

It is Easier to Imagine the Zombie Apocalypse than to Imagine the End of Capitalism

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A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection—not an invitation for hypnosis.

—Umberto Eco¹

The history of capitalism can be told as a monster story from beginning to end.

—Annalee Newitz²

INTRODUCTION: MONSTROUS SYSTEMS

In recent years, the specter of the zombie apocalypse has loomed large in the collective American imagination in film and television, YouTube videos and themed parties, novels³ and blogs, costumed marches and marathons, shooting target companies and survivalist groups, video-games and counterterrorism training, zombie “splatstick” comedies and zom-rom-coms, and used in course curricula from elementary to college levels to teach topics from geography to public health to sociology. It is common to hear people complain, “I feel like a zombie” after hours spent staring at television or computer screens, or to comment on how groups of people absorbed in their digital devices resemble a

zombie horde. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Seth Grahame-Smith's 2009 parody of Jane Austen's novel of manners, was a *New York Times* bestseller. AMC network's *The Walking Dead* is the most watched television drama in basic cable history. Tongue-in-cheek zombie preparedness trainings occur across the nation, imparting real emergency skills for a mock-pocalypse. Zombie productions across diverse modes appear with such accelerating frequency that it is not easy to catch up with their shifting meanings, which is strange perhaps because zombies are known as the slowest of monsters.

Hidden in plain sight, what untold stories do ubiquitous zombie hordes point to? The variations of the contemporary evolution of the zombie apocalypse are worth taking seriously as a dominant myth of our times.⁴ What are we talking about when we talk about zombies? One view may be to see zombies as escapism—a pop culture trend that distracts attention from urgent issues. However, I argue that zombies and the apocalyptic scenarios that are now frequently associated with them provide a forum for speaking about the unspeakable. Zombies as threat and as comedy overlap as “monstrous placeholders”⁵ that point to the gap of what we are not directly talking about—what is censored in our collective public discourse—including economic and ecological crises that are psychologically indigestible. Immersion in prolific undead fiction can steer us to nonfiction that is repressed or blocked from view. Indeed, it is easier to imagine disintegrating cannibalistic corpses covering the planet than to imagine a sustainable shift in our socioeconomic system.

Monster stories can always tell us something meaningful about the society they come from. They do valuable cultural work to embody the fears of a given age, revealing social repressions and cultural anxieties. “Monster” derives from the Latin *monere*, meaning a warning or omen. The undead omen that zombies shamle toward points us to past, present, and future conditions of living death, the frightening underbelly of modernity. In this view, “monster stories are one of the dominant allegorical narratives used to explore economic life in the United States.”⁶ Beyond macabre aesthetics, campy dramatizations, media spectacle and ironic brain-eating commentary, stories that ooze with zombies vividly “present the ‘human face’ of capitalist monstrosity.”⁷ This increasingly normalized pop culture obsession points our

attention to the “nonhuman condition” in the flesh-eating systems of late-era capitalism. A collective recurring nightmare that mirrors our waking ones, pop culture monsters repeatedly return in what Fredric Jameson calls the “political unconscious” of a powerful and troubled country.⁸ Seeing America through its monsters asks us to engage the roots of our country’s monster obsessions as substantial, complex, and revealing, rather than as mere ephemera of popular culture.

The metaphorical breadth of the zombie embraces contradiction, as it is capable of representing vastly divergent threats, of natural and unnatural disaster, war and terrorist attacks. The zombie apocalypse, in its many (re)incarnations, operates to illustrate what we are collectively imagining and may describe what we are actually seeing. Zombies represent the end of the world as we know it, the total breakdown of human society, and the cannibalization of humanity.⁹ The zombie apocalypse “speaks to some of the most puzzling elements of our sociohistorical moment, wherein many are trying to ascertain what lies in store for humanity after global capitalism—if anything.”¹⁰ What apocalyptic futures is our country rehearsing, and how do they signal both despair of, and hope for, fundamental change?

This chapter looks at what the zombie metaphor has signified over the past century, and questions why it continues to be so prevalent in our culture. Its millennial popularity has exploded off the screen and into real life, offering insight into how we process systemic economic, social, and environmental horror. I trace the evolution of this undead figure through broad stages of global capitalist expansion, from New World slavery in Haiti, to American consumerism and militarism, to the networked neoliberal era, in which plague anxieties, apocalyptic scenarios, and near-future dystopian fiction are defining genres of our historical moment. A recurrent monster in the history of capitalism, zombies reflect what is monstrous in an economic system “that seems designed to eat people whole.”¹¹

THE ZOMBIE LABORER AND IMPERIAL HAUNTING

Unlike canonical monsters with origins in European tradition, such as vampires and werewolves, or that were established in literature before appearing in film, zombies are a unique New World creation,

which transitioned directly from folklore to the screen. The mythological origins of the zombie are rooted in Haitian *vodou* (known popularly as “voodoo”) religion, which combined West African and Lower Congo beliefs in spirits, *nzambi* or *zombé*, that could become caught between worlds, trapped in a container, as liminal beings that were neither living nor dead. Zombification was understood to be a reversible state of *hypnosis*, under the control of a vodou practitioner who could work with spells or potions to make the living appear as dead, a form of mind control under direction by the zombie master.

