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Shuffling Narratives: Apocalypticism, Postmodernism, and Zombies

Abstract

Zombies and the tropes that surround them have become a staple of popular culture and a familiar presence in movies, television series, graphic novels, and video games. From their Caribbean folklore origins, the undead are palimpsestic metaphors for social issues and cultural anxieties. This article examines the rarely studied tensions between apocalyptic desires to resurrect narrative stability through monstrous bodies and postmodern voices that utilize zombies to decompose societal conventions. Despite this supposed antagonism, the article suggests that zombies amalgamate these contrasting mindsets by assuming a role of pop-cultural mediators that bridge the gap between increasingly divisive cultural epistemologies.

Keywords: zombies, horror, apocalypticism, millennialism, pandemic, posthumanism, Otherness

1. Introduction: Last Things

After the triumphs of Enlightenment and modernity, religious Eschatology – or what Paul Boyer termed the “theology of last things” (3) – and secular apocalypticism continue to influence substantial portions of the United States’ social fabric. This becomes visible in such phenomena as religious millennialism¹ and so-called doomsday prepping as a trend that has risen from subcultural obscurity to becoming a global phenomenon during the SARS-CoV-2 crisis that saw people hoarding supplies of canned goods and toilet paper. The bloodthirsty and braindead figure of the zombie, crudely appropriated from Caribbean folklore myths and Haitian voodoo, has arguably become the most popular manifestation and most versatile metaphor of American apocalypticism, regularly shuffling through the narratives of books, films, and video games – some of which will be exemplarily discussed below. On the surface, much of the humanoid creatures’ fascination appears as a modern-day permutation of much older apocalyptic drives that seek to resurrect order and stability in a world increasingly perceived as confusing,

disorienting, and nihilistic. The resurgence of apocalyptic narratives becomes apparent in a ‘catastrophe culture’ that embraces zombies as braindead doomsday vehicles that purge an unhinged social order. But the undead also point towards the opposite of this longing for narrative stability. In academic discourses, they have turned into avatars that signify the deconstruction of binary narratives and semantic meta-structures.

The wars and other humanitarian catastrophes that shaped the short 20th century have permanently put to question the stability of such traditional carriers of identity as religion, ideology, race, gender, and even the integrity the body as the last bastion of personal ownership and agency. The various theories and explanatory models discussing the present-day fragmentation of semantic structures might be subsumed under the term postmodernism and appear to directly contradict the apocalyptic desire of engendering coherent narratives. Some have suggested that “[p]ostmodernism challenges traditional sense-making structures [by] refusing to impose one point of view or privilege one kind of ‘culture’ over another” (Rosen xx). Many unique characteristics of the walking dead appeal to themes and stylistic devices such as intertextuality (Brophy), irony and self-referentiality (Romero), the subversion of conventional narrative strategies (Grahame-Smith), as well as an analytical focus on racial and body politics (McAlister; Moraru). This article scrutinizes the postmodern makeup of the undead as seen through the lens of the horror genre, considering novel conceptions of identity in cyberspace, the cults of youth and health, marginalization and Otherness, as well as posthuman concepts of the body. It reviews the zombie’s role as an agent of apocalyptic desires that aims to generate homogeneous structures of meaning, yet simultaneously as a postmodern and posthuman concept that works on the dissolution of these very metanarratives. Transcending this apparent contradiction, it becomes clear that the popularity of zombies also accrues from their implicitly assumed role as mediators between these antithetical perspectives. Consequently, zombies occupy a symbolic function that effectively reconciles this contemporary disaccord on a pop-cultural level, which proponents on both sides are able to assimilate into their respective worldviews.

The previous decade has seen an impressive number of scholars from the humanities,² social sciences,³ and elsewhere⁴ who examined the zombie phenomenon within diverse disciplinary contexts. For some, academic discourses surrounding the undead might thus appear intellectually exhausted and exsanguinate. A central challenge therefore becomes the question of how to position oneself against the impressive amount of work on the subject instead of merely trying to occupy a vacant spot in the ranks of a horde of ‘zombie essays.’ From a methodological point of view, this article presents an attempt of treating previous scholarship as a subtext and epiphenomenon of the zombie phenomenon itself. It suggests a synthetic approach by positioning ghouls as mediators between eschatology and deconstruction. The zombie-themed research taking place in various fields, it suggests is not only a result of hype created by *The Walking*

Dead (2010–) and other Hollywood productions but also a reaction to the bridges which the undead are building between the major epistemic contradictions of our time as well as the immense creative potential created by this dynamic tension.

