations offer their listeners is material by dead composers. The only agenda at play here is that of supply and demand; all things considered, representatives of orchestras as well as radio stations will confirm, if pressed, that audiences simply *prefer* music of the past to music of the present.

Some critics suggest that this preference for old over new signals the end of classical music culture. The British writer Norman LeBrecht certainly attracted attention in 1997 with his boldly titled *Who Killed Classical Music?: Maestros, Managers, and Corporate Politics*. But cooler heads remind us that “the death-knell for classical music has been tolling relentlessly for nearly a century now” (Lochhead, 2016, p. 1) and that, indeed, “the death of classical music is perhaps [that music’s] oldest continuing tradition” (Rosen, 2000, p. 183). When just a few years ago, the prestigious online magazine *Slate* published an article ominously titled “Requiem: Classical Music in America Is Dead” (Vanhoenacker, 2014), the outcry of dissent was not just instantaneous but enormous (Wise, 2014). Audiences for orchestras may indeed be growing older, and opera companies here and there may indeed be facing financial crises, but for those who *love* classical music with a passion, the genre remains alive and well.

What never comes up in these debates is the idea that truly passionate love for so-called “classical” music is, in most instances, a form of necrophilia.

Phrased that way, the concept, of course, sounds creepy. But consider today’s musical reality. On the one hand, we are inundated by arguably vibrant *new* music—classical, jazz, or whatever—that is being created at this very moment by almost countless living, breathing persons. On the other hand, most of us, or so it seems, prefer *old* music by composers who long ago departed this world. This is not to say that we have a taste for dead *music*. Quite the contrary. Unlike the “zombie symphonies” that so many of us hear but do not listen to (Goux, 2017), the vintage music for which we have genuine affection and to which we attend with concentrated energy remains very much alive.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

As much as I shudder whenever I prepare myself to fend off the sounds of muzak, I shudder even more whenever I encounter advertising from a professional orchestra that beckons customers to come and “relax” to the “soothing” music of this or that famous composer. The composers likely roll over in their graves when they hear such drivel, for in most cases, they intended their music to be not “soothing” or “relaxing” at all. That orchestras market their product not as music but as muzak is a scary thought, and if the trend continues, one might conclude that the classical music culture is indeed moribund.

Fortunately, we have years to go before things get that bad. Unless I am truly naive in my thinking, it seems that most people who nowadays buy tickets for orchestral events do so not to be lulled but to be stimulated. For most people, I think, dressing up a bit and going to the concert hall for a program of Bach and Beethoven, or Mozart and Mahler, or Schubert and Sibelius, is an experience that is at least in some ways rewarding. In terms of our classical-music culture, which surely is a culture built on the foundations of a rich and glorious past, it is actually quite healthy, I think, that an evening at the concert hall is, in a sense, a *Night of the Living Dead*.

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**CHAPTER 27.**  
**THE MARCH OF THE NEO-BAROQUE ZOMBIE: FROM HUMAN TO  
HUNGER**<sup>54</sup>

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“Dig, Lazarus, dig!!!”

—Nick Cave

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Could the zombie—as paradoxical as it may seem—possibly *embody* the subjectivity of our era? To what extent can the aesthetic and formal parallels identified by Omar Calabrese between the Baroque and our era be detected in the corporeal status concerning death? To tease out some possible answers to these questions, we will attempt to connect and contrast the concepts of *Baroque* and *Neo-Baroque* through the zombie figure as an inflexion point between the two religious and ideological territories. To this end, we will focus on the concept of the body and the notion of limits in the different epochs. Our starting hypothesis is that the zombie is a privileged textual operator for understanding two views of death in dialogue with each other: a *Baroque* view where the remains of the body are representative of

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an explicit acceptance of death (*memento mori*) guaranteed by the theological propositions of the age, in contrast with a *Neo-Baroque* view in which the logic of capital transcends any notion of spirituality so that the zombie embodies the promise of an interminable physical experience. For our analysis, we have chosen a corpus of significant images from each era to facilitate a dialogue between the respective visions of the body and its post-mortem decay in the work of artists like Valdés Leal—with his admonitory skeletons in the church of the Hospital de la Caridad—and Ribera—the haggard skin of the future martyr—compared to the very different contemporary vision of *The Walking Dead* (Frank Darabont & Angela Kang, AMC, 2010–2022), with its questioning of the ethical and political parameters of our times.

The taste for violence and withered bodies is often mentioned as a feature of the Baroque image, which is characterised by formal complexity and a constant insistence on the awareness of death. Death was an obsession of an era in which the wars of religion and widespread famines took over from the Plague epidemics of medieval times as a ghastly joke that castigated Europe. In the *Neo-Baroque*—and *neoliberal*—vision, however, we find bodies—zombies—with no subject, mere organs, thoughtless, aimless *walkers* that at the same time explicitly reflect the miseries of the living.

## 2. A HOWL OF PAIN: FROM *MEMENTO MORI* TO THE ZOMBIE

The taste for violence and withered bodies is often mentioned as a feature of the Baroque image, which is characterised by formal complexity and a constant insistence on the awareness of death. Death was an obsession of an era in which the wars of religion and widespread famines took over from the Plague epidemics of medieval times as a ghastly joke that castigated Europe. In the *Neo-Baroque*—and *neoliberal*—vision, however, we find bodies—zombies—with no subject, mere organs, thoughtless, aimless *walkers* that at the same time explicitly reflect the miseries of the living.