During the era of the transatlantic slave trade, the image of the *nzambi* was adapted to the horrors that tore people from their communities, stripped them of their selves, reduced to laboring flesh for sale. Under the French occupation of Haiti, once the largest slave economy, the zombie image transmuted to emphasize a lack of personhood and endless plantation labor. French masters used the threat of zombification as a form of social control over slaves. Though suicide might otherwise have seemed an escape from enslavement on sugar plantations, masters taught their slaves that, rather than returning to Africa and freedom, slaves who killed themselves would become zombies. In “A Zombie Is a Slave Forever,” Amy Wilentz recounted this history: “To become a zombie was the slave’s worst nightmare: to be dead and still a slave, an eternal field hand.”¹²

Salt was understood to be the cure to the zombified state.¹³ Its taste had the power to restore a person’s soul and willpower. With this knowledge, masters maintained control by keeping their zombies’ food tasteless.

Zombie legends acquired their modern form during the US occupation of Haiti (1915–34), when US marines brutally deployed forced labor to build infrastructure, renewing the trope of the master who controls the animated dead. “This view of the living dead, which entered the American culture industry in the 1930s and 1940s, carried a critical charge: the notion that capitalist society *zombifies* workers, reducing them to interchangeable beasts of burden, mere bodies for the expenditure of labor-time.”¹⁴ William Seabrook’s 1929 novel *The Magic Island* laid the template for the figure of the zombie to enter into American consciousness, describing *vodou* practices of Haitian culture, and eyewitness accounts of zombies as described in the chapter, “Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields.” Vodou adherents could

supposedly raise the dead for incessant toil. Zombie stories circulated as a key lens to make sense of the colonial relationship between the US and Haiti, self and other, using sensationalistic and racist tropes projected onto Haitian culture. As zombie legends took root in the US, they expressed imperialist anxieties associated with colonialism and slavery, fears of racial mixing and specters of white people becoming dominated through zombification. Entering the American culture industry with films such as Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), the figure of the zombie may be understood in a postcolonial mode, as they revealed more about Western fears than about Caribbean traditions or *voodoo* belief and practice. "By allowing native voodoo priests to enslave white heroines, these inherently racist movies terrified Western viewers with the thing they likely dreaded most at that time: slave uprisings and reverse colonization."¹⁵

In the nineteenth century, the figure of the cannibal had served as an ideological means of separating the colonial world into civilized and non-civilized. The zombie effectively continued this work in films of the 1930s to '60s.¹⁶ Drawing on the insights of Wade Davis, who produced ethnographic accounts of zombiism in Haiti, Chris Vials described "the indissociable relationship between Haiti and B-grade horror in the popular imagination" as "a direct product of U.S. imperialism."¹⁷ Early zombie fiction was shaped in part by fears of Haiti as an independent black republic and the imagined terror of white enslavement. Representations of voodoo were woven with tales of cannibalism to underscore Haitian primitivism. As Chera Kee posed, "what better way to justify the 'civilizing' presence of marines in Haiti than to project the phantasm of barbarism?"¹⁸ Annalee Newitz summarized:

Stories about the undead are best understood in the context of anxieties about many kinds of race relationships that develop in the wake of colonialism. The undead are liminal beings who exist between the worlds of life and death. They represent the sorts of identities that erupt into being when different racial groups collide violently with one another and produce horrifying new cultures of deprivation and oppression.¹⁹

A perfect monster for the age, the zombie's arrival in the US was linked both with the system of slavery and slave rebellion, as the Haitian Revolution of 1804 demonstrated a historic challenge to colonial power structures.²⁰

While American audiences could watch zombie films that depicted the superstitious "other," the image of a zombified worker held up a monstrous mirror to the loss of autonomy and freedom at home, where workers found themselves employed as mass-mechanized laborers, reduced to pawns in larger productive systems that produced frightening, zombie-like conditions. As David Skal has written, "The shuffling spectacle in films like *White Zombie* (1932) was a nightmare vision of the breadline. . . . Millions already knew that they were no longer completely in control of their lives; the economic strings were being pulled by faceless, frightening forces."²¹ Between the 1930s and 1960s, zombie fiction served to depict a range of different masters, from aliens, to communists and mad scientists, all of whom wielded zombifying control.

"THEY'RE US, THAT'S ALL"

Zombiism was first presented not as a disease but a reversible state, in which occult practices rendered hypnotized victims as soulless husks. George A. Romero is credited with single-handedly revolutionizing the depiction of zombies with his 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero's movie created the distinct subgenre of the cannibalistic horde that replicates itself through flesh-eating infection. Romero recast "them" as "us," eliminated the puppet master, and created a new type of zombie, found not in some other land or magical culture but at home. Cannibalism, once projected onto the colonized Other, turned inward. Romero also bestowed the viral zombies' with one weakness: a shot or stab to the head.

