

Cultural Studies and Transdisciplinarity in Education 4  
*Series Editors: Aaron Koh · Victoria Carrington*

Victoria Carrington  
Jennifer Rowsell  
Esther Priyadharshini  
Rebecca Westrup *Editors*

# Generation Z

Zombies, Popular Culture and Educating  
Youth

 Springer

# **Cultural Studies and Transdisciplinarity in Education**

Volume 4

## **Series Editors**

Aaron Koh

School of Education & Professional Studies, Griffith University, Mt Gravatt, Australia

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We live in a time where the complex nature and implications of social, political and cultural issues for individuals and groups is increasingly clear. While this may lead some to focus on smaller and smaller units of analysis in the hope that by understanding the parts we may begin to understand the whole, this book series is premised on the strongly held view that researchers, practitioners and policy makers interested in education will increasingly need to integrate knowledge gained from a range of disciplinary and theoretical sources in order to frame and address these complex issues. A transdisciplinary approach takes account the uncertainty of knowledge and the complexity of social and cultural issues relevant to education. It acknowledges that there will be unresolved tensions and that these should be seen as productive. With this in mind, the reflexive and critical nature of cultural studies and its focus on the processes and currents that construct our daily lives has made it a central point of reference for many working in the contemporary social sciences and education.

This book series seeks to foreground transdisciplinary and cultural studies influenced scholarship with a view to building conversations, ideas and sustainable networks of knowledge that may prove crucial to the ongoing development and relevance of the field of educational studies. The series will place a premium on manuscripts that critically engage with key educational issues from a position that draws from cultural studies or demonstrates a transdisciplinary approach. This can take the form of reports of new empirical research, critical discussions and/or theoretical pieces. In addition, the series editors are particularly keen to accept work that takes as its focus issues that draw from the wider Asia Pacific region but that may have relevance more globally, however all proposals that reflect the diversity of contemporary educational research will be considered.

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**Rosalyn Black** is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, having previously been the senior manager of research and evaluation at the Foundation for Young Australians. Rosalyn's career in education spans 30 years, combining teaching, policy development and research across the school, higher education, government and nonprofit sectors. Her research interests meet at the intersection of the sociologies of education and youth. They include an interest in education policy, issues of educational inequity and youth participation and citizenship. These themes are combined in her PhD study (University of Melbourne, supervised by Professor Johanna Wyn and Dr Ani Wierenga), which investigates the democratic participation of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the role of school policy and practice in this participation. Rosalyn publishes regularly in recognised

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**Victoria Carrington** is professor of education in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia. She researches and writes extensively in the areas of new technologies, youth and literacies with a particular interest in the impact of new digital media on literacy practices both in and out of school. Her work has drawn attention to issues of text production, identity and literacy practices within the affordances of digital technologies and new media.

**Emily M. Gray** is originally from Walsall, UK, and is currently a lecturer in education studies at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. Her interests within both research and teaching are interdisciplinary and include sociology, cultural studies and education. She is interested in questions of gender and sexuality and with how these identity categories are taken up and lived within social institutions. Her key research interests therefore lie with questions related to gender, sexuality and wider social justice issues within educational discourse and practice. She also researches within the field of popular culture and audience studies, particularly with online ‘fandom’ and with media and popular culture as pedagogical tools.

**Peter Hurd** became a qualified teacher at the turn of the century. He is still a qualified teacher but doesn’t teach anymore! He was not always a teacher but started off in life as a farmworker and has worked in an off-licence, bookshops and in child care and as manager of an after school club, factory worker, busker and library assistant. He currently chops wood, grows vegetables and works as a relief library assistant in N. Wales with his lovely wife and a host of wild animals. One day he hopes to make a modest living from his scribbles...or raise a people’s army and seize control of the state. Whichever is more plausible.

**Sarah Juliet Lauro** is the co-author of the article ‘A zombie manifesto: the nonhuman condition in the era of advanced capitalism’ (*Boundary 2*, Spring 2008), and coeditor of the book *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Posthuman* (New York: Fordham UP 2011). Her first monograph, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*, comes out of the doctoral dissertation she completed at UC Davis (2011). It is in production at Rutgers University Press and will be out in print next year. She is the author of both articles and edited collections devoted to topics other than zombies, including a forthcoming special issue of the journal *The South Carolina Review*, coedited with a colleague at Clemson, which is devoted to the topic of ‘The Spectral South’, and one called ‘AfterLives’ for the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. She teaches literature and film at Clemson University.

**Deana Leahy** is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests are primarily concerned with the politics of health education, curriculum and pedagogy. Drawing on governmentality studies her recent work has sought to critique the effects of neoliberal logics on the subject(s) of school-based health education.

**Esther Priyadharshini** is senior lecturer in education at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, UK. Her research invariably involves applying/testing critical theories (post-colonial, post-structural, feminist) to educational encounters/sites, and she has a keen interest in the area of cultural studies in education, particularly around the broad themes of food, sex and death. She teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses covering cultural studies, critical pedagogy and advanced qualitative research methodology. She is the associate editor of the *Cambridge Journal of Education*.

**Jennifer Rowsell** is professor and Canada Research Chair in Multiliteracies at Brock University's Faculty of Education where she directs the Centre for Multiliteracies and the Brock University Learning Lab. She has co-written and written several books in the areas of new literacy studies, multimodality and multiliteracies. Her current research interests include children's digital and immersive worlds, adopting and applying multimodal epistemologies with adolescents and teenagers and ecological work in communities examining everyday literacy practices. Her most recent books are *Literacy Learning Over Time: Longitudinal Perspectives* with Julian Sefton-Green and *The Routledge Handbook of Literacy Studies* with Kate Pahl.

**Phil Smith** is a performance-maker, writer, academic and ambulatory researcher. He specialises in creating performances related to walking, site-specificity, mythogeographies and countertourism. He is an associate professor (reader) at Plymouth University. He is a core member of site-based arts collective Wrights & Sites, a co-author of the company's 'A Mis-Guide To Anywhere' and the company dramaturg of TNT (Munich), the world's leading company touring English language theatre to non-anglophone countries. His plays have been seen by over 3 million people. His recent performances and research have included work with choreographers Jane Mason, Siriol Joyner and Melanie Kloetzel. His most recent performance work includes Blind Ditch's 'This City's Centre'. His publications include *On Walking, Enchanted Things* (both 2014), *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook, Mythogeography* (2010) (all Triarchy Press) and his novel *Alice's Dérives in Devonshire* (2014).

**Jason J. Wallin** is associate professor of media and youth culture studies in curriculum at the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Canada, where he teaches courses in visual art, popular culture and cultural curriculum theory. Jason is author of *A Deleuzian Approach to Curriculum: Essays on a Pedagogical Life*

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**Rebecca Westrup** is a lecturer in Education at the University of East Anglia. Her research interests are primarily concerned with young people, education and identity and how aspects of psychology and sociology intersect with educational experiences. In particular she is interested in students' experiences of assessment in compulsory and post-compulsory education and the (re)shaping of their learner identities.

**Karen E. Wohlwend** is an associate professor of Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University, Bloomington. She reconceptualises young children's play as an embodied literacy, produced through popular media and digital technologies in online spaces and classroom cultures. She is the author of *Playing Their Way into Literacies: Reading, Writing, and Belonging in the Early Childhood Classroom Literacy Playshop: New Literacies, Popular Media, and Play in the Early Childhood Classroom* and, with colleague Carmen Medina, *Play, and Globalization: Converging Imaginaries in Children's Critical and Cultural Performances*. Wohlwend's articles have appeared in *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Gender and Education*, *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *Language Arts* and *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, among others.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

**Victoria Carrington, Esther Priyadharshini, Jennifer Rowsell,  
and Rebecca Westrup**

Many years ago George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published the seminal *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). It was their argument that in using myths and metaphors we build the conceptual and emotional structures that guide how we perceive the world and how we act within it. In this, the metaphors we construct are key to understanding our cultures and societies. One of the most powerful metaphors to emerge in contemporary popular culture is the zombie. This book began with the idea that the zombie, as a powerful and unsettling metaphor, provides the opportunity to explore social models – such as ‘childhood’ and ‘school’, ‘class’, ‘gender’ and ‘family’ – that so deeply underpin educational policy and practice as to be rendered invisible. The volume brings together authors from a range of educational sites and disciplines to use contemporary zombie typologies – slave, undead, contagion – to examine the responsiveness of everyday practices of education and schooling such as literacy, curriculum and pedagogy to the new contexts in which children and young people develop identities, attitudes to learning, and engage with the many publics that make up the everyday. Using zombies in this way can, the contributors argue from their different perspectives, provide a lively (dare we suggest ‘undead’) canvas for critical examination of many of the pedagogic and institutional practices of contemporary schooling.