An outrageous howl that revels in pleasure from pain runs through all Baroque culture. A sometimes exasperated and sometimes placid realism lingers over twisted, dying bodies, in tension or given over to the decay brought by the passage of time. This obscurantist aspect of the inexhaustible and complex Baroque style interests us here. This can be found, for example, in the gaunt and haggard skin of Ribera's *Saint Andrew* (1631) or *Saint Paul the Hermit* (1635–1640) and in the string of guts being pulled out by an eagle in the foreshortened figure of *Tityos* (1632), whose flushed face is taut with wrinkles and whose mouth cries into the void. More explicit still are Valdés Leal's paintings for the Hospital de la Caridad in Seville. Paradoxically, the iconographic program designed to proclaim the soul's salvation through charity begins with two horrific *vanitas*, in which Death—skeletal, mocking, and devastating—displays his power. In *In Ictu Oculi* (literally, “in the blink of an eye”), a skeleton whose cavernous eye sockets stare at us holds up a scale and a scythe,

symbolising how quickly death comes to bring an end to any worldly glory, represented by various objects scattered on the floor and particularly by the globe of the world that the skeleton is treading upon. In the companion picture *Finis Gloriar Mundi*, the corpses of a bishop and a knight are being devoured by insects despite the riches that surround them. At the same time, the wounded hand of Christ holds a scale above them, in allusion to the Final Judgement. As Maravall suggests, the examples are so numerous that one can consider the image of the human cadaver to be a baroque theme, an image occasioned by the representation of the death of Christ, whose body appeared dramatically humanised, without the glorifying elements still present in El Greco. The experience of death and the corpse was utilised to enter into the experience of life and the living human being (1983, p. 149).

**Figures 1–2.** *In Ictu Oculi* and *Finis Gloriar Mundi* (Juan de Valdés Leal, 1672). **Figures 3–6.** Season 3 of *The Walking Dead* (2012–2013). *The editing of the openings to the series articulates a powerful neo-Baroque vanitas. (Numbered from left to right and top to bottom).*



*Source figures 1–2: In Ictu Oculi and Finis Gloriar Mundi (Juan de Valdés Leal, 1672). Source figures 3–6: frames from the openings to Season 3 of The Walking Dead (2012–2013).*

In a certain sense, the Baroque cultivates terror, the exasperated expression, visually expressing a feeling of pessimism and creating a spectacular, propagandistic aesthetic of cruelty designed to shock and intimidate the subjects of absolute monarchies and subjugate them to an all-encompassing regime whose main legitimating force lies in religion.

**Figures 7–8.** *The Massacre of the Innocents* by Rubens (1611–1612); *Judith and Holofernes* by Caravaggio (1599). **Figures 9–14.** *Hershel’s beheading and the revenge taken for it* in Episode 8, “Too Far Gone”, Season 4 of *The Walking Dead* (December 1, 2013). (Numbered from left to right and top to bottom).



*Source figures 7–8: The Massacre of the Innocents* by Rubens (1611–1612); *Judith and Holofernes* by Caravaggio (1599). *Source figures 9–14: frames from Hershel’s beheading and the revenge taken for it* in episode “Too Far Gone” (S04E08, TWD, December 1, 2013).

**Figures 15–16.** *Tityos* (1632) and *Saint Paul the Hermit* (1635–1640) by Ribera. **Figures 17–18.** Episode 8, “*Too Far Gone*”, Season 4 of *The Walking Dead* (December 1, 2013). (Numbered from left to right and top to bottom).



Source figures 15–16: *Tityos* (1632) and *Saint Paul the Hermit* (1635–1640) by Ribera. Source figures 17–18: frames from episode “*Too Far Gone*” (S04E08, TWD, December 1, 2013).

In this way,

the everyday spectacle of repression and war contributed to this same inclination towards cruelty throughout Europe. [...] [T]he spectacular, gruesome testimony to such cruelty achieved the objective towards which the whole pathetic and pessimistic baroque project was oriented: the need to clearly expose the human condition, in order to dominate, contain and direct it. (Maravall, 1983, p. 335)

Maravall identifies a certain alienation already present in the work of seventeenth-century artists who, faced with new situations arising from the flourishing of modernity, turned to twist the classical language in order to deal with the changing times:

If we take into account that this alienation, this estrangement from oneself, at the time affected thousands of poets singing the praises of the whole social system of values of the baroque monarchy and all that surrounded it, and that it equally affected the audiences estranged from

themselves by the verses that seized on their attention, especially in the theatre, we will understand that this baroque alienation exercised a function of control and direction of the masses, in accordance with the objectives that we have attributed to the culture of the era. (Maravall, 1983, pp. 429–430)

It is precisely such alienation that emerges as an explanation for the contemporary popularity of the zombie. In a way, the monster reflects the mind-numbed masses of our times with its endless wandering (tellingly, often through spaces like shopping malls), driven by an insatiable hunger that cannot be satisfied by all the consumerism in the world, and which—like death in the Baroque world—is a threat to the entire human race from which there is no escape.