His 1978 follow-up, *Dawn of the Dead*, further shifted the stage from the private domesticity of a Pennsylvania farmhouse to public space, in the newly emerged structure of the shopping mall, replacing the voodoo zombie as a living dead laborer with the viral ghoulish consumer. Embodying the hungry gaze capitalism directs toward humans and commodities, the zombie consumer satirizes

a mindless, manic consumer system collapsing under its own excess. This insatiable monster both consumes and produces more consumers.



In *Night of the Living Dead* (directed by George Romero, 1968), zombies surround a farmhouse, trapping survivors inside, where they watch televised reports of the escalating national catastrophe outside.

Apocalyptic narratives in which everyday people are irreversibly transformed into monsters allows for significant social critique. Kyle William Bishop, in *American Zombie Gothic*, noted, “By painfully illustrating the destruction of the social systems that have become so essential in the United States of the 1970s, Romero paints not a grim dystopian vision of how things *might* be but rather the way things already *are*.”²² As Aalya Ahmad observed, from the late 1960s on, zombie movies could be read as critiques of what Naomi Klein has termed “disaster capitalism”; we are repeatedly shown how, in Ahmed’s words, “the zombie apocalypse stops the machine, but the machine’s effects clearly linger on in the survivors.”²³ As characters in Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* explain, zombies roaming the shopping mall act out of habit, reproducing the behaviors of their former, human selves. As the mall-trapped survivors gaze upon the moaning hordes scraping at display windows, one asks, “What the hell are they?” to which another responds matter of factly, “They’re us, that’s all.”²⁴

The emergent subgenre of the apocalyptic zombie invasion introduced by Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* took inspiration from

Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, which laid the template for the undead narrative of a human minority confronting the mutant majority, and confronting one's own mutated humanity in the process. Bishop pointed out that "the primary details in Romero's series of zombie films are in essence bland and ordinary, implying that such extraordinary events could happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time."²⁵ Normal everydayness is rendered terrifying, with once-secure sites becoming claustrophobic, barricaded fortresses susceptible to invasion. In today's popular zombie walks,²⁶ flash mobs, and public performances of recent years, participants dress up in specific roles and occupations, zombie grooms and brides, cheerleaders, doctors, just as Romero depicted in his series, wearing the costumes of one's former self, a reminder that "we are you." Catastrophe inhabits intimate familiarity, mere degrees away. Because they are not supernatural monsters, zombies terrify us through their uncanny resemblance to ourselves, rather than their otherness.

This juncture of the mindless worker and the mindless consumer lays bare the social and environmental violence of capitalist exploitation and accumulation. Forms of labor in megacorporations reproduce life-denying conditions for workers whose labor in turn makes hyper-consumption possible. Wilentz invokes contemporary sweatshop labor: "There are many reasons the zombie, sprung from the colonial slave economy, is returning now to haunt us. . . . The zombie is devoid of consciousness and therefore unable to critique the system that has entrapped him. He's labor without grievance. He works free and never goes on strike. You don't have to feed him much."²⁷ In *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*, David McNally has reminded us that, while zombies have morphed to signify and satirize American consumption, the critical image of the zombie laborer has risen in sub-Saharan Africa in the neoliberal structural adjustment era.²⁸ "Throughout the African subcontinent, the figure of the zombie-laborer has come to depict the dirty secret of late capitalism: that rather than a high-tech world of frictionless circuits of accumulation, capitalism continues to subsist on hidden sites of sweated labor."²⁹ Zombies stagger forward as embodiments of capital itself, insatiable and heartless.

George A. Romero's modern zombie cycle coincided with the Tet

offensive in Vietnam, a time when images of death and violence were broadcasted regularly in what became known as the “living room war.”³⁰ Looking back, various scholars have pointed out how the historical events of the last third of the twentieth century—including its wars, revolutions, and social movements—helped to prepare the ground for the resurrection of the undead in film and television. “The legacy of the Vietnam War,” W. Scott Poole has written, “became a silent partner in the birth of modern horror.”³¹ Romero’s makeup artist Tom Savini, known as the “Godfather of Gore,” was a Vietnam veteran, who strove to create realistic images of death, dismemberment, and bodily dissolution. Reel zombies lunged on screen as Americans became accustomed to seeing real-life images of traumatized human bodies. *Night of the Living Dead* offered a vision of horror that could not be contained, one in which the society’s official protective agencies and security mechanisms proved useless. When the Museum of Modern Art screened *Night of the Living Dead*—the first major American institution to do so—the text for an accompanying installation described the film as “a metaphor for societal anxiety” in the age of Vietnam and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy: “Americans identified with the film’s most shocking suggestion: death is random and without purpose. No one dies for the greater good or to further the survival of others. Instead, people die to feed faceless, ordinary America.”³²