2. Apocalyptic Bodies: Thesis

Apocalyptic narratives offer an organizing principle that assigns superordinate meaning to real-life orders and events perceived as confusing, random, or chaotic. The influence of these allegorical stories is rooted in their ability to make sense of diverse circumstances and epistemic crises by situating them within grand, pre-determined designs with clearly defined moral boundaries that distinguish proper from improper ways of thinking and acting. For its proponents, the apocalyptic model provides comfort, consolation, and sometimes the prospect of eternal life. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “apocalypse” stems from Greek *apokalyptein*, meaning to reveal or disclose. In Judeo-Christian theology, the most influential source in this context is the Book of Revelation as the New Testament’s last book, authored around 60–95 CE. It describes how in a prophetic vision the truth was allegorically revealed to John of Patmos, involving not only the binary division of Christian morality along which the future of mankind is graduated after the Second Coming of Christ but also “the definitive and literally ultimate meaning of history” (Pagano 72). Depicted on medieval portals, altars, and stained-glass windows, John’s vision abounds with powerful images that have “become a part of our social consciousness, part of a mythology about endings that hovers in the cultural background” (Rosen xi). Narrative-mythological archetypes such as the Second Coming, Judgment Day, Armageddon, New Jerusalem, the Lake of Fire, the Great Whore of Babylon, and the Number of the Beast continue to occupy the (sub)consciousness of believers, agnostics, and atheists alike. With their stable arrangements between Alpha and Omega, the book gratifies the human desire “to be related to a beginning and to an end” (Kermode 4), thus allowing proponents to surmount worldly mortality by participating in a superior plan of salvation (Kaiser 21). This apocalyptic mode was culturally inherited, interpreted in several ways, and continues to resonate in different contexts. Joachim of Fiore’s vision of a glorious third millennium emerging from the struggle between good and evil influenced both Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and the fascist utopia of a ‘Third Reich’ that would last for a thousand years following an apocalyptic struggle with its ideological adversary in the East. In today’s popular culture, the zombie apocalypse provides some of the most visible of these diachronic resonance effects, with examples ranging from early cinema’s Orientalized *White Zombie* (1932), Peter Jackson’s ultra-gory *Braindead* (1992), Max Brooks’ *Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), to the endless stream of *Resident Evil* (*Bio Hazard*) video games and movie adaptations.

The Latin term *monstrum* roughly translates to “that which reveals,” hence making the zombie into a metacultural glyph that warrants decryption and an allegorical protagonist readily integrated into apocalyptic worldviews (Cohen 1996, 4). The most ostensible reading of the zombie as a monstrous entity therefore seems to align with the apocalyptic derivation of meaning and identity from binary oppositions. The soulless ghoul becomes an antithesis to humanity and humanitarianism, hence confirming the core values of western civilization that stand in marked contrast to the zombie’s lack feeling and reason, evidenced by its exterior Otherness and resulting in dichotomies such as normal/deviant, rational/instinctive, and individual/collective. Zombies thus generate meaning through their difference from us, hence underlining our evolutionary ‘achievements’ of evolving from brutish Neanderthals into self-assertive individuals. Stuart Hall’s explanation for the representational appeal of Otherness further underscores this notion by explaining that “‘difference’ matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist” (1997, 234). Language and paratextuality are the carriers that engender and disseminate said meaning. However, as Herder points out, language becomes more than a toolset that derives meaning from difference; it moreover comprises a ‘cultural spirit’ (*Sprachgeist*) that transcends linguistic-semantic conventions (Evers 97). In the case of the undead, the letter Z for instance evokes a host of such ‘cultural spirits.’ Being the last letter in the Latin alphabet, it elicits associations of finitude and the apocalyptic ‘last things’ that may occupy a society’s generational consciousness. Z is the most rarely used letter in written English texts (0.07 percent in total) and very few words begin with it, further emphasizing the zombie’s unfamiliar nature.⁵ In turn, words that stress the letter’s pronunciation can evoke foreign, ‘exotic’ (e.g. Zulu) or utterly negative sentiments (e.g. Nazi). As a result, the zombie’s eschatological meaningfulness resides both in its externalized Otherness and an internalized unfamiliarity or even aversion towards its linguistic-semantic subtext or *Sprachgeist*.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the Pilgrims exported medieval European eschatological ideas and used their sense-making potential to make graspable a confusing New World, shaping new identities in relation to the threats of an uncanny wilderness full of apocalyptic omens and unfamiliar inhabitants. Early Euromerican colonists expected the Second Coming at the dawn of a millennium of peace and saw their duty in preparing for this event by perfecting the world around them through hard work, thereby becoming “Rapture Ready” (Gibbs).⁶ To ensure their admission into the pearly gates, they promoted social progress, spiritual reform, and the betterment of humanity, hence resorting chiefly to human agency and the modelling of their society as an example for others, exemplified by John Winthrop’s famous spatial allegory of a City Upon a Hill. This moderate and rather optimistic exegesis of John’s apocalyptic vision is commonly described as post-millennialism (Robbins and Palmer 9). However, as theologian David Fergusson points out, “[t]hroughout the history of the Church [...] there have been

fringe groups proffering a more detailed and urgent eschatology” (232). These so-called pre-millennialists advocate a more literal exegesis that expects the end of days, preceded by rampant sinfulness and cataclysmic destruction. In the US, the most prominent figures of this movement were the preachers John Darby and William Miller, whose teachings led to the foundation of the Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses (James 54). According to Miller, humanity is incapable of preventing the forthcoming reign of the Antichrist, hence all that remains is to pray and hope. There is no necessity to alleviate, for instance, world hunger as it is merely a harbinger of Satan’s nearing rule, which will exasperate these symptoms of societal depravity anyway. When the FBI stormed the Branch Davidians’ Waco compound in 1993, David Koresh and his followers interpreted the federal officers as manifestations of Babylon, which presumably drove some of them to commit suicide (Lamy 109). Contemporaries regularly interpreted cataclysmic events as proper punishments for sinners and corrective actions of a just but vengeful god. When the Jamaican city of Port Royal was devastated by an earthquake in 1692, pre-millennialists celebrated the disaster as the “just judgment on a modern Sodom, the act of a righteously offended God” (Crossley 86). Half a century later, Voltaire denounced this same mindset after Lisbon’s destruction in 1755:

Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice
Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?
In these men dance; at Lisbon yawns the abyss.
Tranquil spectators of your brothers’ wreck,
Unmoved by this repellent dance of death. (qtd. in Colman)

Today, some use homosexuality and the spread of HIV/AIDS to support similarly vengeful notions and serve as metaphors for moral degeneration and punishment. As Richard Eves notes, “since events such as epidemics are prophesized for the End Times, the AIDS epidemic is evidence that this time is close” (254). It comes as no surprise that the zombie apocalypse appears highly compatible with this gloomy theology. One of *Dawn of the Dead’s* (1978) most famous quotes, “[w]hen there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth,” seems to be echoed by pre-millennialists with “when society will be corrupted enough, the apocalypse will commence.” The events of the 20th century both amplified and ‘secularized’ this apocalyptic paradigm, inciting new fears and seemingly unmistakable signs for the approaching end of times. Two world wars, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, economic crises, overpopulation, international terrorism, and global warming provided preachers with ample eschatological material (James 56). In the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the post-millennial ideal of an ever-improving world appeared naive at best, while the nuclear arms race of the Cold War seemed to be heading directly towards Armageddon (Basham 22). Some patriotic Americans even worried that the impending Rapture would leave their government

leaderless and unable to perform retaliatory strikes against their Soviet enemy because all righteous politicians would immediately ascent to New Jerusalem (Boyer 242). Hal Lindsey's bestseller *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970) is heavily invested in the secular re-appropriation of pre-millennialist themes, even going so far as to equate China and Russia with the beasts of the apocalypse (Lindsey 83).⁷ During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan internalized this rationale, stating in private that "[f]or the first time ever, everything is in place for the battle of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ [and] [w]e may be the generation that sees Armageddon" (qtd. in Schorr).

After 1945, it became painfully obvious that humanity no longer required supernatural interventions to bring about its own destruction, but was perfectly capable of facilitating an 'apocalypse from below.' In the context of the Holocaust's industrialized killing, notions of morally justified punishment from above became "less likely to draw attention to the justness of the act than to the problem of the god" (Crossley 86). Behind the iron curtain, state-prescribed atheism had ostensibly resolved similar issues concerning the crimes of Stalinism. But even in the capitalist West, as Karen Gershon expressed it most powerfully, unencumbered religious beliefs were subverted after people had smelled the "gas of Auschwitz on God's breath" (46).⁸ As a result of these collective traumas, the allegorical symbols of eschatology were substituted by humanity itself as the new focal point of apocalyptic thinking. In part, the Cold War re-established the moral unambiguity of apocalyptic thinking by highlighting "the clearness of a world divided into two identifiable camps" (Bruckner 8). The binarism between good (West) and evil (East) gained a new significance as the ideological conflict that shaped the cultural reality of the century's second half simultaneously entailed "a world-ending threat and a way to understand the world" (Rosen xviii). After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, for some it signified "not just the end of the Cold War [...] but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 3). Conversely, Jacques Derrida criticized the triumphalism after the 'victory' of capitalism, urging that "instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' [...] let us never neglect [...] that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth" (2004, 85). In the spheres of popular culture, zombies came to typify the dimensions of humanitarian crises and famines in the Global South that received the media's attention in the 1990s, leading to the undeads' abused exterior perpetually representing what Derrida called "innumerable singular sites of suffering" (2004, 85).

Although apocalyptic aspirations in the West lost their main focal point after the end of the Cold War, a plethora of substitutes was already in place. The swing towards a new dimension of global interconnection as well as the reorientation of markets from industrial production to service and information technologies

cast many citizens into a state of disarray. Jobs and entire economies became increasingly vulnerable to stock market trends and speculation bubbles, further exaggerating “fears of anarchy, terrorism, scarcity, crime, and overpopulation” (Stewart 292). Against the background of deepening social differences and accelerating access to the internet, paranoia and conspiracy theories evolved into potent factors that explained a progressively disjointed reality in which traditional and ‘common sensical’ ways of creating and narrating meaning are superseded by what Jean Baudrillard dubbed “hyperreality.” Reality, he argued, no longer constitutes an indisputable concept shared by the vast majority; instead, it is produced and already anticipated by its own prefabricated imagines or “simulacra,” resulting in a mirror cabinet of “simulation [that] threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’” (1988, 168). Categorical distinctions of race, class, and gender also continue to forfeit much of their previous cohesiveness. In a world of fake news and media outlets that provide individuals with “more and more information, and less and less meaning” (1997, 79), apocalyptic stories, including zombies, promise narrative stability and the readjustment of defective moral compasses.