### 3. LAUGHTER AND ACTION IN THE FACE OF THE VOID: FUNCTION Z

Discussions of the *Neo-Baroque* generally involve identifying formal configurations associated with structure or genre (Calabrese, 2012) that leave aside issues related to the foundations of the beliefs that inform the behaviour of the masses. While the Baroque hints at rethinking the phenomenology of sacred gestures (praying, shuddering in front of a painting), the *Neo-Baroque* seems much more comfortable with laughing in the face of a self-proclaimed void. In this sense, in contemporary studies on the topic, we find the repetition time and again, almost like a mantra, of the celebrated quote by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek:

If there is a phenomenon that deserves to be called the “fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture”, it is this fantasy of the return of the living dead: the fantasy of a person who does not want to stay dead but returns again and again to pose a threat to the living [...]. The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt. (Žižek, 1992, pp. 22–23)

With all fashionable quotes, considerable effort is needed to determine how much they shed light on a particular idea or merely reflect a *zeitgeist*, a specific fashion of contemporary popular philosophy. In this case, even the act of thinking itself seems to have taken on a repetitive quality that is difficult to pin down, a hypothetical series of returns—a “return to Freud”, a “return to Marx”, a return that is announced again and again but never fully realised. The zombie figure has been established as a textual operator of our contemporary capitalist system, as Carolina Meloni and Julio Díaz (2017) have shown, precisely because it *em-bodies* an excess, a limit, a mechanical and almost idiotic action of constant repetition.

In its original formulation, the zombie was essentially a body that had passed into that “realm beyond death” explored, for example, by the philosophy of mind. When the tremendous post-Cartesian magic trick pulled the idea of a *mind* out of its hat to replace the

much-maligned *soul*, reducing all intellectual activity to a series of cognitive processes under the reassuring name of *Function F* (Bechtel, 1991), the zombie emerged as a simple celebration of the mechanical body taken to its extreme. This is why it is a predominantly cinematic figure: it guarantees action. It moves, eats, and waits (because it has forgotten time; time decays it but never finishes it off), but never rests because this would entail a suspension of pleasure. The hungry return of bodies stripped of subjective control denies the Christian idea of eternal rest after death—and indirectly denies the concept of the *soul*.

### Figures 19–22

*Teaser for Episode 8, “Start to Finish”, Season 6 of The Walking Dead (November 29, 2015), which metaphorically encapsulates the series and the trajectory from human to hunger.*



*Source:* frames from teaser for episode “Start to Finish” (S06E08, TWD, November 29, 2015).

What we could refer to (somewhat problematically) as *Function Z* is the basic functioning of the zombie existence: biting, consuming, groaning (but never speaking), transforming from *being human* to *being hungry*, *being the essence of hunger*. The teaser for *The Walking Dead* episode “Start to Finish” (S06E08) encapsulates suggestively this idea. A child refuses to leave his bedroom, *believing* he does not live in a post-apocalyptic zombie world. The camera moves away from him to focus on a line of ants entering through his window to eat the hamburger on his plate. The close-up of this hamburger covered in ants

cuts to the opening, articulated around empty fields where no *living* is possible. This close-up constitutes an encapsulation of the meaning of the series: the ants stand metaphorically for the zombies, the hamburger for the (groups of) humans, practically food-bodies—who, incidentally, recovering the Biblical tone, are led by Rick, the first “dead man” we see rise and walk to lead the chosen people to redemption, as Santiago García suggests (2012, p. 131).

**Figure 23.** The pain of the faces in *Maggie*



*Source:* Movie poster for the film *Maggie* (Henry Hobson, 2015).

Zombie narratives generally sidestep the problem of death. However, they occasionally attempt to offer a softened version—sometimes bordering on *religious*—of the zombie: they can be saved; they can fall in love; the latest vaccine can redeem them. *Maggie* (Henry Hobson, 2015) is one of the few exceptions, portraying the journey of a teenage girl who has to deal with her conversion into a zombie. The story explores the notions of limits and loss and focuses mainly on her father’s pain. The actors playing these two roles are not just anyone: the daughter is portrayed by Abigail Breslin, the lively face of *Little Miss Sunshine* (Oliver Hoover, 2006); the father is played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, the rigid face of the action film hero that symbolically breaks down here to show his powerlessness in the face of the end of the subjectivity of his loved ones, whose kisses are doomed to turn into zombie bites.

Even undeniably interesting films like *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) avert their gaze and focus exclusively on the virus, with the typically calm and rationalist explanation of our times: the zombie virus was created inside a laboratory, the inadvertent product of rational—and, therefore, human—thought, unleashed on the world due to a slip-up committed with the best of intentions (a protest by a group of animal rights activists). It is a clumsy excuse to avoid exploring the real problem underlying the extraordinary absence of an explanation for the myth. Is there some divine force that permits what appears as both a physical and spiritual aberration? Or is it simply the blind order of an aimless evolution that has led to the emergence of these hunger-bodies? The zombie poses no questions about what has caused it: its stories keep their distance from conspiracy theories and evade the effects of big data so prevalent in contemporary television fiction. Returning to Žižek's line of argument, it is precisely this that explains that, as a visual motif, the zombie is an effect of the symbolic impoverishment of our era. The zombie does not evoke the symbolic Other; rather, it is designed to reveal that the subject is nothing but a drive-body without an Other to anchor its being.