In zombie cinema from the time of Vietnam to the present, America is depicted as literally devouring itself. Analyzing Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and Bob Clark’s 1972 zombie film *Deathdream*, Karen Randell examined how “the fantastic specter of the zombie articulate[d] issues of loss and mourning for the American war dead and missing in a way that was not being addressed by the war films of the period.”³³ Could zombies’ exponential increase in our contemporary US mediascape be understood, similarly, as expressing loss and mourning for, in Judith Butler’s words, the “ungrievable lives” of uncountable victims of US military aggression in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other sites of US operations?³⁴

ZOMBIES AFTER 9/11

The zombie genre has taken a strong political turn since 2001, as a blood-soaked critique of America's foreign and domestic policy. The Bush administration, having learned the Vietnam lesson of broadcast war violence eroding public support for war efforts, imposed a journalism ban on showing flag-draped coffins, soldiers' funerals, and the effects of bombing campaigns.³⁵ In this absence, zombies have arisen in greater numbers than ever before. Joe Dante's *Masters of Horror* episode "Homecoming" (2005) was a direct critique of the Bush administration's ban on photographs of body bags and dead soldiers. It depicted flag-draped coffins bursting open to release undead American soldiers. Possessing the power of speech, these zombie veterans protested "dying for a lie" as they bloodily shambling their way to the polls with the singular purpose of voting the warmongering president out of office.³⁶ Romero's 2005 *Land of the Dead* was a direct indictment of the Bush administration.

According to Kyle William Bishop, "Because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios depicted by zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded to more traditional horror films."³⁷ One may argue that the US public has also become jaded to war abroad, which in Rachel Maddow's analysis has become like background Muzak for much of the American public: "Kind of annoying when you tune in, but easy enough to tune out."³⁸ As US military power has become increasingly "unmoored," zombies have increasingly covered the planet and invaded our neighborhoods, bringing imaginary war home to our actual doorstep. Drone warfare, more technological forms of killing, and the absence of the portrayal of victims in establishment media render war both intangible and unending. And yet "Zombie Nation" plays out this very corporeal horror with an undead enemy who is everywhere. "Against a zombie enemy, the West can feel justified in ruthless extermination, in self-defense."³⁹ In the zombie war raging alongside our drifting and expanding global wars, lines are continually redrawn. The undead enemy does not require ethical consideration as to its humanity. We are not po-

litical allies with zombies one day and at war the next. Virtual victory is practiced.

The traumatic reality of actual global conflicts and disasters reappears in the genres of fantasy and horror. After a decade of war, with levels of posttraumatic stress syndrome among military veterans reaching staggering levels, zombies act as a cultural cipher, providing a place to interrogate social and political issues, and to engage the visceral realities of war that are all around but nevertheless typically hidden from mainstream view. “Since 9/11 and the proclamation of the ‘War on Terror,’ a new brand of explicitly violent horror movies has scored major box office hits. . . . But from the point of view of many directors, experts, and fans this ‘reel’ horror reflects the ‘real’ horror of our time: War, terrorism, economic decline, corporate greed, natural disasters, and social collapse.”⁴⁰ Reel violence—which includes videogames, television, and graphic novels—mirrors real violence in times of political, social, and economic crisis. Commercially marketable dystopia may also draw audiences whose lives are not directly impacted by nonfiction violence, seeking terrifying experiences that actually pale against the myriad lived horrors of the present time.

The doomsday fascination with the zombie apocalypse surged in the first decade of the new millennium; popular infatuation with the undead reached new heights with the 2008 global economic crisis. Zombies’ blood-splattered mark on mass culture became so clear during 2008–09 that *Time* magazine declared zombies “the official monster of the recession.”⁴¹ Citing the sheer volume of zombie narratives in media as indicative of something more compelling and complex than a superficial trend, Bishop observed, “Zombie cinema is among the most culturally revealing and resonant fictions of the recent decade of unrest.”⁴²

In “A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism,” Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry noted that the ubiquitous zombie is a “pessimistic but . . . appropriate stand-in for our current moment, and specifically for America in a global economy, where we feed off the products of the rest of the planet, and, alienated from our own humanity, stumble forward, groping for immortality even as we decompose.”⁴³ David McNally argued, “In the face of crumbling cities, soaring job loss, decaying social services and

ecological destruction, impending doom can seem not only inevitable, but even preferable to the slow death march of late capitalism.”⁴⁴

UBIQUITOUS ENEMIES

On Halloween 2012, the US military partnered with the HALO Corporation, a private security firm, to stage a zombie apocalypse counterterrorism and emergency response training. Brad Barker, president of HALO, stated, “This is a very real exercise, this is not some type of big costume party.”⁴⁵ Though skeptics might dismiss this as a publicity stunt, a recently released military document shows the stunning cross-fertilization of pop culture fantasy and official planning realities. As Gordon Lubold reported for *Foreign Policy*,

Incredibly, the Defense Department has a response if zombies attacked and the armed forces had to eradicate flesh-eating walkers in order to “preserve the sanctity of human life” among all the “non-zombie humans.”

Buried on the military’s secret computer network is an unclassified document, obtained by *Foreign Policy*, called “CONOP 8888.” It’s a zombie survival plan, a how-to guide for military planners trying to isolate the threat from a menu of the undead—from chicken zombies to vegetarian zombies and even “evil magic zombies”—and destroy them.