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The book draws its rationale from the position that the zombie and the notion of zombification have relevance for considerations of contemporary education and schooling on two levels. The first is the sociological critique made possible by Beck (Slater and Ritzer 2001) and Giroux (2010) in their arguments about the role of ‘living dead’ social categories, institutions and practices. Giroux (2010) has argued that zombies are a metaphor for the defunct but still ‘living’ ideas and practices of neoliberalism while Beck makes use of the term ‘zombie categories’ to describe out-of-date sociological concepts such as “‘living dead’ categories which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu” (Slater and Ritzer 2001, p. 262). This lens provides the opportunity to explore social models – such as ‘childhood’ and ‘school’, ‘gender’, ‘class’ and ‘family’ – that underpin educational policy and practice. What resonance and meanings do these undead categories carry into contemporary classrooms and public spaces where everyday teaching and learning occurs? The second level centers on using available zombie typologies – slave, undead, reanimation, decay, contagion – to examine everyday practices of education and schooling. Can jaded educational concepts like ‘literacy’, ‘curriculum’, ‘pedagogy’, ‘assessment’ be re-thought or refreshed once filtered through or juxtaposed against these rapidly expanding zombie typologies?

The book is constructed around four key parts. Part I (Carrington, Priyadarshini, Rowsell & Westrup; Carrington; Bingham) establishes the parameters of the zombie metaphors that are used throughout the collection; Part II (Wallin; Priyadarshini; Smith) focuses on pedagogies that engage with the zombie mythos; Part III (Rowsell; Wohlwend; Abrams) focuses on the literacies essential in a time of zombies; and finally, Part IV (Westrup Gray, Black & Leahy; Hurd) considers how the work and practices of education can be understood using the zombie metaphor.

Sarah Juliet Lauro is an established zombie researcher and commentator whose work has traced the lineage of this contemporary monster from the colonial slavery of Haiti to its intersection with the growth of mass cinema. Her thoughts in the Preface to this volume reflect the continuing evolution of the zombie in contemporary culture. In particular, she gives consideration to the shift from zombie *walks* to zombie *runs*, and to the role of the zombie as a mirror to our growing sense of disempowerment. She notes the changing role of zombies as signifiers: our representations of zombies are shifting as our own tensions and points of discontent and anxiety have shifted. She uses the growing survivalist culture in the United States as a way into a discussion of what she suggests is the latest shift in the zombie metaphor – the end of times. The zombie hordes, the viral spread, the running, the increasing focus on the cost of survival – in Lauro’s view, these all speak to our sense that our time as a species is running out and that we are already, to some extent, the living dead.

Victoria Carrington picks up on these themes as she explores changing zombie narratives across films, toys, computer games and novels. She argues that the zombie metaphor, originating in Haiti in a haze of postcolonial slavery and then moving into modern cinema, has continuously morphed and spread across popular culture. The zombie – that most modern of monsters – challenges well established beliefs



and practices, making the familiar suddenly and disconcertingly unfamiliar, challenging the boundaries between life and death, questioning our individual and societal preparation for large-scale disaster and profoundly challenging our notions of 'self'. Carrington then argues that the zombie's latest shift has been a move into popular culture for young people and children. It is here amongst children and young people's popular culture she argues, that the metaphor is being reclaimed to perform new forms of identity work, preparing the young for the new cultural, social and economic landscapes they will inherit.

Patrick Bingham has focused his attention on the ways in which zombies can productively focus our attention on gender and technology. This chapter outlines a fascinating approach to issues of gender as they occur in the academy. Bingham makes use of the film *Diary of the Dead*, noted for its continuation of the Romero zombie film franchise and its use of the amateur/found filming style frequently used in contemporary horror movies. This particular film is of particular relevance as the back-story reveals itself to pivot around American college students as they film a movie project for their filmmaking course. Bingham makes the case, through a careful analysis of the story line and the context in which the film was made that technology, and the horror film genre are heavily masculinized. This in turn, impacts on broader educational discourses. He then adds another layer of complexity to the analysis by incorporation of the notion of the zombie. Here, Bingham notes that the Romero depiction of zombies functions as a coded masculinity, linked strongly to themes of patriarchal (and technological) domination of society and culture.

## Part II

Jason Wallin attempts to explore the question of a zombie pedagogy: "What does the zombie teach?" While not denying the contradictory impulses in the zombie fiction of popular culture – it can of course, sustain both the orthodox and the revolutionary – he makes the case for how a zombie pedagogy can revolutionise and reform the restrictive 'ought to' strictures that surround traditional ideas of pedagogy. Some of these 'ought tos' are centred in humanist values of rational progress and development that cannot tolerate contaminations to the 'human' in the form of 'mixing, disfigurement and deformity' that the zombie exemplifies so perfectly. The (educational) institutional instinct is to promote anthropocentrism, to preserve assumptions of how life ought to be, repressing the ethics to support pedagogies that challenge the exploitation of the eco-system and the continuing fiction of 'transcendent man'. This is evident in the orthodoxies of zombie fiction that pitch human against zombie, as a metaphor for eliminating difference itself. Wallin's chapter is in response, an explication of how human life is 'inexorably', always-already, implicated with/in non-human worlds and how zombie fiction can also promote an alternative desire in youth for a future without 'anthropocentric conceit', through a radical understanding that *we* are indeed zombies – the interdependent human, animal, vegetative and microbial all in one.

Esther Priyadharshini offers another example of zombie pedagogy through the case of a YouTube make-up tutorial that teaches viewers how to transform themselves into not one, but two figures of horror – a Prom Queen Barbie and a Zombie Barbie. Both figures raise questions about what a zombie pedagogy can offer women in particular. Given the context of successful on-line Asian American women tutor-entrepreneurs, she argues that these tutorials may be politically ambiguous and pedagogically contradictory, when viewed from the standpoint of traditional, institutionalised notions of pedagogy. Nevertheless they offer a ‘monstrous public pedagogy’ that can function as an exposé of hyper-feminine culture and an exposition of the resistance that doll play in the form of excessive, plastic fantastic Barbie offers. Zombie Barbie in turn, brings ‘life’ through its emphasis on despoiling the plastic hyper-feminine with blood, tissue, veins and rotting flesh. In doing so, zombie pedagogy also reveals the inevitable imbrication of human and non-human, dead and living, woman and doll, self and other.

Phil Smith demonstrates how this notion of a radical zombie pedagogy can work in practice, through a pedagogical exercise that he carries out with a group of undergraduate students and a set of Facebook friends. The exercise exploits participants’ common assumptions and understandings of a zombie apocalypse, and of what it means to be human or zombie – they are simply asked to walk about, imagining themselves as the last human survivor of a zombie apocalypse. The open-endedness of the exercise allows learners to see their physical and social worlds anew, leading to embodied, reflexive, critical learning. While using the exercise as a means of addressing occasions of historical mass death feels less appropriate, as a pedagogical tool to examine one’s physical, economic, social and historical environs, it functions as a de-familiarisation technique with the potential to unlock new and critical relationships. Above all, the zombie figure, by itself stubbornly refusing to die or acquiesce, offers room to learn to resist.

### Part III

Jennifer Rowsell combines theoretical, empirical, and reflexive approaches to interpret the contemporary lure of zombies in popular culture and new media. Focusing on a year of ethnographic fieldwork with Roxanne, a tween who enjoys zombie books and television shows such as *The Walking Dead* storyline, Rowsell attempts to unravel what the fascination with apocalyptic worlds actually is. Applying Rosenblatt’s (1995) transactional theories she reveals how gothic and apocalyptic fiction permit readers to explore darker sides of human nature, and by extension alternative identities that readers can take on if put in an end-of-the-world scenario. Supplementing transactional and aesthetic reading approaches to reading and viewing zombie texts, Rowsell invokes Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain’s work on

figured worlds and sites of self (Holland et al. 1998). Using these conceptual frames, Rowsell explores Roxanne's interests in zombies and in characters who have to co-exist and fight off zombies and as a researcher, she tries to drill down to find out what exactly Roxanne finds so compelling about these apocalyptic tales. In the end, Rowsell finds out more about research and being flexible and honest about findings than she does about any profound implications of the zombie revolution.

Karen Wohlwend explores in detail the world of *Monster High*, a toy franchise by Mattel, examining a particular character, Ghoulia Yelps, to lift out identity construction and rather facile notions of childhood that media producers inflect into their merchandise. Starting with a brief history of *Monster High*, Wohlwend then reveals layers of the media ecology as the site of converging cultural imaginaries (Medina and Wohlwend 2014) in which children play in and out of gendered futures around fashion, adolescence, diversity, and schooling. Spotlighting different media outlets for the franchise, Wohlwend unpacks two-minute online videos about fantasy narratives that run throughout the storyline about teenage "monsteristas" who navigate being monsters while at the same time living out everyday lives of teens with shopping trips, friendship dramas, and boyfriend troubles. As with other chapters in this part of the book, characters like Ghoulia Yelp exhibit the same kind of gendered stereotypes physically and emotionally as Disney characters might, only girls like Ghoulia (who is a daughter of zombies) have gray skin, stagger, and let out unintelligible groans. Theorizing the franchise through Scollon and Scollon's (2003) work on semiotic aggregate accompanied with related theory on transmediation, Wohlwend provides a textured look at zombie culture as transmediated in the toys and the larger implications of these complex media texts for literacy and learning.