To assert that the zombie is the offspring of science entails, from the outset, a specific attenuation of its nature—an attenuation that conceals the golden dream of our era: the boundless potential of the rational animal and its mastery over technology. This narrative is only ever problematized in those stories that attribute the zombie's origin to a vaguely cosmological event—typically, the impact of a celestial body that brings about some form of genetic mutation. The sky, the realm of the divine, is thus inverted and converted into a realm of the diabolical, the source of the *Bad News*. In works as extraordinary as Stephen King's story *Home Delivery* (2016), the horror lies not so much in the external threat as in the savage way that the mechanisms of everyday living—watching television, going to the supermarket—have their meaning and logic twisted while nobody can offer any answers as to the exact *cause* of the return of the living dead. The arrival of the zombie erodes the frames of signification established both by the social pact and by structures of religious origin: the denial of its cause destabilises all causes around it. Perhaps this means that *Function Z* is the capacity to show the extraordinary fragility of these beliefs in the apparent order of events, in the predictability of processes and, above all, in the conception of the mind as a mere process that can be studied using objective parameters. It is not at all surprising that—especially in 1980s and early 1990s films—the *brain* should be considered the preferred meal of the *neo-Baroque* monster. Subverting the tradition that places the origins of and explanations for our feelings, emotions and disorders in this delicious organ, the zombie seeks to feed on the archetypal symbol of rationalism. Subjectivity is reduced to grey matter. It is perhaps the ultimate revenge of the subconscious on popular culture: a (mere) body feeding on an act of utter brutality of the privileged guarantee of objectivity. This visual scream does not demand a word in *re-turn*.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS: THE LIVING DEAD REFLECT THE INHUMANITY OF PLEASURE

The zombie is not so much a symptom-image to be deciphered as a mute, repugnant, and fetid figure that resists and ultimately invalidates any attempt at signification. While it may gesture toward possible meanings, it ultimately functions as a drive-image—one that turns against the image *itself*, undermining its symbolic function from within

Science searches the body for that which can be numbered and labelled. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, things work differently: we are afraid of our bodies because the body experiences pleasure, as Lacan suggests in his Seminar X, *Anxiety*. The body we are afraid of is not the physical body but the body inhabited by the drive, as Freud showed. (Fuentes, 2016, p. 17)

The body we worship, care for, and strengthen is the Gestalt body, which we believe we can put together into an image. We expect a particular representation of the body that can give us consistency and fill up our *lack of being*. However, more than this, the body is a *field of pleasure* that is demonstrably ungovernable—and this ungovernability is confirmed precisely by the notion of repetition into which the speaking being falls throughout his history in a particular way. The body as a field of pleasure is where the literature and cinema of *the new flesh* point to the origin of the monstrous: “The places of the monstrous are no longer the shadows, the underground or external world, but the body itself, that sinister appendage, both known and unknown” (Pedraza, in Navarro, 2002, p. 1).

In short, the zombie can be thought of as a *neo-Baroque re-incarnation* of those depictions of post-mortem decay that today reflect the most inhumane aspects of the drive, the death drive that Freud discovered in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In other words, the living dead are a portrait of the dead living, the living beings who are mortified by a pleasure that leaves them alone and without the rescue of the symbolic word that connects the subject to others. “While the bodies are alive, they engage in pleasure symptomatically, each in their own way” (Fuentes, 2016, p. 18); conversely, as cinematic depictions of zombies show us, when bodies are dead, they all *act* in the same way. This explains the zombies’ strict codes of “conduct” throughout film history. However sophisticated their abilities may become, even picking up the pace of their pursuit, they cannot speak or express themselves as individuals. Their fate is to devour.

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**CHAPTER 28.**  
**CONCLUSION. ZOMBIE UNIVERSES: (PRE-)CONFIGURATIONS OF A  
(POST-)PANDEMIC WORLD**

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1. INTRODUCTION

“For me, the worst part of every zombie movie is the end. I always want to know what happens next”, shared with his readers the comic scriptwriter Robert Kirkman in the prologue of the first volume of *The Walking Dead: “Days Gone Bye”* (2004, p. 9). This feeling is shared in this final chapter of *Deconstructing the Zombie*, given the vividness that the zombie has gained since we initiated this project because of the COVID-19 pandemic, still convalescent in the post-pandemic state that we are currently experiencing. In this sense, when the zombie seemed dormant due to the numerous publications that revolve around itself, the reality of this international pandemic caused not only the figure of the living dead to be reborn but also that of the entire imaginary built around a possible zombie apocalypse (suspicious labs, empty urban landscapes, face masks, restricted areas, crowded hospitals, etc.).