“This plan fulfills fictional contingency planning guidance tasking for U.S. Strategic Command to develop a comprehensive [plan] to undertake military operations to preserve ‘non-zombie’ humans from the threats posed by a zombie horde,” CONOP 8888’s plan summary reads. “Because zombies pose a threat to all non-zombie human life, [Strategic Command] will be prepared to preserve the sanctity of human life and conduct operations in support of any human population—including traditional adversaries.”⁴⁶

CONOP 8888, otherwise known as “Counter-Zombie Dominance” and dated April 30, 2011, is no laughing matter, and yet of course it is. As its authors note in the document’s “disclaimer sec-

tion,” this plan was not actually designed as a joke.⁴⁷ A recognizable mock-serious tone permeates zombie menace warnings. Call it Homeland Insecurity.

Concurrent with the “War on Terror,” huge numbers of people have participated in zombie apocalypse scenarios, as our country experiences trauma at home and perpetrates it abroad in the name of self-defense against a morphing enemy who, under the condition of “endless” war, is “everywhere.” An epidemic metaphor, the zombie apocalypse haunts America’s post-9/11 imperial consciousness. It graphically depicts violent domination at home, while violent occupation abroad is abstractly justified as spreading freedom and democracy. Sociologist Avery Gordon observed, “Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security).”⁴⁸

Zombies can be inserted anywhere.⁴⁹ Within the immense videogame culture industry, zombie survival horror games offer “pleasure found in violating social norms without fear of reprisal.”⁵⁰ As Tanya Krzywinska analyzed, videogame zombies function as ideal antagonists: as the zombies are “strong, relentless, and already dead,” players can “blow them away without guilt or a second thought.”⁵¹ All ambiguity about who is the enemy is burned away.

This first-person shooter rehearsal of zombie extermination, with increasingly realistic graphic representation, coincides with an era in which US warfare appears more and more like videogaming. Military bots and remote-controlled weaponized drones have become normal, owing partly to a tacit, mostly unspoken consensus that unmanned weapons are more “humane” because they reduce US casualties. Having learned that US drone operators refer to human fatalities as “bug splats,” a group from the heavily drone-targeted region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan organized as #NotABugSplat. They created a ninety-by-sixty-foot art image of a child’s face and located it in a field, where it would be recognizable even to the long-range view of US drone operators. The group hoped that the image of the child, whose parents were killed in a drone strike, would humanize the victims of drone strikes and “create em-

pathy and introspection amongst drone operators . . . dialogue amongst policy makers, eventually leading to decisions that will save innocent lives.”⁵²



In Pakistan, a community targeted by US drone strikes displays the large image of a child to humanize the victims of US drone strikes.

Zombie Industries sells shooting targets of zombie characters with bleeding torsos that can be repeatedly shot. Targets include zombie President Obama, zombie Osama bin Laden, a zombie gun control advocate, and—until a feminist campaign convinced Zombie Industries to discontinue it—the sexy “Ex Girlfriend Zombie.”⁵³ Given that zombies function as the ultimate killable once-humans, it is crucial to pay attention to how the political category of zombies is wielded and by whom. Who are deemed not truly human, not fully alive, and thus monsters, undeserving of respect or protection?⁵⁴

Through television programs like *The Walking Dead* and zombie-themed videogames, millions of people are becoming accustomed to zombie killing as a routine way of life. Fans and players witness graphic destruction of zombie heads and bodies hundreds of times, with cringing relief. We witness characters in varying degrees of trauma, the fight-or-flight response engaged at all times, against a post-apocalyptic backdrop.

The zombie pandemic serves as a rehearsal for an uncertain future, a mirror for the spectacular and mundane economic decay of the present. Native studies scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy uses *The*

Walking Dead series as critical pedagogy to explore American history with her students. In her article, “On Telling Native People to Just ‘Get Over It’ Or Why I Teach *The Walking Dead* in My Native Studies Classes . . . *Spoiler Alert*!” she described the power of the series to bring home the nonfiction reality that, for Native Americans, the apocalypse *did* happen and the world as they knew it *was* violently ended.⁵⁵ From this standpoint, viewers may begin to comprehend the depth of intergenerational trauma. “California Indians often refer to the Mission System and the Gold Rush as ‘the end of the world.’ What those who survived experienced was both the ‘apocalypse’ and ‘post apocalypse.’ It was nothing short of zombies running around trying to kill them.”⁵⁶ She draws out the haunting question that arises multiple times in the series, “Do you think we can come back from this?”

PLAGUE NARRATIVES

The zombie pandemic is coming. It's not a matter of if but when.