Sandra Schamroth Abrams opens up zombie worlds in the popular videogame, *Minecraft* by documenting videogame practices of three adolescents and contrasting their lively, engaged play with normative models of learning and teaching in US schools. Contextualizing her work within US politics and policies vis a vis education, Schamroth Abrams outlines a tendency within US curriculum, and indeed international curriculum, to standardize through the Common Core Standards. In stark contrast, Schamroth Abrams then presents her own research with adolescent males in library and schooling contexts examining their videogame practices and the thinking processes that they engage in during game play. The two male and one female adolescents that she profiles, Kyle, Sage, and Sloane all love playing *Minecraft* and they derive particular pleasure fighting off zombies in defense mode. Schamroth Abrams does not fail to appreciate the irony of three adolescents' love of zombies and zombie chases and the robotic framing of learning in the Common Core Standards. In fact, Schamroth Abrams looks to videogames as exemplars of structured change, perhaps the educational community can consider videogame heuristics and epistemologies to avoid students becoming standardized zombies in school.

## Part IV

In this part of the book the authors focus on the ways in which educational policy and practice in schooling can influence the construction and shaping of learners' and teachers' identities. In the first chapter of this part of the book Rebecca Westrup critically explores assessment within schooling practices in a UK context. Drawing on her experiences from over nearly ten years in various teaching and supportive roles in universities and zombie as a metaphor, she argues that assessment practices, and in particular testing, are zombifying children and young people. She argues that following transition from schools and/or colleges into universities some students experience difficulties with participating in university study because they have been zombified. The relentless amount of testing in compulsory schooling has decayed their brains until there is the mention of assessment and these slack-jawed milky-eyed students sniff out the associated learning outcomes. After exploring the affects that assessment and testing practices can have on some children and young people in schools Westrup draws on the findings of a small-scale research study to suggest how university educators can bring these decaying students back to life.

In their chapter, Rosalyn Black, Emily Gray and Deana Leahy focus their attention on the use of zombie and monster metaphors to provide an analytical device for critically exploring the creation of the young citizen in increasingly neo-liberal times. Against the backdrop of moral panics within society, the authors suggest that the formation of educational policies and the subsequent shaping of schooling practices is driven by society's fear of monstrous citizens. Set within an Australian schooling context, particularly active citizenship programmes and health education, Black et al. draw on popular culture and academic sources which have depicted zombies, monsters and ghouls in particular ways. They draw on a combination of films such as *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* and more recently Francis Lawrence's movie adaptation of Richard Matheson's novel *I am Legend* and academic theory such as Beck's 'living dead' categories to analyse the ways in which policies and practices within schooling are zombifying young people. They argue that educational policy creates a tension between the ideal of the active citizen, young people who can contribute to economic and social productivity and the actual lived experience of the zombified citizen, those young people who are 'othered' and who cannot make choices nor have their voices heard because their education is prescribed by the Government.

Peter Hurd continues to discuss these themes by focusing on the zombifying of teachers within the neo-liberal education system. In his chapter, focusing on his perspective as a supply teacher, Hurd provides a sombre piece of writing. The author provides an honest reflection of his experiences of working in primary schools. Drawing on Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* Hurd draws on zombie as a metaphor and intertwines his own narrative with characteristics of zombie to illustrate the zombification of education. Hurd draws our attention to the current issues some teachers face such as teaching 'the institutionalised infant', work pressures and mental health problems as well as the tensions surrounding the employment of

unqualified teachers in schools. Central to this is the tension between teachers enjoying their job because they can inspire child and supporting them with their learning and them being disheartened with the profession because of the increasing zombie faults, often related to ‘thhhe ooobbjjeccttiivvveeee’ as Hurd points out. Drawing on the notion of testing discussed in Westrup’s chapter, Hurd illustrates how teachers as well as learners are being zombified by assessment practices. Although as he says he is not ‘an academic’ (whatever one of those is these days) his chapter highlights many issues within the current education system and interestingly seems to have more life than the others in parts. Perhaps this is because unlike the chapters written by Westrup and Black et al. he was not constrained by the zombifying conventions that are spreading from compulsory education into Higher Education?

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# Part I



## The Zombie's Eyes

The zombie's eyes are oozing with slime  
down his warty face.  
Pus is dripping like puke  
and stench of mouldy breath.  
His squidgy brains trickle with blood.  
Peeling, mushy flesh, from his grim body.  
(By Neve)

## Chapter 2

# Preface Zombies Today

Sarah Juliet Lauro

I was supposed to be in Berlin. But there was something about “severe weather” in the Midwest (in May?! What is that but a harbinger of the climate crisis?), and an airport control tower on fire in Chicago, and a vision of the kind of chaos that ensues when society breaks down. At the airport, there was a two-hour long line to wait in, full of irritable would-be passengers, and at the front, barely an apology from the overworked airline employees, tasked with the unenviable job of informing all those booked on cancelled flights that delays were on the order of days, not hours because (and here’s our old friend capitalism rearing his ugly mug), the airlines had all, according to common procedure these days, overbooked their flights. Sure, they could get me to Europe, but not for several days, and by that time, I would have missed my reason for going: to see German zombies run.

Several months earlier, I had been contacted by a producer for a German television station based out of Berlin. They were making a documentary on the zombie and wanted some soundbites on the larger cultural fascination with the undead, a topic I’ve been researching for over a decade. So, when the opportunity to come to Berlin to be interviewed by the producers at the first annual German zombie run presented itself, I was excited. Maybe a little trepidatious, though, too: What did I know about *German zombies*? My dissertation and the book that came out of it, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (Rutgers UP 2015), is about the obsession with the zombie that has roiled the U.S. for nearly a century and my argument specific to US politics and economics, history and foreign policy, and American popular culture.

The extent of my knowledge of German zombies extends to the handful of films that depict Nazis as the undead, for example *Shock Waves* (1977), Jean Rollin’s *Zombie Lake* (1980), and the more recent Norwegian film *Dead Snow* (2009). But

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even though the zombie—with which we have attained maximum cultural saturation, appearing as the monster does now in television adverts for telephone companies and candy—*does* seem to be an archetypal figure for the “banality of evil,” as Hannah Arendt wrote, isn’t that just *too* easy, to read the zombie’s mindless droves as a reflection of the Germans’ complicity under Hitler, a nation of little Eichmanns?<sup>1</sup> Unluckily, because of the cancelled flight, I wouldn’t get the chance to learn more about Germany’s zombies and zombie fans, but the invitation reminded me of the ever expanding uses and resonances of the zombie in a global context. This volume, an international, interdisciplinary collaboration, reveals the still widening interest in and the surprising applications of this undead figure. Soon, like a virus spreading beyond national borders, the zombie is likely to outgrow all of our previous definitions, but I’d like to take this opportunity to share some of my observations on the history of the zombie, and its recent transformations.

## Economics and Government

Up until about a year ago, it was very easy, when someone asked me why our culture seemed to be in the grips of zombie mania, to answer by glibly quoting the slogan of Bill Clinton and Al Gore’s political campaign, “It’s the Economy, Stupid.” The zombie first made its appearance in cinema during the Great Depression. In the early films of the 1930s, the zombie is very clearly a puppet of his voodoo master, evocative of the powerless cog in the capitalist machinery. As many film historians before me have noted, it seems likely that the early zombie invited audiences to identify with it, particularly as the imagery became redolent of the factory worker rather than the field hand.<sup>2</sup> The zombie undergoes significant transformation in cinema, becoming, most notably, in George Romero’s oeuvre, a contagious cannibal, but there remains, in the best films, an invitation to identify *with* the zombie, rather than to just be terrified of it.<sup>3</sup> This current is best summed up by the line “They’re

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<sup>1</sup>The reference here is to Hannah Arendt’s important article “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” *The New Yorker*, February 16, 1963. A television commercial for Sprint Unlimited that ran in the US featured a zombie; so did one for Starburst candy.

<sup>2</sup>For books devoted to the zombie in cinema, see Kyle Bishop’s *American Zombie Gothic* (2010) and Peter Dendle’s *Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* Volumes I (2000) & II (2011), as well as Jamie Russell’s *Book of the Dead* (2005) and Glenn Kay’s *Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide* (2nd ed. 2012). Several other book collections of late have provided similar studies of the zombie either in cinema or in various media: see especially Greene and Mohammed, *The Undead and Philosophy*; McIntosh and Leverette, *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*; Moreman and Rushton, *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on the Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*.