Susan Sontag summarized the disposition of US culture to function alongside such an ‘apocalyptic mode’ by stating that “[t]he taste for worst-case scenarios reflects the need to master fear of what is felt to be uncontrollable. It also expresses an imaginative complicity with disaster” (87). In recent decades, apocalyptic tropes have saturated many pop-cultural spaces, regularly represented by a hungry zombie mob threatening the destruction of humanity, celebrating the survival of the fittest, and the emergence of a postapocalyptic society with clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, perhaps most evident in the nearly dozen-season-long TV adaptation of Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* comic books. In this and other grittily realistic ‘apocalyptic soap-operas,’ the end of times is no longer a comfortingly far-away metaphysical concept that one may choose to subscribe to or simply ignore; instead, apocalypticism has evolved into a mindset that embraces a sense of constant crisis and impending doom. In hyperreal simulations, zombie hordes have already materialized in the shape of various cross-media simulacra in which the apocalypse “has already unfolded [...] [i]n our collective fantasies” (Cohen 2012, 401). The zombie as a fictional-yet-real and highly allegorical figure has filled the ‘void of fear’ after the Cold War’s modernist bipolar order, embodying a “sense of cultural distress or failure [that] gives rise to the desire for a clean sweep, a tabula rasa” (Sontag 87). The change in thinking from Judeo-Christian eschatology to Cold War partition and finally to an insatiable appetite for cathartic destruction becomes evident in the viral pandemics of *Outbreak* (1995), environmental cataclysms of *Twister* (1996), or meteor showers of *Armageddon* (1998) and *Deep Impact* (1998) that pervaded the 1990s mainstream cinematic taste. In these films, natural or self-inflicted disasters promise thoroughly egalitarian and ‘democratic’ obliteration for everyone alike, thus filling the void left behind by the disappearance of heinous communists

wielding nuclear warheads. Disaster culture in this manner supplanted top-down intervention with the fatalistic notion of a *force majeure* that wipes clean the slate of a corrupted and confusing (hyper)reality, performing a hard reset and forcing humanity back to its narrative origins.

3. Posthuman Bodies: Antithesis

In contrast to the apocalyptic inclination of assigning meaningful superstructures to human existence, so-called postmodern ideas often appear “hostile to any overarching philosophical or political doctrine, and strongly opposed to those ‘dominant ideologies’ that help to maintain the status quo” (Butler 29). Narrative devices used to oppose these “dominant ideologies” include self-referentiality, meta-fictionality, irony, and intertextuality, all of which find their pop-cultural reverberation in the zombie. Today, the walking dead have arguably turned into a posthuman pastiche of sociocultural tropes, functioning as the agents of an increasingly globalized culture that is perplexingly getting more uniform and more complex at the same time and whose orientation, like the zombie, is constantly shifting and changing direction. The heterogeneous assemblage that makes up their monstrous bodies has established the undead as the alpha predators of the current generation’s horror fantasies exactly because it represents an oblique, yet simultaneously transparent negation of human culture as a coherent system of meaning. While there are many more characteristics and metaphors that emphasize the postmodern dimension of the zombie phenomenon, the following section addresses what I consider to be the most emblematic aspects in this context, namely the zombie genre and corporeal features of the undead.

Like postmodernism itself, zombies challenge the integrity of genres and their boundaries. They undermine, for example, the so-called “Gothic consensus,” namely the belief that all contemporary horror has its roots in 18th century European Gothic (Ahmad 130). Zombies, in contrast, are indigenous to the New World, originating not from the ruins of medieval castles described by aristocratic writers like Shelley or Stoker, but from the oral histories of Caribbean folklore (Bishop 207). Unlike ghosts or vampires, zombies dwell largely outside of literary canons on television screens, computer monitors, and in comic books or graphic novels. Unlike the spectres that haunted the feudal European imagination and their offshoots in the Salem Witchcraft Trials or Hawthornian Gothic, the undead have abandoned the ethereal spheres of twisted psyches and paranormal phenomena in favour of an unvarnished display of corporeality. While other monsters draw their imaginative powers from frequently veiling and unveiling their mystical powers in front of the audience, “[t]he zombie is pure visuality, and therefore a consummate cinematic body. Nothing is left to the mind’s eye” (Cohen 2012, 402). While such classical monsters as

Dracula or Frankenstein's Creature are round characters with individual agency and complex personalities, the undead exhibit no such features and exist merely as expendable and nameless parts of a biopolitical collective.

Zombies also do not respect their confinement in the horror genre. Whereas apocalypticism appears decidedly dualistic, permitting little nuance in its value system, the monsters in their postmodern guise defy unambiguous categorizations (see O'Leary 71). Part of their cultural appeal may therefore be explained by the fact that they subvert human impulses to think in distinct categories (Cohen 1996, 6). Transgressing genre boundaries, they shuffle through 'zomedies' such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) or 'rom-zom-coms' (i.e. romantic zombie comedies) like *Warm Bodies* (2013) that are ripe with irony, quips, and references to the tropes and clichés of the genre. A parodistic mashup of Jane Austen's literary classic, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) portrays the Bennet sisters as ghoulish sword fighters and further illustrates how zombies subvert genre conventions and create patchworked pastiches of pulp and highbrow themes. The last act of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* exemplifies this destabilization of genre between drama and comedy. Elevator music accompanies the ultra-violent slaughter while a zombie finds a gold treasure in the mall's fountain. The final showdown between the film's protagonists, a hostile biker gang, and the undead blurs the distinctions that might set apart these 'social groups' through their humanity and empathy: Some humans are zombified while others turn into raging maniacs who throw cream cakes into the monsters' faces. One biker misjudges the gravity of the situation and decides to try out a complimentary hemodynamometer at a drugstore, whose blood pressure readings escalate as he gets eaten alive. Philip Brophy describes this style as "horrorality," namely "horror, textuality, morality, hilarity" as the narrative, visually amplified by over-the-top violence, turns into a potpourri of clichés, moral subversion, and generic deconstruction (3).