—Zombie Research Society⁵⁷

The zombie viral epidemic has endured to the present day, continually reincarnating fears of decimating, uncontrollable disease. A dominant plague narrative of our times, it recycles and reanimates long Western histories of plague terror, a post-apocalyptic Black Death. In films such as *28 Days Later* and *World War Z*, zombie swarms move at speeds impossible to battle, which may speak to the rapid rates of global infection, whether a biological pandemic, or computer viruses that can travel the world in superhuman time.⁵⁸ *28 Days Later* vividly depicts London under quarantine from the “rage virus,” its realism contributing to viewers’ sense of how easily this *could* happen.

Zombie movies are almost always set during or shortly after the apocalypse: established infrastructures—and the reassurances they can bring—cease to exist or crumble quickly amid obligatory scenes of disorder, and authorities who are looked to for protection themselves fall victim to the erupting mayhem. Whether the birth of the virus is attributed to vague extraterrestrial origins, hazy pseudoscientific mistakes, a wonder drug gone spectacularly wrong, or evil

government machinations, the rapid effects of societal collapse are consistent staples of the genre. Law enforcement, government, communications systems, family structures, and all supporting infrastructure are shown to be impermanent, forcing survivors to dive into deep reservoirs of resilience and self-reliance.⁵⁹

Over and over we take in the ways that the zombie-wrought chaos metastasizes across the planet. The repeated message is that no one is in charge of the world any longer. The recurring theme of total disintegration of the consumer-based economic system as a necessary prerequisite for new growth does not immediately translate into optimism about that new growth. Attempts to rebuild the social order may be as problematic as what they replace. In zombie narratives, as a contemporary spin on ancient plague narratives, it may not be the specifics of an individual breakdown that are most important, but instead, “the very idea of breakdown, the dissolution of certainty and meaning that zombies represent.”⁶⁰

Blurring recent memory and real conditions of viral threats, myriad versions of the zombie virus tap into deep-seated fears of universal vulnerability, while holding them at a fictional, sometimes comical, distance. The narrator in Ruben Fleischer’s *Zombieland* (2009) offers the simple explanation, “Mad cow became mad person became mad zombie.” In the *Resident Evil* series, the root cause of the mutagenic t-Virus stems from the overreaching effects of corporate greed and militarism. Off the screen, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have joined the undead trend, with their tongue-in-cheek emergency preparedness booklet called “Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic,” which “demonstrates the importance of being prepared in an entertaining way that people of all ages will enjoy. Readers follow Todd, Julie, and their dog Max as a strange new disease begins spreading, turning ordinary people into zombies.”⁶¹ A sensationalist effort to prepare for the unforeseen, the CDC’s jokingly serious educational outreach echoes that of survivalist groups, who appear to be invoking the day when their paranoia will be justified. For instance, *Zombie Squad*, whose motto is “Making Dead Things Deader,” is armed and ready with detailed preparations. Numerous survival manuals and websites, akin to those Max Brooks parodies in his 2003 book *Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection From the Living Dead*, openly discuss the latest methodologies and gear needed for zom-

bie killing, advertising zombie apocalypse readiness as full of transferable skills for natural disasters and human-caused destruction. Zombies cross over from media-produced dystopias into waking life through survivalist fantasies anticipating the end times, functioning simultaneously as an outlet for anxiety and a method for the dissemination of emergency response plans. Our nation is being regularly instructed and trained in how to meet this catastrophe.

The Walking Dead series puts forward the ontologically horrifying realization that we are all infected. The thin yet fundamental boundary between living self and undead other weakens to the point of erasure. What makes us biologically human recedes, bringing the fight to retain psychic integrity into stark relief. Functioning as another dimension of existential anxiety, the survivors' struggles challenge us to question what we are becoming or have already become.

Centuries-old plague narratives in Western history take a new spin in our techno-consumerist society. The inexorable zombie onslaught speaks particularly to a millennial generation whose identities are shaped by dependence on instantaneous technology. Collins and Bond have argued, "Accustomed to instant communication with virtual strangers, insulated from the natural world and dependent on fragile transportation, communication and power networks, millennial audiences have good reason to fear the chaotic anonymity of zombies."⁶² Zombies are the physical shadow of the information era, and the apocalypse they bring with them is the specter of total unplugging. No longer networked, what are we connected to? Survivors use "single-function devices." There are no selfies.

In the 2006 book *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, author Max Brooks paints a future portrait: As Collins and Bond summarized, "In the new post-plague world order, practical survival skills eclipse the more rarefied expertise associated with a sophisticated but highly fragile information-based society found in developed nations before the war."⁶³ Amid shifting notions of identity in the Internet age, the zombie serves as a critical meditation on what it means to be human. A shuffling, rotting corpse with no detectable intelligence and incapable of using a single tool seems a bizarre iconic villain for a technologically savvy, fast-paced generation. While films of robotic uprisings provide a forum to reflect on our techno-digital environ-

ment, the zombie hordes represent the eradication of both our off- and online selves. As millions inhabit virtual, immaterial realms, the figure of the zombie haunts the “evolved” cyborgian self-image of disembodied consciousness, forcing engagement with ravenous, wrecked bodies that are devoid of consciousness, depersonalized, wiped blank, left only with a hideous hunger drive.