<sup>3</sup>The association between zombies and capitalist critique has been deeply entrenched since *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). In his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986) Robin Wood wrote that Romero’s “zombies represent, on the metaphorical level, the whole dead weight of patriarchal consumer capitalism, from whose habits of behavior and desire not even Hare Krishnas and nuns, mindlessly joining the conditioned gravitation to the shopping mall, are exempt” (Wood, 118).



us. They're us and we're them" from the *Night of the Living Dead* remake (1990), but it is a thread we find running throughout zombie cinema, as in the zombies haunting the shopping mall in Romero's 1978 *Dawn of the Dead*—an indictment of consumer capitalism in the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

The zombie's popularity had waxed and waned throughout the decades, but during the Great Recession, it came back in a big way. Most strikingly, to me, were the occurrence of zombie walks—a phenomenon I've written on elsewhere: thousands of people joining in public dressed as zombies, most often, for no reason other than fun. This wasn't just a handful of events staged by horror fans: zombie walks were being orchestrated in major cities across the country, and over a period of ten years, every state in the union saw a zombie walk planned. Nearly ten thousand zombies turned up for a record setting event in New Jersey. What was going on? Was this really about frustrations with a stagnant economy, or something more? In my essay "Playing Dead: Zombies invade performance art and your neighborhood" I called such zombie mobs a dress rehearsal for revolution.<sup>5</sup>

Elaborating in a phone interview, off the cuff, I said that perhaps the zombie represented the American public's feeling that they were not being heard by the politicians meant to represent them in politics. Like the Iraq war. Nobody I knew wanted to invade that country, but President Bush did it anyway to devastating losses, including the death of my husband's cousin, Captain Brian Freeman. Maybe our zombies are about that—after all there are films that make the link directly.<sup>6</sup> For this, I received hate mail. That was a wonderful war, everybody loved it, and I should consider leaving the South and taking my liberal opinions with me.

Ok, then, I revised my stance, trying to draw a wider circle that would include those of different political persuasions than myself. Maybe, I thought, as I stood behind a man at a movie theatre wearing a T-shirt that said "If Daryl dies, we riot"—the "we" here signifying, in this gentleman's case, the redneck subculture that looks to this character on AMC's *The Walking Dead* as a hero representative of their ilk—zombies, especially when ensconced in the typical post-apocalyptic, survivalist narrative, are often a symbol of blanket frustration with government, a fantasy that we might survive something as cataclysmic as the end of capitalism or the fall of the nation state.<sup>7</sup> Yeah, I thought acerbically as I chatted briefly with Daryl's disciple, thinking especially of the Zombie Industries' target practice model "Barocky,"

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<sup>4</sup>See, for one example among the many scholars that discuss the significance of this line, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. in *Back from the Dead: remakes of Romero films as markers of their times*. McFarland & Co., Jefferson, NC, 2011.

<sup>5</sup>See my essay in *Better Off Dead: the evolution of the zombie as posthuman*. Eds Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, Fordham UP, New York, 2011.

<sup>6</sup>See for example, Peter Dendle's description of the film *Zombie Self-Defense Force* (Japan, 2005) and *Zombies of Mass Destruction* (Japan, 2008) and the episode of *Masters of Horror* called "Homecoming," (Showtime, 2005). In general, Dendle's *Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, (McFarland & Co., Jefferson, NC, 2001 and 2011) in two volumes, is a fantastic source for the zombie film enthusiast.

<sup>7</sup>More than one company has made a shirt bearing this slogan, but see for example, one sold by Hot Topic, <http://search.hottopic.com/clothing/If-Daryl-Dies-We-Riot> Accessed 15.6.2014

which looks suspiciously like President Barack Obama—a three dimensional model that bleeds when you shoot it—frustration with *this* government.<sup>8</sup> That there is a huge segment of the US population that refuses to accept that a black man is their President is something I could never truly have believed until I moved to South Carolina. But that the zombie is always, in some sense, connected to our history of oppressing the African slave, and deeply colored by our country’s history of colonialism and racism is not to be doubted. This cannot be intuited, but must be learned by studying the zombie’s history. Yet, the spectre of the African slave is often visible even in contemporary iterations. Think, for example of the character of Michonne on *The Walking Dead*, a powerful African American woman who keeps two zombies in chains as companions, an image obviously evocative of the “colonial gaze” that Gerry Canavan describes in relation to the zombie.<sup>9</sup> Or even, a recent episode in which zombies blackened by fire stumble forward to surround a farmhouse where the humans are hiding in a scene evocative of rebellion. Could a T-shirt proclaim, “If Michonne dies, we riot”? What would be the implications of such a statement and who would be the “we”?

## History and Foreign Policy

To trace precisely the evolution and migration of a myth from seventeenth century African soul capture mythologies, to the cane-rich colonies of the Caribbean is a much bigger project than I can undertake here, but suffice it to say that the zombie only comes to what we often and erroneously call “western” consciousness because of an ancestor myth’s transference from Africa to the Caribbean via the transatlantic slave trade. The zombie is always “about” slavery, not only in its content, but also in its accrued historical meaning. Historically, the zombie attracts the attention of Europeans and US Americans when the myth is described in the early twentieth century by visitors to the island of Haiti, a former slave colony that earned its independence from France after a 13 year long war that began as a slave rebellion. Yet, that the nascent country was saddled with debt, made to pay retribution to France for the loss of property and slaves, and, thus, made reliant on foreign investment ensured that the country was not free from the meddling influence of a new kind of economic imperialism, as is seen especially in Hasco, the Haitian American Sugar Company, and the US occupation of Haiti, a prime motivation of which was the protection of American economic interests in a time of political unrest. It was during the US occupation of Haiti that the first wave of interest in the zombie began to swell, as narratives about the nation reported stories of “dead men working in the

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<sup>8</sup>This disturbing product has since been taken off the virtual shelf, but reports about it can still be read online. See for example, the MSN news write-up of 17.5.2013, “Did NRA ban zombie targets that resemble Obama?” <<http://news.msn.com/us/did-nra-ban-zombie-targets-that-resemble-obama>>

<sup>9</sup>Canavan, Gerry. “We ‘Are’ the Walking Dead”: Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative *Extrapolation* (University of Texas at Brownsville); Fall 2010, 51(3).

cane fields.”<sup>10</sup> A convenient cinematic bogeyman, the zombie was ripe for the plucking by Hollywood. Because of its folkloric origins—as Jaime Russell notes—producers would not have to pay copyright fees to the estate of an author, as they had to do with *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*.<sup>11</sup> Filmgoers saw much in the early zombie films to identify with—apart from a sense of kinship with the zombie as exploited workers—the earliest films also mirrored contemporary fears of black bodies, and particularly of black male sexuality. As Ann Kordas states, the reduction of the black man to a disempowered zombie may have fed racist white filmgoers a plate for which they hungered.<sup>12</sup> We see already in this example one of the zombie’s central tensions—its ability to act as a reflection of one’s self, and one’s own disempowerment, at the same time that it provides an opportunity to metaphorize those one wishes to denigrate as zombies. The audience will identify, variously, with either the zombie, or with the zombie’s opponent, its master in early films, or victim, in later ones.

Of course, this is the Cliff Notes version, but the important points to take away are (1) that the zombie has its origins in Haiti as a myth directly informed by the people’s history as colonial slaves, and (2) that the zombie is transmitted to filmgoing audiences as a direct result of an economically-motivated military intervention carried out by the US in the sovereign nation of Haiti. Therefore, the zombie both historically references the colonial slave and the postcolonial state of perpetual imperialism. My work argues that these deeply entrenched references cannot be bleached out of the zombie’s associations: they make up the history of its transmission, but they are also visible in its symbolism and in the myth’s pivot that we see occur in the history of American cinema and popular culture, when a figure representing the slave becomes instead a figuration of the colonial or capitalist oppressor.

The zombie’s transformation turns it from representing the disempowered (post) colonial subject—the zombie forced to work for the profit of another—to become the stand-in for the colonist or the postcolonial aggressor, as we see when the zombie changes shape in the second half of the twentieth century to become the always hungry, cannibal zombie, reflective of capitalist consumer culture.

## Popular Culture

In 2003, Thea Munster of Toronto, Canada staged the first ever zombie walk. By 2005, there were similar events in San Francisco and major cities in the US. By 2006 an artist, Jillian McDonald, was already responding to the “phenomenon” of

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<sup>10</sup> See Seabrook, William. *The Magic Island*. Harcourt, Brace & Co, New York, 1929.

<sup>11</sup> See Russell, *Book of the Dead*. FAB Press, Surrey, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> See Kordas, Ann. “New South, New Immigrants, New Women, New Zombies: The Historical Development of the Zombie in American Popular Culture” in Moreman and Rushton, eds. *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition* (McFarland & Co., Jefferson, NC, 2011).

the zombie mob in her work. In 2009, I flew to Toronto to meet Thea Munster and interview her about the annual walk she organizes, which had grown each year. And shortly thereafter, I noticed another strange appearance of the zombie in popular culture. Not only were zombies turning up for the sake of “fun,” as in Zombie walks, proms, and pub crawls, but they were also being used to advance causes—the zombie walks were increasingly transformed into charity walks, and people began turning up dressed as zombies at political protests. I described this turn in a chapter called “‘Sois Mort et Tais Toi’: zombie mobs and student protests” in *Zombies in the Academy: Living Death in Higher Education*, and for the first time, I began to look at the zombie’s contemporary uses outside of North America, comparing the appearance of zombie events in Germany, the UK, and France and their proximity and timing to (non zombie) student protests.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it is worth an aside here to note, that even then, German zombies puzzled me—my findings in relation to the events staged in Germany defied the rest of my data. And though the rest of Europe was feeling the pangs of the global recession, Germany’s economy remained strong. And yet, the zombies marched.