Recent publications include *Zombie Futures in Literature, Media and Culture. Pandemics, Society and the Evolution of the Undead in the 21st Century* (Bacon, 2024), *Diseased Cinema: Plagues, Pandemics and Zombies in American Movies* (Alpert, Eisenberg, & Mordechai, 2023), *Pandemias, dragones y muertos vivientes. La Ciencia Política en lugares insospechados* [Pandemics, dragons, and the living dead. Political Science in Unexpected Places (Kahhat & Camacho, 2021)] or *Metaphors of Coronavirus Invisible Enemy or Zombie Apocalypse?* (Charteris-Black, 2021) show, among other issues, the impact that the context of the coronavirus has inflicted within the sociocultural context, making it evident that the zombie is not only part of the collective imaginary but has also been used with a tactical purpose in this period. On the one hand, posting post-apocalyptic headlines to persuade readers to consume tabloid press. On the other hand, connecting the virus to the concept of

Otherness to alert and unite citizens against the enemy that we must all fight together. As Charteris-Black points out, “if a virus is referred to as a ‘zombie’, because we know that zombies threaten humans, we might find a higher level of commitment towards whatever actions eliminate zombies than if we referred to it just as a virus” (2021, p. 5).

Focusing on the long-term strategic use of the zombie within cultural productions, *Deconstructing the Zombie* has studied this figure as a sociopolitical symbol of not only the Western literary and audiovisual industry but also from other geographical backgrounds (*cf.* from chapters 19 to 22, or Ch. 25). As we mentioned in the introductory chapter of the present book, each of its authors’ contributions pursue to expand the connotations and multiple lectures associated with this popular culture character.

Following this path, this final chapter proposes a brief classification of the most relevant interpretations that have been made about the zombie character in the field of Media and Cultural Studies concerning its origins—the “Haitian zombie”, the “atomic zombie”, the “resurrected zombie”, the “infected zombie”, or the “humanised zombie”—, as well as its different socio political meanings gathered indirectly in the different contributions of this book—the “labouring zombie”, the “consumer zombie”, and the “activist zombie”, divided into the “parodic zombie” and the “anti-establishment zombie”—.

## 2. A TAXONOMY OF THE UNDEAD: THE MANY DISGUISES OF THE ZOMBIE

Building on the analysis of audiovisual book adaptations and fictional television productions from previous chapters, we may classify the various approaches to the zombie figure according to its origins, defining features, and its function as a sociopolitical metaphor—whether this metaphor operates through the zombie’s individuality or its integration within the horde.

### 2.1. **Categorising the origins of the zombie**

The following table shows the main differences established between five constructions of the archetypal image that audiences have of the zombie figure:

**Table 2**

*Five categories of the archetypal audiovisual representation of the zombie*

Category	Main Features	Origins	Predominant Audiovisual Period	Main Metaphor(s)
<b>The Haitian Zombie</b>	Emotionless Automaton Non-human flesh diet Alienation Slow zombies (“shamblers”)	Non-Dead/ “Zombie state” (Voodoo “zombification” ritual by a sorcerer; or hypnosis process by a mad scientist) Known as “zonbi” in Haitian culture	From <i>White Zombie</i> (Victor Halperin, 1932) to decade of 1950s	Colonization, Slavery, Working-class or Racial Struggle & Female sexual abuse
<b>The Atomic Zombie</b>	Emotionless Otherness invading the ordinary (Apocalyptic scenario)	Corpses reanimated with atomic energy used by mad scientists or extraterrestrials	The decade from 1950 to 1960	Anti-communist <i>paranoia</i> & Cold War Nuclear Fears
<b>The Resurrected Zombie</b>	Cannot be domesticated Greedy for human flesh (“Ghoul”/ Cannibal) Diminished mental faculties Apocalyptic zombie invasions (“the horde”)	Returned from the grave (The so-called Modern Zombie or Living Dead)	From <i>The Night of Living Dead</i> (George A. Romero, 1968) until the decade of 1990	Effects of consumerism & capitalist system
<b>The Infected Zombie</b>	Fast zombies (“runners”/ “sprinters”) Aggressive cannibals Apocalyptic zombie invasions (“the mass”) or Post-apocalyptic scenario	Diseased/Infected non-dead zombies or genetically altered zombies (caused by a failed experiment, new virus or a fungus/virus mutation)	From <i>28 Days Later</i> (Danny Boyle, 2002) to nowadays	Immigration or environmental impact; Fear of an uncontrollable pandemic or a social/global collapse (economic, terrorist, political...)

<b>The Humanized Zombie</b>	Empathic Rational beings / Human side Alternative diet to cannibalism Recovering routine from a post-apocalyptic scenario Leaders, heroes/heroines, or self-portrayed individuals	Resurrected zombies or Diseased / Infected non-dead zombies ("zombie condition", i.e. virus, genetic mutation or resurrected by an unknown or inexplicable cause)	From <i>Warm Bodies</i> (Isaac Marion, 2010; adapted to film by Jonathan Levine in 2013) to nowadays	Integration into an unchangeable neoliberal system / Hope in the restoration of human values
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*Source:* Own elaboration.

The table includes the leading causes that originated the zombie state or condition shared in the literature review (Dendle, 2001, 2012; Lauro & Embry, 2007; Bishop, 2010, 2015; Griffith, 2013; Luckhurst, 2015; Matteo, 2023) and the contributions of this book. For example, in Chapter 5, we delve into the origins of the zombie connected to the concerns of American society in the 1950s. In Chapter 16, we address zombie traits such as empathy, captured in the “humanized zombie” category or the emotionless, in other cases, referring to zombies whose rationality and human capabilities have been nullified.

