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Author(s): DENNIS M. WEISS, Victor Taylor

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DENNIS M. WEISS
York College of Pennsylvania

VICTOR E. TAYLOR
York College of Pennsylvania

THE CULTURAL UN/LIFE OF ZOMBIES

When zombies appear, they seem to do so from everywhere and all at once. This is true in zombie films and in more recent television shows. It is seldom that just one of the undead dead occupies the screen, big or small, for very long. If a lone zombie does make an appearance, it is usually only as the first of a stumbling legion just around the corner. Zombies overwhelm us in number, which is *the* critical element in what makes them terrifying. This is not to say that the scenes in which a solitary zombie comes out of nowhere are not incredibly frightening; they are. But, the seemingly endless zombie “herd,” especially as it is depicted in *The Walking Dead*, brings an element of horror that is unique—zombies envelop, swarm, and keep coming.

Zombie “omnipresence” also applies to their place in wider contemporary cultural context. In fact, the zombie craze has become even more pronounced across culture with the enormous success of AMC’s *The Walking Dead*. There are popular “Zombie 5k Runs,” “Zombie, Run” fitness apps for iPhones and Android phones, “zombie student clubs” that sponsor human vs. zombie Nerf tag and other activities, and a very lucrative zombie/apocalypse industry that sells self-defense gear and manuals to those who want to survive the looming end of days. Even as a social “meme” or cultural reference point zombies are everywhere. For instance, when the Fox News commentator Karl Rove suggested that former secretary of state Hillary Clinton had suffered a traumatic brain injury, it was the “Big Dog” himself who said that the GOP was trying to cast her in *The Walking Dead*. The fact that former president Clinton jokingly and effectively used this reference to a popular television show speaks to the degree to which zombies have proliferated our cultural space—everyone, in a manner of speaking, “got it.”

When it comes to the cultural un/life of zombies, there are many avenues of investigation. It is relatively easy for scholars to agree that zombies are a cultural, perhaps global, phenomenon today, but it is significantly more difficult for scholars to agree on what that means. The standard approach would be to examine zombies as a cultural metaphor—a Žižekian *à la* Lacanian “master signifier.” Like the shark in *Jaws*, which, as Žižek notes, could be seen as “nature fighting back” or, as Fidel Castro saw it, “Capitalism,”¹ zombies could be seen as representing some social fact.² For instance, in Zach Snyder’s remake of Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, survivors hold out in a Milwaukee shopping mall and it is fairly short interpretive step to see the zombies in this film as late capitalist consumers—always ravenous and always non-thinking.

One could extend this social allegorical approach into a more specific theoretical cultural analysis; that is, acknowledging the zombie as a putative representative of a social fact and then examining the way that the feared object relates to or makes manifest a wider cultural anxiety. In other words, the inquiry in this instance focuses not on what the zombies represent in culture but on what cultural fear people attach to them . . . as “fetishistic” objects. This would be consistent with Žižek’s analysis of cultural phenomenon in his early work *For They Know Not What They Do*. In this sense, zombies, for instance, don’t simply represent consumers or, as in the case of *I Am Legend*, illegal immigrants, but manifest, as a cultural fetish, some deeply held fear and anxiety—similar to the fear and anxiety Roland Barthes identified when he argued that Martians (from the red planet) exposed a deep societal fear of communism.³ A cultural studies approach that turns on this critique of the zombie as a metaphor could correlate to a range of philosophical examinations—zombies and the philosophy of mind (neuro-philosophy), zombies and human nature, and/or zombies and ethics. Are zombies just people who are “sick”? as Hershel Greene from *The Walking Dead* opined. Zombies also provide opportunities to analyze discourses surrounding more specific issues relating to sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity. Theories of zombie identity and subjectivity not only are concerns for philosophers of culture but occupy the interests of writers and directors—consider the transition of “R” from “zombieness” back into being human in the film *Warm Bodies*. Thinking about the cultural un/life of zombies presents interesting disciplinary and methodological challenges. Zombies, like other “monsters,” turn our attention to many fundamental questions at the center of the human situation. As a result of this, we find that there are as many ways to study zombies as there are . . . zombies. We can see this from the variety of analyses brought together in this special issue, from gay zombies, consuming zombies, to zombies and the Apostle Paul.