A disproportional amount of zombie productions constantly engages in an exchange with other texts by referencing, re-enacting, plagiarizing, or paying homage to the archetypes laid out by Romero and his successors. Brophy suggests that the accumulation of meaning across zombie-inhabited texts is almost obligatory in a content-saturated genre whose primary goal remains the generation of suspense (5). To avoid repetition, focus needs to be put on the meta-textual level, psychology, and expectations of viewers. In other words, the movie "*knows* that you've seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know" (Brophy 5; original emphasis). By employing these strategies, zombie movies intentionally betray the implicit contract between author, text, and audience. Productions like *Dawn* or *The Walking Dead* ironically play with their nature as fictional works by containing their basic plot lines in their titles, hence demonstrating the genre's self-awareness and tendencies to "recklessly copy and re-draw [its] generic sketching" (Brophy 5). Utilizing

these devices then means dismissing the Saussurian semiotics of *signifié* and *signifiant* and instead introducing multiple layers of (contradictory) meaning in which symbols may relate to a host of signs, subtexts, and cultural references. In this manner, the zombie genre deconstructs the *raison d'être* of dominant meaning-making structures, hence effectively subverting the modernist reciprocity between language and reality.

In doing so, the genre has transcended its fictional origins and invaded everyday cultural practices. Zombie walks combine elements of cosplay and flash mobs as elements of millennial public culture that relies on social networks like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Morehead 87–88). This real-life indulgence in eschatological fantasies has become emblematic for a postmodern apocalyptic re-imagination that draws its fascination from the enmeshment of physical and virtual reality. The “Zombie Jesus Day” website asserts that “everything that rises from the dead is a zombie” and sells T-shirts, mugs, and bumper-stickers that depict a green-skinned Jesus. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta gives tongue-in-cheek advice in case of a zombie outbreak by assuring citizens: “If zombies did start roaming the streets, CDC would conduct an investigation much like any other disease outbreak” (Khan). As a result, zombies now populate the “ontological liminality” between reality and fantasy, in the gloomy shadows of the imagination, and perhaps even the “hermeneutic circle itself” (Cohen 1996, 6–7). As a result, the zombie genre in US popular culture has arguably evolved into its own simulacrum.

Nonetheless, in a politically and economically atomized environment with a declining base of common values, the ownership and physical integrity of one’s own body seems to remain one of the last stable indicators of individual identity. In the presence of zombies, however, the body turns into a testing ground for experiments with which the cogency of formerly intact concepts is, often literally, dissected. Corporeality in all its facets has become a proving ground that scrutinizes conventional understandings of the human self-image. Made up of organisms defined entirely through their menacing exteriority, the zombie horde takes shape as a random collective of instinct-driven, expendable individuals that are devoid of reason, agency, and empathy. However, although they lack the facilities of rational thinking, zombies are perceived as human *doppelgänger*s who retain a great amount of signifying power for our species’ inclinations towards senseless violence, merciless warfare, and material excess. By embodying the darker and usually repressed aspects of the human condition, the undead shuffle about as our dysfunctional likenesses. Lacking conventional means of expression, the memories stored and displayed on their battered bodies speak with similar eloquence (Fhlainn 153). Devoid of personality, they overflow with material expression and cultural significance, externalized by the rotting clothes on their bodies that bear witness of their owners’ taste, occupation, and social status. This double status as both threat and impersonated cultural memory works to destabilize “conventional

understandings of the world, of texts, of everything we take for granted” (Roberts x), which Fredric Jameson identified as an essential feature of postmodernism. Examples for these destabilizing influences can be observed by scrutinizing the monsters’ relation to virtual reality, callomania, as well as marginalized and posthuman identities.