Despite the “humanized zombie” the origins are familiar to previous categories, based on resurrection, infection, or mutant disease<sup>55</sup>, it has its category since this typology has been gaining predominance within fiction from the second decade of the 21st century onwards. These representations of the zombie have tried to connect with younger audiences through romantic or (high) school themes (*cf.* Szanter & Richards, 2017). In the Nordic TV series *ZombieLars* (NRK Super, 2017–2019), the pedagogical approach is introduced to reflect on xenophobia and to promote the acceptance of others within the educational environment. Referring to this production, Alberto Añón Lara (2020) outlines that it also offers “a

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<sup>55</sup> This category may be debatable, considering some literature reviews. For instance, Dendle claims that “[r]esurrected bodies that retain all previous personality and mental ability don’t constitute zombies” (2001, p. 14). Dendle also excludes those in hypnosis or brainwashed state portrayed in films such as *Invaders from Mars* (William Cameron Menzies, 1953), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) or *Village of the Damned* (Wolf Rilla, 1960) as he considers “the physical death and (partial) resurrection of the body integral to the core definition” (2001, p. 14). In this second case, we consider that using the term “zombie estate” would be more appropriate than identifying directly with “zombie condition” or nature, as is seen in the “humanized zombie”. In 2012, Dendle published the second volume of *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, in which he revised his previous conception of the zombie according to new representations: “[...] zombies can now just as easily be fast, frenzied, and alive” (p. 5). However, he is still invited to “healthy debate” affirming that “[...] they aren’t zombies at all if they’re not dead [...]” (p. 5).

reflection on how Norway faces its fears and contradictions in relation to the rise of extreme right-wing parties” (p. 426).

In content platforms such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video, this “civilized” representation of the zombie coexists with old and new audiovisual productions which focus on confronting humanity against hordes of zombies infected by a virus that is rapidly spreading throughout the planet, like is portrayed in *The Last of Us* (HBO Max, 2023–present), based on the video game analysed in Chapter 17; or diverse South-Korean productions such as *Virus (Gamgi)* (Kim Sung-su, 2013), the historical production *Kingdom* (Netflix, 2019–2020), the popular teen TV series *All of Us Are Dead* (2022–present) or the reality show *Zombieverse* (Netflix, 2023–present). Does it sound familiar? The fears of a post-pandemic audience are once again reflected in the mythology of the genre<sup>56</sup>.

The diversity of zombie representations is not fully compiled in Table 2, as we can find similar or complementary categories framed in Zombie Studies. For instance, in *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture. The Multifarious Walking Dead in the 21st Century* (Bishop, 2015), Bishop structures his book content in nine categories connected to the media—the Video Game Zombie, the Literary Zombie, the Comic Book Zombie, the Stage Zombie, or the Cinematic Zombie—or particular features—for example, the Young Adult Zombie, the Romantic Zombie or the Comedic Zombie—. In his introductory chapter, the author elaborates on a taxonomy divided into five categories according to the main characteristics of each zombie genre period (2015, pp. 5–15). This is divided into (1) The “real” zombie or the “walking dead” created by voodoo rituals; (2) “Female victims from evil voodoo practitioners”, derived from the first type; (3) The “modern zombie” is also known as the “living dead” or the “Romerian zombie” because of its creation by George A. Romero. It corresponds to the category “the resurrected zombie” in Table 2; Bishop also mentions “the infected” within this second category; (4) The “hero zombie” or the “agent zombie” refers to what we call “the humanised zombie”; (5) “Real-world zombies”. This fifth category connects the genre with its impact on real-world zombie genre fans, including Bishop himself, who manifests “[...] a passionate affectation of zombies and zombie scenarios in our daily lives and in a variety of disciplines, discourses, and fields. [...] [T]hey want to *live* the apocalypse first hand” (2015, p. 15). This desire has materialised under multiple initiatives and business models, such as survival zombies, “Human vs. Zombies”, corporate paintballs, etc. Transferred to the real-world educational field, this zombie passion is reflected in Chapter 24 of *Deconstructing the Zombie*. It shares a teaching experience that uses the “zombie invasion” theme as a pedagogical resource for scientific-technical

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<sup>56</sup> Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the audience has demanded this zombie content, as some News echoed with headlines such as “The coronavirus causes downloads of this 2011 film that is not on Netflix” (*El Mundo*, 2020), referring to the film *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011). This also was the case with the video game *Plague Inc.* (Ndemic Creations, 2012).

communication. On the other hand, in Chapter 1, the term “smombie” or the “smartphone zombie” encompasses the dark side of some of our real-world daily habits or addictions, which connect us with the “zombie state” that the first category entails. This subcategory represents “the slowly walking inattentive people attached to their phone that cause public safety issues to themselves and to others, which led city planners to adopt special traffic signals for them and special sidewalks” (Ch. 1).

In short, as Dendle outlines, “the [...] zombies have organically given rise to several recognizable sub-species, such as Nazi zombies, underwater zombies or zombie monks” (2001, p. 2). Within these varied representations of the zombie, we can detect that some are directly connected to the role that this creature plays in society, as the so-called “labouring zombie” or “the consumer zombie” (Gunn & Treat, 2005)<sup>57</sup>; or what we have named as the “activist zombie”. These roles reflect our passive or active essence as citizens—victims, liable participants or rebels—towards our reality. In the following section, we focus on the mentioned three subcategories to delve into their significance as a sociopolitical metaphor of society.