In “Beyond the Metaphor: Gay Zombies and the Challenge to Homonormativity,” Xavier Aldana explores the evolution of the zombie in both mainstream as well as gay film and challenges the traditional identification of zombies and homosexuals. The connection between gays and zombies is often predicated on surface similarities, suggestive especially of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s: contagion, infection, decaying and diseased bodies. But as Aldana Reyes notes, this increasingly common reading of the gay zombie fails to challenge limiting and conformist models of queer identity. Aldana Reyes finds in Bruce LaBruce’s first zombie film, *Otto; or Up with Dead People*, a vehicle that complicates our usual understanding of the gay zombie. As Aldana Reyes notes, “LaBruce’s gay zombies offer nuanced commentaries on gay identity and sexuality, and thus surmount and complicate the potential representational pitfalls of their artistic contemporaries.” Aldana Reyes’s essay traces how ideas surrounding queerness and the rejection of queer liberalism, including the refusal of reproductive futurism and defiance of stable meaning, find their way into the gay zombies of LaBruce, which Aldana Reyes suggests represent a critique of queer liberalism and open up a political space where gay zombies can become complex negotiations of gay subjectivity.

Tamas Nagypal is drawn to Boyle’s *28 Days Later* as signaling something of a disruption in zombie narratives. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben,

Nagypal constructs an interesting contrast between George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* and Lucio Fulci's *Zombie 2*. He reads Romero and Fulci through the lens of Žižek's contrast between "alive while dead" and "dead while alive" and suggests these films provide two politically antagonistic approaches to the zombie apocalypse as an allegory for popular uprising at the dawn of a global neoliberal order. Romero's *Dawn* problematizes the plague as a threat to the established class and gender hierarchies of post-war American society and Nagypal argues that Romero remains hopeful and nostalgic about the classical polis. In contrast, Nagypal reads Fulci's *Zombi 2* as indicative of Žižek's alive while dead, suggesting that Fulci's enthusiasm for the grotesque apocalypse represents a more critical take on neo-liberal and neo-conservative. As Nagypal notes, "Fulci welcomes the leftist (universal, equalizing) impulse of the grotesque apocalypse of precarious masses, endorsing the radical negativity of those who are 'alive while dead...'" Nagypal turns to Boyle's *28 Days Later* to resolve these tensions, and argues that the film "introduces a post-political space with human-zombie hybrids internalizing the injunctions of the now ruling neoliberal ideology."

Yari Lanci's essay begins with the end—the inevitable apocalypse that begins most usual zombie narratives. Lanci observes that contemporary zombie narratives generally feature the inevitable collapse of civilization. But he is drawn as well to an even more recent feature of zombie narratives: the fast zombie. Focusing particularly on Boyle's *28 Days Later* and Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead*, Lanci interrogates the significance of these fast zombies running quickly toward the inevitable collapse of society and raises a set of intriguing questions: What does this emphasis on the end times and the running zombie have to tell us about our current condition? How are we to understand the increased speed of the living dead? Can we consider this increased speed as anything other than a symptom of a generalized anxiety about the kind of speed the *homo oeconomicus* must adopt in order to survive the neoliberal market? Drawing on Michel Foucault's account of subjectivation and Paul Virilio's account of speed or dromology to address these questions, Lanci suggests a paradigm shift from Zombie 1.0, the slow Romero zombie representative of a Fordist model of capital production, and Zombie 2.0, the fast moving neoliberal capitalist zombie. Those fast moving zombies are indicative, Lanci observes, of contemporary workers: "Today, the worker as an entrepreneur of herself is required to be fast and adaptable to the constantly changing requests of the neoliberal market." Like Aldana Reyes, Lanci suggests that there is untapped critical potential in this figure of Zombie 2.0 as we continue to grapple with the effects of the neoliberal economic order.