Firstly, zombies have contributed to a novel perception of identity in the online age. In the light of constant simulations of reality on the internet and its patterns of instant gratification and superabundance of (contradictory or self-reproducing) data, the plain corporeality of the undead serves as a welcomed corrective. On the one hand, their materiality represents a supplement for the incorporeality of virtual spaces. Whereas zombies lack opinions, passions, or political ideologies, the internet, filled to the brim with all of the above, lacks any carnal palpability. Because virtual experiences are immaterial, the ghouls’ soulless body becomes a fitting vehicle for the cyber-body as “embodiment in [virtual realities] may necessitate a transfiguration of the body boundaries” (Murray and Sixsmith 316). But the fascination of meme-savvy millennials with slow and ‘analogue’ zombies might also be mere escapism: the undead suggest a simpler and more carefree existence in an uncomplicated world where choices follow naturally from a “biologically attuned psyche” (Dendle 186). The web’s immateriality provides opportunities to escape from an offline world where “people fixate on the body because they equate happiness with sexual attractiveness” (Barrera 408). In “Docile Bodies,” Foucault describes the need to discipline one’s body – for instance through training or plastic surgery – to stay productive and therefore in line with social expectations, while failure to do so results in deviation and punishment (180). In part, this may explain the attractiveness of seeking refuge in virtual realities where such pressures are not felt as severely and where self-contained spaces may be dreamt up, altered, or deconstructed at will. In these networks of virtual signification, zombies exist as memes or in video games and thus as “a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1988, 166). As a result, in the nexus of virtual realities and cyber-identities the existence of zombified bodies appears as likely as any other real-or-imagined entity.

Secondly, the prospect of being killed and consumed by zombies obviously appeals to our deeply ingrained necrophobia. While countless bodies are eviscerated in *Dawn of the Dead*’s excesses, the value of individual lives is simultaneously disparaged: lethal headshots mark the shocking finality of an existence that has discarded the consolatory notion of the eternal human soul. The senseless destruction of anthropomorphic bodies opposes the tabooing and invisibility of mortality and concealment of the moribund in dedicated hospices that erase the act of dying from everyday experience (Morehead 93). This elimination of experiential mortality unmasks contemporary obsessions with youthfulness and health, diets, exercises, and cosmetic surgery (Kendrick xvii). By their refusal to respect the axiomatic fact of human mortality, zombies have turned into ensigns of a youth-loving and

death-fearing culture. Exempted from the finality of life, “our fascination with the zombie is, in part, a celebration of its immortality and a recognition of ourselves as enslaved to our bodies” (Lauro and Embry 88). Being infected through contaminated blood or saliva also evokes visceral fears concerning the loss of agency and control over bodily functions (Brophy 8). Greyish, rotting skin and limited mobility foreshadow the horrors of old age, exposing a real threat in a society with ever-growing life expectancies but without guarantees of basic standards for senior citizens (Dendle 183). The tormented zombie body thus reveals not only primal fears but also the prospects of enduring discomfort – the very “pain of being *alive*” (Dendle 183; original emphasis). Much of the zombie’s shock value results from its body’s conception as a powerful counter-draft to dominant narratives of everlasting youth and beauty.

Finally, zombies reflect the inclination of postmodernism to bring into focus the conditions of marginalized existences. The undead, for example, are a forceful reminder of widespread sentiments towards homeless people. Like zombies, their peripheral existences may appear “mentally volatile, unclean and even repulsive” (Whelan 315), constantly failing to meet social expectations by losing control over proper speech, clothing, and body functions. In lieu of regular housing, for both the homeless and the zombie the body turns into a last retreat. It demarcates a distinct space of being where no artificial structures prevent the public display of suffering. The *South Park* (1997–) episode “Night of the Living Homeless” comments on this notion when hordes of panhandlers overrun the quiet mountain town, demanding “change” instead of “brains.” When a homeless man is zombified in *Shaun of the Dead*, the movie’s protagonist remains ignorant of the man’s metamorphosis, casually jogging past him several times and muttering excuses for not having change. The same analogy holds true for the status of refugees, stateless people, and other undesirables who are forced into the margins of society. Gean Moreno notes that “[t]hose that live politically unsheltered lives, pushed beyond the protection of the social order and the space of legality, are the new zombies” (30). Mirroring the Otherness of these individuals, zombies embody the aggravation of the prejudices and sentiments that “monsterized [these] subjects in the first place” as well as the “subjugation of one cultural body by another by writing the body excluded from personhood and agency as in every way different, monstrous” (Cohen 1996, 11, 14). The zombie horde moreover embodies cultural anxieties regarding overpopulation, unchecked immigration, and the contaminating impoverishment of the Global South. For moviegoers, the escalating proliferation of infected bodies during a zombie pandemic renders visible the realities of pointless consumption on the one hand and world hunger on the other. Seen from this angle, zombie movies draw their horror not only from fears about undead – and therefore intersectional – forms of life but also from an already existing global class of ‘undying living,’ or, more drastically, from fears of Third World “*surplus-life*” (Williams 92; original emphasis).

The zombie therefore epitomizes the formation of a self-conception that transgresses the classical correlation between human objectivity and subjectivity, i.e. the duality of body and soul. Its condition of being undead becomes the negation of a state that already denotes the ultimate existential negation. This double negative nonetheless does not correlate to being alive, at least in the conventional sense. Cohen identifies this ambiguous ontology as representation of a “gap in the fabric of the known world that opens a space neither real nor chimerical, a breach in which everything familiar loses its certainty” (2012, 398). Donna Haraway’s studies in the field of posthumanism speaks to this conundrum by doubting the existence of an exclusive space from which humanity emerges as the apex of creation as presumed by Renaissance humanism (152). Instead, and in correlation to the undead, posthumanism challenges the binaries that have long-since structured common understanding of what it means to be human, most notably human/animal and organism/machine distinctions. Being undead then becomes a contact zone in which the membrane between dead and alive, human and non-human, tradition and reconfiguration is perpetually permeated. According to Judith Halberstam, the zombie is posthuman precisely because “it participates in re-distributions of difference and identity,” whereas humans thrive “(whether according to race, class, gender) to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman” (10).