Collective thought experiments of a near-future world left with a fraction of the human population, covered with decaying swarms of the undead, raise ethical, philosophical, and existential questions. With its common refrain “What would *you* do?” the zombie genre compels reflection on oneself as we witness human actors confront hellish choices. What would one do to survive? What unimaginable sacrifices might one have to make? Would I still be me? What holds humans together, without familiar societal structures? Will we retain our humanity in the face of the engulfing undead? Will I cannibalize or kill my loved ones? How will I find anything without the GPS tracking on my cell phone? What does single-tasking look like? What would it feel like to walk through empty, silent urban landscapes?

The zombie apocalypse is a glimpse of a radical, violent renewal of the social order. It is a massive Control-Alt-Delete. How will “the machine linger on”? On one level a mass hunter-gatherer fantasy, its sociohistorical popularity is significant at a time of unbridled corporate monopolies and seemingly inescapable privatization. In the new “zombie economy,” money is useless, and everything is free to those who know how to forage for it. If early zombie fiction spoke to Western fears of racial leveling and reverse colonization, current zombie apocalypse visions illustrate a class leveling. Values are reprioritized with survival skills on top.

Zombie plague narratives are closely tied to post-apocalyptic landscapes of destruction and regeneration. Apocalyptic landscapes show us visions of a decaying built environment as nature takes it back, images of overgrowth and re-wilding, useless machines and technology, signaling the reduction of human control and predation. The earth continues on without us.⁶⁴ The “eco-zombie” may be the genre’s most compelling emergent trend—the zombie reimagined as an avenger that refuses to accept environmental destruction and ultimately rids the earth of humans.⁶⁵ “Greening” the zombie reads it as an ecological figure, “encoding the rift

between humans and their natural environment perpetrated by capitalism, an economic system that centrally depends on the 'downgrading or devaluing of nature.'"⁶⁶ A peculiar relationship exists between this repetitive rehearsal of the sci-fi post-apocalyptic future and our sci-non-fi apocalyptic present. Audiences of the zombie apocalypse continually witness the post-apocalypse succession of denial-breaking moments, situations, and realizations. This catharsis may alternately enable a turning away from present conditions or act as a means to shatter denial regarding troubling forecasts that, in Doyle Canning and Patrick Reinsborough's words, "the ecological crisis is already feeding the historic dynamics of militarism, entrenched corporate power, and the systems of racism and oppression that have haunted the human family for generations."⁶⁷

SALT FOR A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY APOCALYPSE

Over forty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. predicted, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."⁶⁸ It may be argued that we have long since arrived at this point, and that American empire has entered a state of spiritual *un-death*. Perhaps the zombie apocalypse is already here, now. What will anthropologists of future generations say about American culture's fixation on fighting zombies during this particular time? Our culture's use of an iconography of death and decay can be seen as a process to grapple with structural horror, climate destabilization, and accelerating change, as global capitalism is on a collision course with the earth's ecological limits. "In an America anxious over the fate of the social order, the zombie offers a talisman, a laughably horrific symbol about a fake apocalypse that keeps at bay real fears about social degeneration and collapse."⁶⁹ These past and present meanings, metaphors, and allegories of the reanimated dead invite re-cognition of our monster fixation with a critical edge. Historian of American monsters W. Scott Poole claimed, "Social justice can break the power of the monster, altering the structures of history and society so that the terror of history recedes."⁷⁰ What is the twenty-first-century equivalent of salt, the flavor that returns us to our sovereign embodied selves, releases humans from zombification, and allows the undead to rest?

The new millennium zombie apocalypse presents a humanizing challenge to audiences to become more fully “human,” reflective, cooperative, and self-reliant. This more apocal-optimistic engagement is lucidly depicted in Brooks’s *World War Z*, where ultimate human victory is not in doubt, and the zombie war serves as a horrific crucible out of which a surviving fraction of the human population emerges as warriors with profoundly renewed humanity. This fantasy is deployed to summon mass forces of humanity’s highest qualities as we regroup to fight, brought into relief against the relentless, unthinking zombie hordes. The US is shown to have redeemed itself of the narcissistic features that left it ill-prepared for the zombie menace.⁷¹ Brooks invites “zombie awareness” of what capacities nations currently possess to rise to such a vast challenge of potential annihilation. Hopeful regeneration follows the plague’s scourging.

The original meaning of apocalypse derives from the Greek *apocalypsis*, “lifting a veil,” “disclosure of knowledge,” or “revelation.” Lifting the veil that shrouds soul crushing and ecocidal business as usual, zombies’ work is never done, it seems. As W. Scott Poole proclaimed in *Monsters in America*, “Imagining the world as we know it collapsing around us gives us the opportunity to take a long look at what that dead world values and call it into question.”⁷² A collective cultural autopsy of what is worth keeping from a dead or dying world informs prefigurative imagination, what future sustainability may look like, as sci-fi as those imaginings may be. Slavoj Žižek asked, “How come it is easier for us to imagine the end of all life on earth, an asteroid hitting the planet, than a modest change in our economic order?”⁷³ Overpopulation, income inequality, and climate destabilization, with grave realities in the present and dire predictions for the future, are all grimly reversed by the imagined undead destruction of humanity and its autopilot doomsday systems.