Might zombies someday inspire a political movement critical of late capitalism's status quo? This is the question partly motivating Simon Clark's essay "Doing the Zombie Glitch; Haptic Undeadliness as a Political Theory." But Clark is clear that not any old zombie will do. Clark is critical of the current crop of zombies reliant on digital effects. The zombies of *The Walking Dead* and *Resident Evil* have lost "the blatant and the affective materiality" of George Romero's earlier

"analogue zombies" and is indicative of a certain stagnation within the genre. As Clark notes, "Undeadliness has lost its weird haptic irreverence and become part of the normative language of cinema." Clark looks back to Romero's zombies for an exemplar of what he terms "haptic undeadliness," Romero's reveling in the hyperbolic artifice and spectacle of his gory zombie set pieces. Clark argues that this reveling, this haptic undeadliness, functions as a kind of glitch in the normative cinematic language, "a moment of playful excess and tactile surfaces that suspend and complicate diegetic integrity." And he wonders whether this same kind of glitch might serve as a counterpoint to contemporary political-economic liberalism. Bringing haptic undeadliness into our own political lives might entail adopting "the stupefying haptic irreverence of Romero's analogue zombie as a methodology that informs us how to swamp our prevailing political protocols with an unruly dose of excessive nonsense."

In his essay included in this special issue, "Adorno, Žižek and the Zombie: Representing Mortality in an Age of Mass Killing," Gary Mullen poses some basic questions motivating many of the essays brought together in this special issue: "Why the zombie? Why is this narrative device so alluring and so pervasive in popular culture? Why are we so riveted by the image of the human body that lives on past the death of the personality that once inhabited it? What exactly are we working through in this fantasy of the zombie apocalypse? And what does it tell us about our cultural condition?" As with several of the other essays, he too draws on Žižek, but he also brings Theodor Adorno to bear on the zombie apocalypse. Mullen is drawn to the seminal *Walking Dead* episode "Pretty Much Dead Already," episode 7 of Season 2, in which Rick Grimes is faced with shooting Sophia, Carol's daughter and now one of the zombies hidden in Hershel's barn. But rather than focusing on Rick's shooting of Sophia, Mullen reflects on Rick's fellow survivors inability to "execute Sophia's undead body." As Mullen notes, "The party's hesitation offers us a fleeting moment of humanity, of a bodily and visceral empathy for the desubjectivized other. This is one of several moments in the *Walking Dead* series when we find futile, abortive and sometimes ghoulish attempts to see the humanity beneath the dehumanized other." Bringing Žižek and Adorno to bear on this scene, Mullen argues that while "Žižek's approach helps to situate the zombie fantasy in our current historical context it fails, from Adorno's perspective, to point the way beyond the cycle of violence played out in the zombie fantasy, as it fails to integrate our own mortality and vulnerability into our yearning for a more meaningful and human world."

Vernon Cisney's essay begins, we might say, with a coincidence of history. The year 1968 was a seminal year for both zombies and French post-structuralist thought. It was in 1968 that George Romero debuted his particular vision of the zombie apocalypse in *Night of the Living Dead*. Of course, 1968 also witnessed the disruption of French thought and the emergence of Gilles Deleuze's *Différence et Répétition*. This historical coincidence leads Cisney to inquire in his essay "Living in the Land of the Dead: George Romero, Gilles Deleuze, and the Question of

Thought," what French post-structuralist thought has to do with zombies. His answer is plenty. Cisney begins with Romero's observation that, "To me, the zombies have *always* just been zombies... My stories are about humans and how they react, or fail to react, or react stupidly. I'm pointing the finger at *us*, not the zombies." Examining the evolution of zombies in Romero's oeuvre, Cisney begs to differ with Romero, suggesting that the zombies in his film do in fact occupy a more problematic position than Romero suggests. Drawing on Foucault's and Deleuze's concept of the "thought of the outside" and explicating the movement from Heidegger to Deleuze through Foucault, Cisney offers a reading of Romero's zombies, especially their evolution, as indicative of their adaptability and malleability in the face of the dogmatic image of thought. Deleuze, Cisney concludes through his analysis, allows for an optimistic and joyous reading of Romero's zombies as singing a song of life.