Nonetheless, out of this research came my conviction that when we desire the zombie it is because we are looking to feel our own sense of disempowerment mirrored in the movie monster. In those first years of the twenty-first century, when zombie walks were so popular, the living dead, which itself comes directly out of Haitian folklore allegorizing the slave, seemed to be the conduit of economic frustrations. After a series of banking scandals lead to a government bail-out of the country’s largest financial institutions, there was a sense that free-market capitalism had run its course, and yet, we could not imagine a future without it. In the U.S., in those moments we felt ourselves to be zombies, so perhaps, dressing up as them didn’t seem weird, or not so weird that thousands of people weren’t willing to do it.

But two things were happening simultaneously that were really undermining my attempts to pinpoint the zombie’s popularity on capitalism’s disappointments. Firstly, the economy was getting better. People left Zuccotti park, and maybe they left Occupy Oakland, too, at any rate, the news stopped covering it. At the same time, AMC’s show, *The Walking Dead*, was only gaining in popularity, so much so that it inspired a rehash talk show to be aired live after each episode called *Talking Dead*. Despite the economic rebound, zombies didn’t seem to be going anywhere. My theory that the zombie was directly related to the economic downturn wasn’t holding water! Maybe this was just due to the fact that companies had realized how saleable the zombie could be: zombies became even more of a commodity, and an image once found only on the covers of rock albums or the occasional T-Shirt began appearing even on baby onesies, bibs, and pacifiers.<sup>14</sup>

Thirdly, and this is what really called into question my larger theory that zombies represented our sense of ourselves as powerless: zombies started running. Now, I’ve done my homework: I know that fast zombies had been around in film for quite a

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<sup>13</sup> See Andrew Whelan, Ruth Walker, and Christopher Moore, eds. *Zombies in the Academy: Living Death in Higher Education*. Intellect Press, Bristol, UK, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> A few examples can be seen at <<http://www.zazzle.com/zombie+baby+clothes>> Accessed 15.6.2014.

while, before even Zac Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and Danny Boyle's "infected" of *28 Days Later* (2002), which were redubbed "zombies" by moviegoers. There were surprisingly spry zombies in *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) and in Lucio Fulci's *Zombi 3* (1988). What I'm talking about here is the preference of the Zombie Runs over the Zombie Walk.

I haven't, at this point, done the kind of data survey necessary to prove that the popularity of the Zombie Walk was diminishing, nor have I undertaken a demographic survey to show that the same people that had previously participated in Zombie Walks became more invested in joining Zombie Runs instead, but it cannot be doubted that there has been an increase in the number of Zombie Runs of late.<sup>15</sup> In such events, runners are most often given a number or a flag that other participants dressed as zombies try to strip them of as they complete the Run. In some of these events, runners carry a balloon filled with a red dye or powder, signifying blood so that as the zombies pop the balloon, there is the sense of a kill made.

The event that I was to attend in Berlin was such a Zombie Run. And though I didn't make the flight so that I could be there in the flesh, in this age of global connectivity, I could nonetheless access a kind of second-hand experience of the Run, for people had posted Youtube videos of it within a matter of hours.<sup>16</sup> In the footage, one can see that the event is set up somewhat like an obstacle course. The runners are corralled behind barriers and are then released in a group to surmount various challenges—like hurdles and walls that they have to scale. They also have to make it past the zombies, people in costume, performing as the living dead, who try to grab the runners' flags as they run past, weaving and dodging the zombies as they go. In one of the videos posted online, a runner wears a camera, so that the viewer is put in the action, and is given a first person perspective of the frenzy.

What events like the Berlin Zombie Run illustrate to me is that zombies have undergone a kind of sea change in the last few years: such zombie events no longer signify, as the Zombie Walks had, a desire to make the monster our own reflection of ourselves, a mirror of our discontent, but instead, the chief role offered to the participant is that of the human, attempting to overcome the zombie onslaught. This narrative of survivalism above identification with the zombie is also a major feature of the series *The Walking Dead*, with its emphasis on the humans that band together after the apocalypse. In fact, as others have said of the show, it really isn't about zombies at all.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A cursory internet search reveals that many states have their own zombie run websites (like Florida, Connecticut), but that other sites, like 5kzombierun.com, zombierun.com, and thezombiemudrun.com aggregate events in various places. There is also a very popular app called "Zombies, run!" that prompts runners to imagine themselves as having to outrun imaginary zombies, as an aid to their fitness routine. See <<https://www.zombiesrungame.com/>> All accessed 15.6.2014.

<sup>16</sup> See RuptlyTV's live streamed post dated 18.5.2014 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eW5wehw\\_gTs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eW5wehw_gTs)> and Bim Telkin's post of 18.5.2014 at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUoH100EcGU>> Both accessed 15.6.2014.

<sup>17</sup> An excellent collection of essays on the show is Dawn Keetley's *We're All Infected: Essays on AMC's The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human* McFarland & Co., Jefferson, NC, 2014.

This change in our interest in the zombie's uses had its predecessor in the zombie survivalist groups (elsewhere called "zombie preppers") that have cropped up on the internet since the turn of the new millennium, and one increasingly sees the zombie commoditized to this purpose, its image emblazoned upon emergency kits, weapons set, and even concretized in the creation of target practice sheet and three dimensional target practice dummies for the shooting range.<sup>18</sup> In online chat rooms, and in the events staged by zombie survival group like those described by Christopher Zealand, a fantasy narrative is collaboratively constructed—of a world post-government, in which an "every man for himself" ethos takes hold.

What this transition in the zombie's uses may signify in the United States might seem positive to some: we are no longer depicting ourselves as the powerless victims, the walking corpses in a national or even global disaster. Instead, the zombie is used as a bogeyman dramatizing a narrative of endurance of the most atrocious calamity imaginable. And it is immediately relevant that this change comes as we lament the 10th anniversary of the horrific terrorist attack that befell our nation on 9/11. In particular, the zombie runs cannot help taking on new resonances in light of the more recent Boston Marathon bombing. Perhaps, I see now, they signify that we are aware that life goes on, even after a sense of an ending, and that our *modus operandi* in a world that has become as terrible as our nightmares must be to survive, to keep dodging the zombies as they come.

But, more negatively, zombie survival narratives also reveal the mentality of many in my society, who fight, tooth and nail, to preserve gun laws, including the right to bear semi-automatic weapons, even in the wake of the nearly monthly mass shootings that we continue to endure, and, the most horrific of these to date, the massacre of innocents at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in December of 2012, an occurrence that for me felt like a rupture: I, at least, would never be the same. (I feel as though I will never hear sirens during the school day without a chill gripping my heart, though my country continues on as before, enforcing the *status quo*.) The narrative perpetuated by the gun lobby in the US is that the only real protection one can depend on is oneself: "The only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," as National Rifle Association CEO Wayne LaPierre said in his response to that tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, and which Dawn Keetley writes in her introduction to *'We're all Infected':* "could be the tag line of *The Walking Dead*."<sup>19</sup> Sadly, the zombie apocalypse stories with which we surround ourselves, that depict a disaster so total that local and national government have collapsed, in which there is no law anymore, no more good guys in uniform coming to our rescue or holding down the fort, only undergirds this idea: the only way to

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<sup>18</sup>On zombie survivalists, see the essay by Christopher Zealand "The National Strategy for Zombie Containment: myth meets activism in post-9/11 America" in *Generation Zombie: essays on the living dead in modern culture*. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz, eds. McFarland & Co., Jefferson, NC, 2011.

<sup>19</sup>Keetley, Dawn. *'We're All Infected': Essays on AMC's The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human* McFarland & Co., Jefferson, NC, 2014, p. 10.

survive is to take matters into one's own hands. And the most efficient way to take down a zombie, as we all know, is a bullet to the head.

But, if there are zombie running, too, in Berlin, then this larger phenomenon cannot be just about American crises, our economic woes, distrust of the government, whether under George Bush or Barack Obama, fear of terrorists, both international and domestic, or the twisted way that notions of rugged individualism have extended to self-preservation, raised above the idea of the common good in American legislation like the "Stand Your Ground" policies embraced, with disastrous results, in many states.<sup>20</sup> So, I'll hazard here yet a final theory: that the global obsession with the living dead, as seen in the survival narrative of an event like the Berlin zombie run, is about something more universal: our sense that the world is ending, whether we choose to see in the zombie our own terrifying reflection, as a species that is already in some sense, living dead, or whether we choose to practice outrunning the hordes. The same impulse is visible in both narratives, a need for catharsis and to reconcile ourselves to an impending disaster, one that is shared by all those that inhabit this planet: namely, global climate change.