Derrida suggests that the term “différance” describes a set of heterogeneous features that govern the production of meaning (1999, 76). At the centre of this concept rests the notion that language never contains absolute meaning and can only be completely understood through differences from other semiotic networks. Meaningful identities thus result not merely from self-contained systems but also from patterns of difference that exist in the liminal cultural spaces between them. These patterns in turn engender binary oppositions and semantic hierarchies that further underpin their meaning, making zombies a fitting example for the deconstruction of binarisms and redistribution of differences among complex semiotic networks. Their dead-and-alive contradiction cannot be resolved because both concepts are defined as biologically exclusive conditions, which makes their synchronous existence in a singular body an affront to logic and ‘common sense.’ The zombie’s grey skin is a reminder that binaries are “a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning [since] there is actually no pure ‘black’ or ‘white,’ only varying shades of grey” (Hall 1997, 235). Consequently, the unmapable and ambiguous canvas of the monstrous body forces us to query the dominant cultural framework of either/or, while tenaciously confronting audiences with the conundrum of neither/nor. The significance of the undead becomes detached from their status as real or fictional, dead or alive, making them into warped mirrors of the themes and tropes they are put in relation to and acting as their meta-cultural reflections. This engenders new perspectives on diversity and difference as the undead “offer a permissible groupthinking of the other [...] about whom we can

without hesitation speak in terms of determinative mental traits, communal body designators, and stereotyped characteristics” (Cohen 2012, 403). The body of the zombie thrives in the dissolution of boundaries by subverting impulses to categorize and label. Its unwillingness of submitting to generic categories makes it a proxy for the stigmatized, the ‘abnormal,’ and the validity of difference and Otherness per se. Neither dead nor alive, black or white, real or fictional, zombies always seem to end up in between categories, thus breaking up the incrustation of cultural conventions by floating “ambiguously in some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy in-between” (Hall 1997, 236). In doing so, they have become a postmodern nexus of present-day America’s attempts to achieve what Stuart Hall calls “the fate of the modern world,” namely “[t]he capacity to live with difference” (1993, 361).

The zombie’s refusal to vanish from the ontological landscape also illustrates a fundamental conflict of Western societies, namely the contradiction between the superelevation of material, soulless things on the one hand, and an implicit insistence on the existence of an immaterial core or essence of the human condition on the other hand. Both unchecked physicality and unlimited appetite of the zombie convey a highly charged analogy to this antithesis. The undead epitomize excess and eternal dissatisfaction by consuming without purpose but are unable to digest and make proper use of the devoured substances. Since its digestive functions have stopped, the monster eats merely for the sake of eating and to satisfy an irrational desire to have more (see Bishop 140). This points towards a twisted capitalist logic that thrives on mass-scale consumption and exploitation, thus ultimately itself representing a congested, quasi undead entity. Just as this system exhibits a fatal tendency to implode by consuming itself, its infected participants metaphorically transform into their own “simulacral doubles as cannibal consumers” (Loudermilk 85). The zombie’s defiance as an unadulterated allegory of material excess points to the soullessness, inhumanity, and irreversibility of an ultimately mindless materialism: Once zombies and materialism are brought into existence, they cannot be sent back into the genie’s bottle. Since both the individual and social body are composed of individual cells or units, they are both exposed to the distinctly materialistic process of decomposition. However, as the zombie’s body demonstrates, death – even in a hyper-materialistic culture – is not the end. Conversely, while it “seems final, fatal, and terminal [...] this activity [i.e. dying] is future directed, creative and uninterested in our mourning” (Cohen 2012, 407). Therefore, the post-mortem transformation of bodies – whose analogy to a unique identity was once taken for granted – may now simultaneously terminate and enhance the body’s agency. Notably, Haraway suggested appreciating the body as an assemblage of incessantly mutating genes and microbes that engender “momentary traces focused by force fields, or [...] information vectors in a barely embodied and highly mutable semiosis ordered by acts of recognition and misrecognition” (185). This and similarly counter-anthropocentric approaches

propose the interchangeability of human and non-human existences and find their philosophical correlation in object-oriented ontology, which argues that

nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally – plumbers, DVD players, cotton, bonobos, sandstone, and Harry Potter, for example. In particular, OOO rejects the claims that human experience rests at the center of philosophy, and that things can be understood by how they appear to us. (Bogost)

Cohen applies this concept to the walking dead who also exhibit “organs without a body, an assemblage of autonomous zones without a necessary totality” (2012, 407). If, for instance, Sarah Baartman’s African features embodied ultimate Otherness for 19th century Europeans, zombies fulfil a similar function in contemporary US culture. Like the so-called Hottentot Venus, the zombie’s difference is pathologized and its body read like a text that proves its unfamiliarity. Like Baartman, society grants the undead no individuality but views them as a collection of physical zones that can be dismantled, dissected, or preserved ad libitum. This dynamic culminates in the “substitution of a part for the whole, of a thing – an object, an organ, a portion of the body – for a subject” (Hall 1997, 266). The zombie’s status as a fetishized object thus exposes the inner workings of a culture in which negating a person’s humanity equates to disrupting both their individuality and conformity, hence nullifying them in a system that generates identity between these poles. As they are objectified and fetishized, audiences witness the reconfiguration of bodies, whose status constantly oscillates between alive/dead and intact/fragmented according to the principle that “[v]isual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused” (Freud 156). In this manner, the zombie, which is able of existing autonomously even as a severed head, advocates the viability of fragmented half-life, hence becoming emblematic for the posthuman redistribution of identity in relation to the body.