As he suggests by the very title of his essay, "The Watching Dead: The Panoptic Gaze and Ideologic Zombies," Christopher Flavin is interested in the gaze of the undead and the ever-present watchfulness that characterizes zombie narratives and links the zombie horde and the human survivors. The horde watches the living which mirrors the way in which the living must watch themselves, continuously monitoring themselves in order to insure their survival, which Flavin analogizes to Foucault's account of the plague-besieged town and the late medieval response to threats. Flavin is interested in this watching and he develops a contrast between the gaze as it is implicated in the zombie horde and the gaze as it functions with individual zombies. As he notes, "While this gaze functions panoptically when the zombie is part of the larger horde, it becomes fragmented when the individual zombie is recognizable as a discrete subject while the underlying ideologies and power structures are still present and are reinscripted through the Othering of the undead by the living." It is the individual zombie that finally captures Flavin's interest and he draws on the concept of diasporic subjectivity to "flesh out" our understanding of this liminal creature.

While watching the harrowing adventures of Rick and his gang of survivors, struggling against the ever-present tide of zombies, ought we to pay attention to the regular interruptions by advertisers hawking their wares? Or, better, what precisely is the significance of those commercial moments amidst the zombie apocalypse? This is the question that Larry Shillock poses in his essay "The Walking Flesh: Zombies, Narrative Desire, and the Apostle Paul's Anxious Account of Embodiment." As his title suggests, Shillock brings the Apostle Paul's injunctions against the flesh to a reading not only of *The Walking Dead* but those commercial moments that seem so incongruous against the backdrop of the zombie apocalypse. Shillock observes that linking zombies and commercials alike is a "master logic" he traces back to the writings of Paul and which he relates to a flesh-spirit continuum. As Shillock explains, zombies are walking allegories of appetite that, following Paul, he identifies with the flesh extreme of that continuum. "Due to being appetite-in-action and yet dead, they complicate

his account of the spirit by embodying a new kind of eternal life.” Shillock observes as well that corporations too earn a place on this continuum through their “televised incitements,” and we viewers as well are susceptible to this master logic: “We too are susceptible to responding dimly to sense impressions, turning in the direction of things that promise to satisfy our flesh, and stumbling forward until we have bought and consumed them—and they, through our distracted commodity lust, us.”

In “*The Walking Dead* as Cultural Critique,” Charles Nuckolls focuses on two central narrative elements of *The Walking Dead* to upend our usual notion that zombie narratives represent the critique of traditional cultural values—as suggested by several of the essays included in this special issue. Like Mullen, Nuckolls too focuses on the powerful seventh episode of the second season in which Sophia is revealed to be one of the zombies being kept in Hershel’s barn and Rick must shoot her. He focuses as well on the troubled relationship between Rick and Laurie, and the difficulties their marriage faces and the challenges presented by her pregnancy. Reading these narrative arcs through an anthropological lens, Nuckolls argues that rather than representing the collapse of traditional social structures and systems of meaning, *The Walking Dead* affirms conservative cultural values predicated on Christian sacrifice and the restoration of traditional marriage. As he notes: “The ritual of sacrifice serves to re-affirm traditional institutions and to reconstruct the post-apocalyptic world on the basis of a conception of marriage restored to its ‘traditional’ form. *The Walking Dead* is thus a form of cultural revanchism masquerading as a fantasy of destruction.”

DENNIS WEISS is Professor of Philosophy at York College of Pennsylvania. Dr. Weiss’s publications include *Interpreting Man* (Davies) and *Design Mediation, and the Posthuman* (with Amy Proppen and Colbey Reid) (Lexington) as well as dozens of articles in the areas of philosophical anthropology, philosophy of technology, digital culture, and feminism, including “The Philosophical Task in a Digital Age” (*Contemporary Philosophy*), “Max Scheler and Philosophical Anthropology” (*Philosophy Today*), and “Artificial Intelligence and the Return of the Repressed” (*Southwest Philosophy Review*).

VICTOR E. TAYLOR is chair of the English and humanities department at York College of Pennsylvania. His areas of scholarly interest are in comparative literature, philosophy, writing, and religious theory. He is co-founder and executive editor of *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, the director of academic publishing for Davies Group, Publishers, and the co-founder, with Carl Raschke, of The Global Arts and Ideas Nexus (GAIN), a digital, critical discourse aggregator.

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¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Perverts Guide to Ideology*, dir. Sophie Fiennes (Zeitgeist Films, 2014).

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008).

³ Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).