There is a sense that we've already ruined our planet, that the effects of climate change are already being felt and that the future will be bleak: That, as is scrawled on a wall in the film by British director Danny Boyle, *28 Days Later*, "The end is extremely fucking nigh." What we as humans are facing is far more terrifying than the legions of the undead that we have imagined in our cinematic nightmares, and we share this, from Berlin to Boston, and Dusseldorf to my hometown of Davis, California; the common enemy cannot be defeated by an unlikely hero with a cricket bat (as in my favorite zombie film of all time, *Shaun of the Dead*) nor with bullets, for that enemy, whatever form it takes, is most likely only ourselves.

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<sup>20</sup>"Stand Your Ground" allows citizens who feel threatened with bodily harm at any place and time to use force (even force with a deadly weapon) to defend themselves, but what constitutes a "threat" is not specified. According to the website findlaw.com, 23 of our 50 states have passed such legislation. This is different from "castle doctrine" which allows a person to defend himself by any means he deems necessary in his own home or on his property. <<http://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-law-basics/states-that-have-stand-your-ground-laws.html>> accessed 14.6.2014.

# Chapter 3

## The ‘Next People’: And the Zombies Shall Inherit the Earth

Victoria Carrington

### Introduction

On Halloween night 2014 I stood with thousands of others along the side of a large boulevard in Amsterdam. There was an excited buzz rippling through the crowd and young children zipped in and out, threading their way around their parents and friends, vying for the best viewing locations. Their cries and laughter filled the air alongside the adult conversation and the sound of phones ringing as people attempted to find each other in the crowd. We were all waiting with mounting excitement for the annual Halloween Parade. It was running late. Heads turned down the street, cameras and phones at the ready, watching for any sign that the parade was arriving. Expectation hung in the air. Finally ... music. And then a truck disguised as a giant metal dragon belching smoke and music lurched into view, followed by a slow moving phalanx of participants, all in Halloween costumes. Some of the walkers were waving at the crowd, others were ignoring us, while still others lunged at unsuspecting individuals with threatening roars and grimaces. An armada of decorated vehicles, flanked by phalanxes of monsters and ghouls moved slowly along the street. Loud music blared out from each of the decorated trucks and cars interspersed amongst the walkers; some walkers carried their own drums and many blew on whistles. The result was a cacophony of noise and a visual smorgasbord of horror. There were the usual Friday the 13th outfits, a few Freddy Kruegers, too many creepy clowns, vampish nurses and devil costumes, but what stood out were the zombies. There were baby zombies, school-aged zombies, decaying zombies, sexy zombies, zombie families, zombies young and zombies old. We clapped and screamed our appreciation at all of them. Some zombie costumes were highly professional with exposed teeth, ghoulish eyes and rotting bloody flesh while others

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amounted to a bit of green and white face paint and blackened eyes. Nevertheless, the zombies were everywhere, taking over the streets of Amsterdam on that night. This seems only appropriate, as zombies *are* everywhere.

Global crisis and fear has been good for zombies: by the end of 2011, zombies were worth almost US\$6 billion to the US economy alone (Ogg 2011). In 2008, 21 news headlines across the US and the UK used the word ‘zombie’; by mid-2013, the term ‘zombie’ had already been used 100 times in that one year. In the last ten years, we have found ourselves in the grip of a profound economic crisis alongside natural disasters, wars, and a number of global pandemics including HIV, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the avian influenza H5N1. Levina and Bui (2013, p. 1) suggest that the surge in monstrous narratives, zombies amongst them, “have allowed us to deal with the profound acceleration in changing symbolic, economic and technical systems” offering a “space where society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time”. Our time is one of global interconnection and uncertainty and it seems that the monster we have chosen to represent our resulting anxieties is the zombie.

This positioning of zombies as contemporary monsters seems apt. Auerbach (1995) observes that each era or generation embraces the monsters it needs. We, apparently, need zombies. According to Bishop (2008, p. 145) the zombie “was a new monster for a New World”. Unlike other monsters well known to us – Dracula, Frankenstein, werewolves – zombies do not originate in European literature and folklore. They are, instead, creatures of the modern era and the New World. This genealogy seems to have uniquely positioned zombies as a mirror to contemporary cultural landscapes and social tensions. The film critic Robert Eiberg considered that the Fritz Lang masterpiece *Metropolis* (1927) created “a time, place and characters so striking that they become part of our arsenal of images for imagining the world” ([http://www.ebertfest.com/four/metropolis\\_silent\\_rev.htm](http://www.ebertfest.com/four/metropolis_silent_rev.htm)). Just as the images from *Metropolis* provided a social metaphor around inequality and exploitation, the figure of the zombie has become part of the way that we imagine and interpret the contemporary world. Appropriately, this contemporary monster has been brought to life in film and the increasing reach of mass popular culture since the mid twentieth century. The emergence of the zombie as a modern monster and metaphor is significant. The history of the zombie in popular culture mirrors a range of social and economic issues as well as the evolution of media since the early twentieth century. This chapter briefly explores the characteristics and uses of the zombie before turning to a consideration of the issues that zombies raise for thinking about young people and education.

## The Zombie Shuffles into Popular Culture

First seen briefly in William Seabrook’s anthropological novel *The Magic Island* (1929), the idea – and terror – of the zombie crossed quickly into our imaginations, buoyed on the first wave of popular cinema in the 1930s. Seabrook painted an image of male and female bodies enslaved and possessed by zombification and sent to

labour in the foreign-owned sugar cane fields. Echoes of the history of slavery and racial tension in the United States run through these early voodoo zombie depictions as zombies shuffled through the night, mindlessly slaving on plantations for exploitative landowners occupying an abject liminal zone between life and death. This theme was the base for the films *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) both of which were set against the evocative backdrop of tropical cane fields, racialized sexual desire, exploitation and the beating drums of voodoo. Bishop (2008, p. 31) notes that *White Zombie*, “presents audiences with the exoticism of the Caribbean, the fear of domination and subversion, and the perpetuation of the imperialist model of cultural and racial hegemony”. These comments are just as relevant for *I Walked with a Zombie*. Set against a legacy of the US occupation (1915–1934) and colonial control of Haiti, these early films portray Haiti as both savage and regressive, caught up in the fallout of colonialism and subaltern politics. At the same time, the films reflect issues of slavery, disposable and exploitable bodies, abuse of labour in the early twentieth century, and of course, deeply entrenched racism. The *New York Times* review of the movie published during its opening week in 1943 called zombies a “dull, disgusting exaggeration of an unhealthy, abnormal concept of life” and sought to safeguard the minds of the youth of the country from the ideas and images associated with the film. However, the real terror of the film and others like it for audiences in the West, beyond the titillation of monsters and women in distress, was the suggestion that white people might also be turned into zombies, subjugated and ‘colonized’ (Bishop 2008). Bishop goes on to suggest these movies “not only exploit the exotic black native but also take advantage of the popular tendency to romanticize ancient lands, imposing castles, and mysterious figures” (p. 144). These themes and the new figure of the zombie worked to generate an ‘Other’ against which a surgent America could measure itself.

In the late 1960s, George A Romero shifted this early voodoo infused zombie trope with the release of his independent film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The low-budget movie was filmed in black and white and as LeJacq (2007) notes, “the almost news-reel black and white footage gives it an eerie homespun quality that parallels simultaneous footage from the civil rights movement and Vietnam, and makes us question our own pleasure in watching it”. The film begins with a brother and sister visiting their father’s grave and the now famous line of dialogue, “They’re coming to get you, Barbra”. As it turned out, they were in fact, coming to get them both. The film was shocking, and a terrifying new monster uniquely equipped to reflect the concerns of the modern era shuffled into our collective psyche. This movie and the Romero films that followed established what became the classic zombie lore, moving zombies from soulless slaves controlled by a colonial master to the risen dead, driven by a hunger for living human flesh, and relentlessly slow moving. While the 1930s and 1940s zombie films spoke to issues of labour exploitation and racism, Romero and his zombies constructed a biting critique of post-war American consumerism, setting up zombies as a vehicle for criticism of social issues. Like the earlier film zombies, the Romero zombies had lost their humanity as well as their identity. As the zombies relentlessly attack, the social breakdown

that follows lays bare existing tensions around gender, race and class as survivors turn on each other.

While the shambling zombies of earlier movies were slaves to mass production, Romero's zombies became slaves to mass consumption (Botting 2011), often depicted wandering empty shopping malls in their role as the ultimate undying and mindless consumers. In their unreasoning consumption of the living zombies demonstrate the "ultimate in possessiveness, hence the logical end of human relations under capitalism" (Wood 1986, p. 213). This drive to eat flesh is refined by a focus on eating brains in *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985) creating a zombie world strong enough to support four sequels. In *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) writers Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright updated Romero's social critique with their own, focussing on what Stokes (2010, p. 68) describes as the "apathy and identity crisis evident in postmodernity". Once again, the zombie film was used shine a harsh light on social issues. Romero's zombies were coming to get you. Stokes notes that, "while Romero criticized social injustices and rampant consumerism, Pegg and Wright focus on the toll postmodernity takes on the individual and on the community" (2010, p. 68). It takes a zombie apocalypse to wake the main characters from their own lifeless state as postmodern zombies, staggering through the motions of mind-numbing daily lives with no sense of identity or purpose. In an ironic twist, one of the lead characters ends the film as a zombie, but rather than being destroyed, his lifelong friend keeps him chained in the garden shed where he spends his time playing video games, exactly as he had done in life.