Finally, disrupting the boundaries between human subjectivity and monstrous objectification escalates in the most disturbing realities, for instance the largely unstudied case of the so-called *Muselmann*.⁹ In Nazi concentration camps, this label was sometimes applied to prisoners whose bodies were so utterly exhausted that “years later, many survivors remained uncertain as to whether one could properly refer to these individuals as being fully human” (Muntean 91). Giorgio Agamben described them as “the ‘complete witness’ [who] makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man” (Agamben 47). Holocaust survivor Jean Améry recalled that he “no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts [between] good or bad, noble or base [...]. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions” (qtd. in Agamben 41). The so-called *Verkümmerer*, a stunted slave labourer afflicted with atrophy or other consumptive diseases whose pains are corroborated in Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* represents the Soviet counterpart of the *Muselmann*. Analogous to the zombie,

both victimized existences reference an ineffable space of (post)human terror that emerges from the destruction and realignment of corporeal and psychological integrity. Like fictional zombies, they emphasize the liminal boundaries between the posthuman redistribution of identity and ruthless dehumanization. But they also make plain that fears of foregoing a 'complete' and meaningful existence may be suppressed so forcefully that "the cultivated sense of identity can only stably function through the denial of their existence" (Muntean 95). While these real-world zombies bear witness to the crimes of the 20th century, they also challenge some of the most basic assumptions of humanity. Their painful experiences, however, are permanently marginalized and ousted from cultural memory, while seemingly fictional figures become substitutes for the disturbing reality of their morphogenesis.

4. Conclusion

The popularity of zombies epitomizes a new wave of apocalypticism rooted in eschatology, millennialism, and catastrophe culture. In this environment, the undead function as a welcome cultural incarnation of apocalyptic desires that seek to construct or resurrect narrative stability by classifying humanity into binary categories with clearly discernible moral structures. The undead, however, also expose the deep-seated cultural pessimism of this reasoning as well as its morbid fascination with wiping out undesirable and confusing aspects of (post)modern society via the zombie apocalypse. At the same time, the zombie genre has turned into a testing ground and projection surface for postmodern reconfigurations of identities and categories, oftentimes through stylistic devices such as intertextuality, pastiche, or irony. The body of the undead bears witness to concepts that challenge or realign conventional approaches to identity and difference as highlighted by the zombies' simulacral agency on the internet, pungent critique of Western callomania, as well as their revealing embodiment of marginalized existences and traumatic cultural memories.

Approaching the undead as a cultural *force majeure* that manages to bypass the rift between apocalypticism and postmodernism marks a distinct contrast to readings that simply regard zombies as braindead, shuffling doomsday vehicles. In their role as archaic yet utterly progressive creatures, zombies display a proclivity towards but also vigorous resistance against the apocalyptic desire to destroy or undo new conceptions of identity and difference that are brought into existence by the zombie's body. As a result, at least part of their popularity can be explained by their role as mediators between two seemingly exclusive epistemes. As they establish a nexus in which dialogue, adjustment, and cross-fertilization can take place, zombies bridge a widening gap in the sociocultural fabric, perhaps even going so far, as Jeffrey Cohen suggests, to incarnate the prospect of "a future in which we recognize the suffering, the possibilities, the potency and the dignity

of our fellow humans and our fellow nonhumans alike” (2012, 410). While such a future still appears far removed from present-day realities, the undead continue to mediate new concepts and controversial perspectives on the politics of human conditions past and present, dead and alive, and everything in between.

Notes

- 1 Based on the last book of the New Testament, millennialism denotes the belief in the Last Judgment and a preceding thousand-year-long period of sanctity and peace.
- 2 Lauro and Embry 2008; McAlister 2012.
- 3 See Cohen 2012; Moraru 2012.
- 4 See Blanton 2013; Boluk and Lenz 2011; Drezner 2011.
- 5 See <http://pi.math.cornell.edu/~mec/2003-2004/cryptography/subs/frequencies.html>.
- 6 “Rapture Ready” is also the name of an Evangelical website dedicated to tracking real-world events that supposedly hint at apocalyptic prophecies. It stresses the immediacy of the Rapture as the moment when true believers “will be caught up together [...] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and [...] shall always be with the Lord” (Thessalonians 4:16; see <https://www.raptureready.com>).
- 7 The respective chapter is titled “The Yellow Peril” (Lindsey 81).
- 8 Adorno expressed this sentiment by stating “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch” [‘writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’] (Adorno 30).
- 9 The origins of the term remain unclear. Agamben suggests that an explanation may be “found in the literal meaning of the Arabic word *muslim*: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God” (Agamben 45; original emphasis).

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