## 2.2. Categorising the “citizen” roles of the zombie

### *The Labouring Zombie*

The “labouring zombie” especially connects with those representations of the so-called “Haitian zombie”. They are not living dead, but as this category figures, the person remains in a “zombie state” because of a voodoo ritual exerted on him/her. This mental manipulation can also result from hypnosis, as seen with the sleepwalker Cesare in the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), where he remains under the hypnotic control of Dr. Caligari, who forces him to commit crimes. Although not directly connected to the zombie genre, like the second technique, both reflect human vulnerability to manipulation.

In this approach, we observe that the term “labouring zombie” appears closely linked to the Marxist concept of alienation of the working class, understanding this state as the suppression of the personality of the individual to control and annul his/her free will, by creating a sense of dependence on what is dictated by another person or organisation. In this sense, the figure of the zombie has been considered by many theorists as a representation of the self-absorption and annulment of the will suffered by the alienated worker within the capitalist system. Joshua Gunn and Shaun Treat (2005) outline that “[n]o other fictional character in the Western imaginary better exemplifies the idea of ideological determination

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<sup>57</sup> This category could be related to the term “the capitalist zombies” (Matteo, 2023), quoted in Chapter 21, to refer to workers and consumers as slaves of the capitalist system. This term connects with what Annalee Newitz calls “the capitalist monster” (2006, p. 2), mentioned in our introductory chapter.

than the zombie” (p. 150). As exemplified in previous chapters of this book (Introduction, Ch. 1 and Ch. 2) with films that initiated the zombie genre, such as *White Zombie*, “the traditional zombie is a slave. S/he is speechless, incapable of emotion, slow-moving but diligent, and utterly beholden to his or her ‘master’” (2005, p. 150).

Both authors affirm that “monsters are intrinsic to the ordinary, everyday reality of capitalism itself” (2005). If the zombie is the passive character, the victim of this system, whose daily routine is subject to the will of an employer or corporation, those who play the dominant role in this system embody another type of monstrosity. For Karl Marx, the vampire metaphorically appeals to the functioning of this capitalist system. He claims that “capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (2017, p. 297). By vampirising them, capital tends to turn workers into zombies, configuring them in its image, reducing them to mere “production operators” dedicated to the valorisation of capital, into “machines for producing surplus value” (Bihr, 2021). This implies that these slaves/workers decay into moral degradation and intellectual degeneration, added to physical deterioration, as this figure portrays.

It is worth asking if these zombies, apart from embodying the victims of this regime, also represent their bosses’ greatest desire: to be able to have a large arsenal of human beings who do not reason or revolt against the exploitation that the capitalist system makes of them.

### *The Consumer Zombie*

This category refers to individuals and hordes of zombies that reflect another dark side of the capitalist system. As Steve Shaviro outlines, “zombies present the ‘human face’ of capitalist monstrosity” (2002, p. 288). This involves their victim/passive role in the rules of production domination and a more active role in the habits necessary to maintain this system: consuming without limits.

Consumerism, one of the most significant engines for consolidating the capitalist system, is addressed in several audiovisual productions of this genre. As especially addressed in the first part of *Deconstructing the Zombie* (*cfr.* Introduction and Chapters 1–4), the zombie figure embodies the rules of consumption without conscience and its opposite: it also represents individuals who, in times of economic crisis or recession, wander aimlessly, uncertain of what to consume or lacking the economic means to support themselves within this consumerist system. In recent productions such as *iZombie* (The CW, 2015–2019) and *Santa Clarita Diet* (Netflix, 2017–2019), the zombie has also been portrayed as a new type of consumer with a particular need: human brains. Far from being excluded, the zombie protagonists of these two series work and live according to the capitalist standards expected from them as members of society (*cfr.* Ch. 3).

As expressed in the film *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978), zombies are drawn to the shopping center—chosen by the human survivors as their shelter—because it represents an unconscious habit: they continue performing actions they once did when they were alive. For real-world modern living humans, as Jaime Cuenca Amigo (2007) points out, the act of consuming has gone beyond the scope of the shopping centre to invade their entire lives. In fact, unlike the zombie, who is very clear about his/her consumer goods—the (human) flesh—individuals are surrounded by several offers that appeal to non-existent needs or irrational desires that supposedly determine their identity. All these options are open except for choosing none. Within the consumed goods, as zombies do, we flee from the old—from putrefaction in their cases—seeking the novelty that makes us forget the ageing process to which our human condition subjects us. At the same time, we long for that consumer good that will satisfy our never-ending needs, remaining in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction—the incessant consumption of meat in the case of our living dead pals.

In short, the “consumer zombie” immerses us in what Jordi Berrio (1983) describes as “the total society”, a consumerist society that compels its members to consume, infiltrating all aspects of their social lives. “No one can stay outside the system” (p. 37).

### *The activist zombie*

This figure refers to characters and plots within the zombie genre that aim to change or generate empathy towards the zombies’ social status or their (biological) condition. These can be categorized into two subtypes: the “anti-establishment zombie”, and the “parodic zombie”.