While the earlier Romero films were set in more local locations – small town USA, shopping malls, cities – newer depictions of zombies reflect the more globalized world in which we find ourselves. Instead of local infestations, we are provided with sweeping vision of total apocalypse with entire nations falling within days to the zombie onslaught. Our fears and tensions have become global and as a result, so have the zombies we produce. The film *World War Z* (2013) presents the deeply unsettling vision of hordes of zombies – created as part of a global pandemic – surging up and over each other to breach high barrier wall, a locust plague of flesh-eating zombies. These massive barrier walls and what they represent are themselves no stranger to the viewer of contemporary zombie films: the US fears invasion across its southern borders and has spent years and many millions building and maintaining the Mexico-United States barrier; Israel continues to build fortified barriers in its ongoing conflict with Palestinians. In this era of film, disease spreads so quickly that entire cities are overrun, governments collapse and survivors have to band together to survive (the zombies and each other).

While their original contagion was reliant on film, zombies have continued to spread. Following the pathways of popular culture, zombies quickly invaded the video game industry. *ZombieZombie* (Quicksilver 1984) is credited as the first zombie video game. In this very basic arcade style game, players find themselves in the middle of a city overrun by zombies and must use bursts of air from a rifle to knock down the zombies in order to survive. By the 1990s, game graphics had improved significantly, encouraging an increasing gore factor in games such as the LucasArts cult classic *Zombies Ate My Neighbours* (1993). A key point in the zombie game

universe was reached with the release of *Resident Evil* (1996). Establishing the new zombie genesis as viral, the backstory for the franchise is the secret development and illegal experimentation with the T-virus that, when released, turns animals and humans into ravenous flesh eating zombies. The virus, once released, is spread by bite. Very quickly, former colleagues and friends become rabid zombies who must be destroyed before they can infect you, the player. This game established the now sprawling Resident Evil media franchise and influenced game development from that point, selling more than 50 million games by 2012. Since that initial game, the franchise has grown to almost 20 video games, a highly successful film series, novels, comics and a large range of merchandising and action figures. Of course, the game with possibly the most general appeal has been the tower defence game *Plants vs Zombies* (PopCap Games 2009) which requires you, a home owner, to use a variety of plants to fend off an army of cartoonish zombies attempting to cross your lawn and enter your house. Like most contemporary zombies, they want to eat your brains. When it was released on iOS for iPhone via the Apple AppStore, it sold more than 300,000 copies in the first 9 min.

Paralleling the resurgence of zombie movies and the growth of entire virtual game worlds populated with zombies, the phenomenon of zombie walks in urban sites emerged. These participatory street events brought together hundreds, sometimes thousands of shambling people dressed as zombies, each with the desire to demonstrate publicly or to just participate in a large-scale event. These walks were often linked to the sense of dispossession felt by citizens as world economies collapsed and neoliberal governments did little to support them. Accusations of soulless governments neglecting powerless citizens, loss of traditional identity pathways – these were all themes associated with the walks. They were, and remain, as much a political statement as they were a fun participatory mass event. As in the movies, and as Sarah Juliet Lauro notes in the Preface, there has been a recent shift towards fast moving zombies in film and this has spread to the non-film world with the appearance and spread of Zombie Runs. In these events, the zombies are no longer shambling. Reflecting the speed and rapid spreading of the disasters and threats – viral and environmental – that seemingly surrounded us, zombies began to run. Fast and increasingly, in packs.

Zombies have proved to be adept at boundary crossings and as such, have been co-opted as metaphors across a range of social theory. In the field of international relations, Drezner (2011) has used scenarios based around a zombie apocalypse to test the readiness and scope of national and international responses to large-scale humanitarian crises and violence. Giroux (2010) has argued loudly that zombies are the perfect metaphor to describe the dead but still twitching ideas and behaviours of neoliberal capitalism. Ulrich Beck has drawn on the notion of 'zombie categories' to describe 'living dead' sociological categories which remain in use even while they are unable to effectively describe contemporary social and cultural conditions (Slater and Ritzer 2001).

The power of the zombie to reach into the far – and sometimes unexpected – corners of our culture is reflected in the latest iteration of the classic comic book character *Archie*. American high school student, Archie Andrews first appeared in Pep

Comics No. 22 in 1941 hoping to attract fans of the Andy Hardy movies (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 1937–1946) starring Mickey Rooney. Since then, Archie and his friends Jughead Jones, Betty Cooper, Veronica Lodge and Reggie Mantle have lived together in the seemingly ageless small town of Riverdale, attending Riverdale High School and hanging out at the local milkshake shop. Their exploits have been depicted across a number of comic series including *Archie Comics Digest* (January 1982–present), *Betty and Veronica Vol. 2* (June 1987–present), *Archie* (Winter 1942–present) and *Life with Archie* (1958–1991) and *Life with Archie: The Married Life* (2010–present) that explores the two parallel lives that characters would have if Archie married either Betty or Veronica. This series comes to an end with the death of Archie – in both possible universes – as attempts to save a friend from being shot. The death of the lead character of a successful comic book franchise that has endured since the early 1940s is not, however, as terminal as might be expected. Archie’s character pops up in a new comic series, *Afterlife with Archie* (October 2013–present), a story arc begins with the death and botched resurrection of Jughead’s pet dog – Hotdog – and Jughead’s own subsequent death and zombification. Before long, the town of Riverdale and its inhabitants are forced to face a zombie apocalypse with well-known and beloved characters from the Archie universe appearing in the series as zombies. Like the *Walking Dead* comic book and television series the story arc embraces horror and pathos as characters fight for survival against the backdrop tagline, “This is how the end of the world begins”. Each issue of the series has rapidly sold out. The entwining of a much loved and iconic character such as Archie who has always represented youthful innocence and optimism, with the darker trope of the zombie evidences the power of this metaphor for addressing a range of social issues.

As zombies have moved into the popular consciousness and escaped the limits of film to cross into video games, television, comics, toys and social theory they have also evolved to match the issues of a new cultural and economic landscape. In many contemporary depictions they are no longer the inexplicably risen dead or the victims of a bewitching, but the result of infection, rapidly spread along the pathways of globalization. The challenges of surviving in a zombie-infested world reflect the challenges to our own humanity and moral compass in the face of terrorism, war and economic unrest. Zombies have continued to evolve as a mirror for the concerns of each generation, providing a vehicle to articulate and challenge social norms and current.

## What Is It About Zombies?

Derkson and Hudson Hick (2011) suggest that the power of the zombie is linked to its uncanniness – its ability to be simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. This ambiguity results in acute discomfort in those who experience it. The zombie is apparently living – it moves, looks human (particularly in the early stage of

zombification), demonstrates desire and purpose – but it is also patently without life. It is both living and dead, familiar and unfamiliar. This sense of uncanniness, of something simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, is enhanced when the zombie is someone we once knew as a living person – a colleague, neighbour, husband or parent. The familiar-become-strange challenges the boundaries of obligation and the social contracts established between parent-child, neighbours, employer-employee, citizen-government, particularly when the former family member attacks. Viewed from another perspective, the zombie refuses to stop existing, but the death of the self that formerly inhabited that particular body crosses a boundary line away from subject-citizen (Vint 2013). Zombies exist but no longer have the protections afforded by the notions of subject and/or citizen that sit at the core of our cultural, social and political structures. Even as they attempt to consume the living, they are themselves without any of the protections afforded the citizens of a fully operational state. The non-living, but undeniably existing zombie, poses a direct challenge to many of these fundamental structures and the relationships premised upon them.

The living-but-not-living zombie also challenges the immutable boundary between life and death. Modern western culture has become disconnected from death. The process of dying has become pathologized and medicalized. Few of us ever see a dead body. If we do, it is usually in the sterilized wards of a hospital or alternatively, at a funeral home where the body is arranged to look as if peacefully sleeping – death as slumber. Zombies challenge this efficient and hygienic process by refusing a quiet death and by forcing the living to confront the non-living in a battle for survival that must ultimately end in violence. Zombie bodies challenge our death-as-sleep image by confronting us with physical trauma and decay. Portrayals of zombies “take the hidden bodies and place them directly in front of the audience, bridging the disconnect between daily life and the reality of death” (Twohy 2008, p. 47).