“Initially, zombie movies shocked audiences with their unfamiliar images; today, however, they are even more shocking because of their familiarity.”⁷⁴ This normalized familiarity, alternating between laughable brain-eating horror and renewed power to terrify in various media genres, needs to be rendered shocking. Many cultural critics have interrogated the reasons for zombies’ explosive popularity in the past decade. Longing for radical change and despairing of its potential, the

paradoxes of the zombie obsession point to the entrenched hopelessness and profound desire at the heart of American empire. Ahmad states that the Z-generation popularity takes root in the zombie as a sign of “an unsated cultural appetite in the Global North for the type of radical transformations that a relatively affluent and politically complacent society cannot achieve.”⁷⁵ In this view, the developed world’s “zombification” depends on the absence of belief in the possibility of change and a corresponding lack of will to fight for civil and economic liberties. “They simply can’t imagine,” Werner de Gruijter has written, “that a more humane form of capitalism and democracy is attainable and that in this whole drama they could have a valuable role to play.”⁷⁶

Recent undead protests, featuring crowds dressed as zombies, hold up a monstrous mirror to economic systems that are devoid of consciousness, stumbling down a path of devastation. A fascinating proliferation of zombie demonstrations arose in response to the economic crash and age of austerity, with marches of the undead during the Occupy movement, a zombie invasion of the New York Stock Exchange, “hunger marches,” and University of California students’ “Rise of the Living Debt” protest against tuition hikes and student debt. As David McNally observed, “Revolt by the undead warns that the zombie laborers who sustain the twilight world of late capitalism might awaken and throw off their chains. These images offer the true counterpoint to the gloomy survivalism of the zombie apocalypse.”⁷⁷ Embodying terrors of history and deadening social conditions, zombie rebellion calls for a destruction of reigning economic structures, a breakdown leading to possible breakthrough(s).

In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit documented how communities have recurrently risen to their best in times of catastrophe. She offers a historian’s intervention into the corporate media narrative that crises only bring out the worst in humans, who readily devolve to savagery and selfishness. Solnit reminds us that in disasters across North America throughout the twentieth century, the loss of electrical power sometimes allowed residents of disaster-struck cities to see stars otherwise obscured by urban light pollution.

You can think of the current social order as something akin to this artificial light: another kind of power that fails in di-

saster. In its place appears a reversion to improvised, collaborative, cooperative, and local society. However beautiful the stars of a suddenly visible night sky, few nowadays could find their way by them. But the constellations of solidarity, altruism, and improvisation are within most of us and reappear at these times. People know what to do in a disaster. The loss of power, the disaster in the modern sense, is an affliction, but the reappearance of these old heavens is its opposite.⁷⁸

Desperate times give rise to desperate fantasies. The temporal gap between near-future dystopian fiction and the present continues to shrink. Contemporary versions of the zombie narrative give evidence of a cultural desire to unplug and reboot, a traumatic liberation. The mythology of zombie apocalypse is a drastic “way out” of our contemporary systemic plagues. But we do not need to create more fantasies to shock us awake; we need only face the otherwise censored realities of survival in a time of global horror. With zombies, we have created humanoid monsters that repeatedly confront us with annihilation unless we radically shift. As Max Brooks states in *The Zombie Survival Guide*, “Conventional warfare is useless against these creatures, as is conventional thought.”⁷⁹

Zombie mobs devour individualism. This pop culture phenomenon can be seen both as a failure of the imagination and a summoning of the imagination in service of the mutual, collective effort required to challenge undead systems on a global scale. Rotting compost may become fertile soil. The most optimistic reading of the zombie apocalypse is the forced enacting of unconventional thought. The systemic “salt” of unconventional thought may be a return to diverse wisdom of how humans lived or could live outside these monstrous systems. The zombie threat musters crucial humanizing forces that spectators can tap into again and again. The bleakness of the genre tests us. The overwhelming threat of an inhuman future suggests our worst fears, while the promise of an alternative, in which human care and cooperation prevail, speaks to our unfulfilled yearnings. To face the truly monstrous challenges of our time, we may yet radically transform and de-zombify our society.

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Notes

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17. Chris Vials, "The Origin of the Zombie in American Radio and Film: B-Horror, U.S. Empire, and the Politics of Disavowal" in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, eds. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 51. An anthropologist and ethnobotanist, Wade Davis wrote *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), a controversial account of the role played by pharmacological substances in Haitian zombification practices.

18. Chera Kee, "From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again," 13.
19. Newitz, *Pretend We're Dead*, 90.
20. Joan Dayan describes how, during the 1804 massacre of whites led by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the figure of Jean Zombi, "a mulatto of Port-au-Prince" who "earned a reputation for brutality" as "one of the fiercest slaughterers," became a prototype for subsequent zombie representations. See Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 35–38.
21. Quoted by Kee, "From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again," 17.
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