The “anti-establishment zombie” illustrates a new concept of zombie, based on the idea of progressively waking up from that lethargy to which the system has induced the individual (zombie), so that s/he revolts against it and tries to change its mechanisms of power and dominance. In pursuing this goal, zombies are usually humanised, enhancing the recovery of consciousness and actively participating in the plot, inviting spectators, as citizens, to also awake from this shared sociopolitical lethargy.

In this approach, the zombie is usually portrayed as a leader towards the horde of zombies, as Big Daddy, the main zombie character of *Land of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2005). In Romero’s film (*cf.*: Ch. 4 and Ch. 13), Big Daddy stands out within the mass of the living dead. This character is aware of the abuse humans inflict on his kind and decides to lead them to the fort built by the few survivors who have managed to stay alive in the city’s new reality. The fact that the zombie leading the group is African American, and that the apprentice and central support in his fight against humans is a woman, adds an ideological layer to the film by giving significant roles to two historically disadvantaged minorities in America. As Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano (2009) claims regarding this movie,

[...] the seed of terror no longer comes so much from the voracity of the living dead [...] but from the inability to coexist, the corruption and the thirst for power symbolised by Kaufman, responsible for the military excesses and the torture to which the threatening zombies are subjected. (pp. 15–16)

With the subcategory “parodic zombie”, we aim to highlight the self-parodic representation of the zombie genre and its figure. This type of representation is seen in films such as *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009) and *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004) as well as in TV series like *Z Nation* (SyFy, 2014–2018) and *Ash vs. Evil Dead* (Starz, 2015–2018). As outlined in Chapter 3, some productions use humour to foster empathy and a deeper identification between the audience and these “monsters”, as seen in the TV series *iZombie* and *Santa Clarita Diet*. In other cases, such as in *Shaun of the Dead*, this humorous approach to the zombie genre is used to criticise the zombie-like state in which contemporary society finds itself. In the opening and closing scenes of the film, we see the similarity between the zombies and the uninfected individuals, whose routine, alienating lives make them indistinguishable from their enemies. The arrival of these living dead creatures disrupts their lives, compelling them to take a more active role. This reminds us of the quotation on the back of the first volume of *The Walking Dead*, “Days Gone Bye”: “In a world ruled by the dead, we are forced to finally start living”.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Among the characters classified as “the undead”, such as Frankenstein or the seductive Count Dracula, the zombie has often been relegated to starring in low-quality or low-budget horror splatter films, a subgenre in which blood and viscera take centre stage, often overshadowing the creature’s role towards humans. However, as we have seen throughout this book and previous contributions to Zombie Studies, this character has served as a symbolic representation of the individual at different times in history. Whether by harshly denouncing the alienated or passive attitudes that human beings tend to adopt in certain situations, urging them to rebel against the system, or by portraying the zombie as a victim of human racial, gender, social, or class prejudices, and of their desire to exert power over their own and other species.

In this work, we have delved into some of this creature’s “disguises”. This suggested categorization reflects the complexity that the zombie has acquired in Cultural Studies, offering a rich object of study from multiple approaches, psychological and sociological, in those more humanized representations; as well as cultural and political, in the cases most

connected with the zombies as resurrected or infected beings within a horde, as an anonymous mass.

In this way, the zombie will continue adjusting its “wardrobe” to its contextual circumstances, shedding light, metaphorically, on the concerns of each historical period. In this sense, nowadays, we find ourselves in an apocalyptic limbo, in which, after a global pandemic, war conflicts and diverse sociopolitical changes devastate different geographical areas. In our cultural productions, still digesting what is yet to come, references to video games framed in post-apocalyptic environments populate the popular culture panorama, like the recent TV series adaptations *Resident Evil* (Netflix, 2022) or *The Last of Us*, where “the infected”, once again, shake the pillars of the civilized population; or *Fallout* (Amazon Prime Video, 2024–present), whose zombie-like appearance nuclear mutant character “The Ghoul”, disguised as a cowboy, reflects the decrepitude of an alternative post-nuclear American society. “Why, is this an Amish production of *The Count of Monte Cristo* or... just the weirdest circle jerk I’ve ever been invited to?”, he claims after being awoken. With this quote of astonishment, this character embodies “the surprises” that are yet to come, for him and his zombie pals, because of the poor human management of the planet they share with.

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Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not experienced a moment of calm. A spectre haunts the world: the spectre of permanent crisis. Indeed, the forthcoming social, economic, and political conditions will favour the zombies, ensuring their continued presence in our cultural agenda. Throughout several literary, cinematographic, serial fiction and video game cultural productions, this character has served as a symbolic representation of the individual at different times in history. Whether by harshly denouncing the alienated or passive attitudes that human beings tend to adopt in certain situations, urging them to rebel against the system, or by portraying the zombie as a victim of human racial, gender, social, or class prejudices, and of their desire to exert power over their own and other species.

This book covers a wide range of topics concerning its universe, offering a complete study divided into six significant areas:

1. Power, Labour, and Economy
2. Ethics, Religion, and Society
3. Flesh, Bodies, and Gender
4. Politics and Ideology
5. Geographical Adaptations
6. Social and Cultural Manifestations.