One of the other key messages embedded in recent zombie films has been that we – the living – must be self-reliant and prepared to face the worst that an apocalypse can offer, including the realities of governments that are at best, no longer set up to support private citizens and at worst, uncaring and incompetent. Social breakdown – evidenced by the need to commit violence against the bodies of those we previously loved and depended on, and to break many of the everyday norms concerning property and behaviour – is a key theme associated with zombies and zombie apocalypses. Not only are zombies breaking the laws of life and death, and challenging the relationship of the state with its citizens, but the living citizens are also forced to break the established moral and ethical codes in order to survive. The issue of survival has been taken up seriously by groups such as the Missouri-established, but increasingly international, Zombie Squad set up in the wake of 9/11 and the film *28 Days Later* (2003). Group members, initially attracted to discussions of how to survive a zombie apocalypse more successfully than film characters, have become advocates for disaster preparedness, working with organizations such as the American Red Cross, the Disaster Preparedness and Emergency response Association, Youth in Need, Habitat for Humanity and Meals on Wheels. The organization, while dedicated to preparedness for manmade and natural disasters dem-

onstrates, by its very existence, scepticism about the capacity of national emergency preparedness infrastructures and a refusal to trust their own survival to official responses and officials (Generation Zombie reference, last chapter). At the same time, the US Centre for Disease Control (CDC) makes use of the zombie apocalypse as a framework for disaster preparation and information: if you are prepared to survive a zombie outbreak you are prepared for any and all disasters.

Cutting across these themes, zombies are viscerally unsettling and downright terrifying – their presence challenges deeply entrenched constructions of identity and self in addition to the physical threat they represent. According to Warner (date), “a zombie is a body which has been hollowed out, emptied of selfhood” (p. 357). To be bitten by a zombie is a violation of the boundaries of the flesh; to become a zombie is to lose ‘self’ – the essential qualities that distinguish one human from another – the core concept upon which much of our understanding of others and ourselves rests. The ‘self’ is constructed in relation to the norms and practices of the society around us. When that society crumbles, as it always seems to do when confronted by waves of zombies, the structures that have contributed to the construction and maintenance of ‘self’ dissolve. The zombie assault on the self-reflexive ‘I’ as well as the challenge to our humanity is at the core of the zombie apocalypse as we struggle with the decline of established narratives and cultural norms. While the human body may be recognizable, there is no longer a recognizable or responsive ‘self’ or ‘I’ at home and any sense of humanity has eroded away. The self is constructed out of multiple and fluid identities (Stryker 1980) which are attached to social roles and positioning. These roles and social positions are located in relation to the broader social structure and cultural practices. When these structures crumble, the ‘self’ is no longer anchored. The zombie is not just an attack on the identity and self of the infected. It challenges the identities and constructions of self of the entire society as well as the ways in which we treat each other.

Such has been the challenge mounted by zombies, the monsters for our era. They affront our sense of self, they attack the foundations of our society, they challenge the boundaries between life and death, obligation and anarchy that form the parameters of our way of life. Zombies are relentless, unthinking, unforgiving, infected. They have become the mirror of contemporary social, economic and political strife and while they place our social and religious norms in doubt, until recently they have offered no alternatives and no clues for what a new relationship might look like. However, an exploration of the ways in which zombies have made their way into youth culture and the manner in which the zombie metaphor has been applied to young people has, I suggest, much to tell us.

## **Zombies and Young People**

Young people are living in a world where zombies are embedded in the everyday narratives and experiences of growing up. Toy aisles are host to soft toy zombies, nerf ball zombie guns, action figures from *The Walking Dead*, zombified classic

fairytale princesses, as well as Mattel's *Monster High* series adolescent fashion dolls. Children are the prime audience for the animated film *ParaNorman* (2012) that featured zombies as a way to look at issues of bullying and how to fit in. *Zombie Hotel* (2006) is an award-winning animated series about two zombie children who attempt to pass as human to attend their local school. *Daddy, I'm a Zombie* (2011) and its sequel *Mummy, I'm a Zombie* (2014) are Spanish animation films about Dixie, a 13 year old reanimated as a zombie who must juggle middle school and teen love with saving the world from destruction. Television and film are building zombie-themed programming directed at the youth market. Phone and console games are also targeting the young. Mobile phones, consoles and tablets allow children to play the hugely popular video game *Plants vs Zombies* that involve the player defending his/her home from an army of zombies, and any number of other games on numerous platforms have been released with children in mind including *Zombies at my Neighbours*, *Zombie Cart*, *Zombocalypse*, *Zombie Shoot* and *Zombie Mall*. There is a lot of zombie action aimed at a young audience.

But the young are not just immersed in a popular culture that ultimately uses zombies as a way to reflect broader social anxieties. The zombie metaphor has been applied to young people just as it has been applied to larger social and political issues. Most recently, zombification is a stand in for a set of moral panics swirling around young people in contemporary culture. The zombification of the young takes two major pathways: zombification via technology and zombification through medication. In the first, young people are routinely depicted as zombies addicted to technology on the one hand – becoming inert, unresponsive and either/both aggressive or lethargic. In the second, they are constructed as over-medicated into a compliant, soul-less zombie state, particularly by ADHD medications. By either route these zombie young become slow witted, low achieving, lethargic and/or aggressive.

Video game playing is constructed in the media as the cause of sleep deprivation and declining social skills (see for example Baker 2012) that serve to zombify young people, while technologies such as mobile phones are linked to youth isolation and alienation. Social anxiety around the use of technology by the young finds an outlet in the zombie metaphor. The catchier media headlines depict children as 'engineered techno zombie children', 'tech zombies' and 'digital zombies'. Australia's *Daily Telegraph* newspaper shifts the blame to parents by asking, "Are you raising a digital zombie?" Technology is apparently turning our children into zombies, but so is medication. Almost 800,000 children in the UK were taking ADHD medication; in Australia the number of children taking ADHD medication has doubled in the last decade reaching almost 70,000 by the end of 2013 (Corderoy 2014). According to Thomas et al. (2013), "medication prescription rates have also increased twofold for children and fourfold for adolescents" while "the prevalence of parent reported diagnosis of ADHD in the US rose from 6.9 % in 1997 to 9.5 % in 2007. In the Netherlands it doubled over a similar period and other countries have also seen similar rises". There has been a 41 % rise in diagnoses of ADHD among children aged 4–17 years in the US in the last decade; two-thirds of these young people are prescribed drugs such as Ritalin or Adderall leading to headlines such as



“Ritalin turned my son into a zombie” (*The Star*, 2014) teacher descriptions of students who have lost their “life spark” (Corderoy 2014), and arguments that normal childhood behaviour is being pathologized and drugged as schools struggle to enforce curricula and norms that are no longer useful or appropriate. Children and adolescents are, in these views, losing social skills, energy and identity. The use of the zombie metaphor to give voice to the moral panic around children, technology and medication is telling. Young people, it turns out, *are* one of the broader social anxieties that zombies allow us to articulate.

## And the Young (Zombies) Shall Inherit the Earth

However, there are new indications of an evolution of form and function in the zombie universe. Interestingly, it seems that the emerging shift in zombie lore emerging from films and novels is specifically focused on the young. If, as many have argued, shifts in zombie behaviour and characteristics reflect larger social and cultural issues, then the shift that is currently emerging must be of particular interest to educators and educational researchers.

In a market long dominated by Barbie and Bratz dolls, the zombie has recently been reinterpreted as a teenage franchise in a global toy market. Mattell, Inc. has created a multimedia *Monster High* range that includes a broad range of consumer products aimed at adolescents including fashion dolls, stationery, bags, key chains, various toys, play sets, video games, TV specials, a web series and direct to DVD movies. The franchise characters are the offspring of famous movie monsters such as Frankenstein, the Mummy, werewolves, vampires and, of particular interest here, zombies. Ghoulia Yelps (see also Chapter xx, this volume), one of the central characters of the *Monster High* franchise, is 16 and the daughter of two (nameless) zombies. She has inherited a number of the usual zombie traits including the shambling walk, stooped posture and seeming inability to articulate words beyond the production of groans and moans. According to Ghoulia,

I cannot function without a proper schedule and I do not process last-minute change very well. My zombie nature also means that I walk rather slowly, have trouble making facial expression and can only speak...well...zombie <http://www.monsterhigh.com/en-us/characters/ghoulia-yelps>.

She prefers to eat, “Brains ...just kidding”. She prefers instead to eat, “rapidly prepared, mass-market cuisine” (Translation: I like fast food.) She is, however, particularly bright and thoughtful and her grunts and groans actually comprise a complete language. She displays an explicit love of learning, along with books and reading. While she is depicted in the *Monsters High* DVDs and television series as stereotypically hunched over and lurching, as a doll she is upright and svelte with luminous pale skin, tall slim build, pale eyes, and thick tonal blue hair. In all depictions of her character – dolls, video, books – she is trendily dressed with a slight psychobilly vibe. Ghoulia has a unique identity and clear sense of ‘self’ which runs

counter to the loss of self and soul that characterizes much of the zombie mythos. In addition, she is hungry not so much for brains but for knowledge. Ghoulia dwells in a world in which zombies have social lives, friends and a love for learning and self-development – a world in which zombies have a future and a legitimate role. Instead of holding a mirror to an abject humanity, Ghoulia is presented as an aspirational role model. While one of the terrors associated with becoming a zombie has traditionally been the loss of self or identity, Ghoulia has a strong sense of self and personal narrative, which seems to set her apart from the majority of zombie depictions. Self-awareness and personal narrative link Ghoulia with other emerging zombie tropes.

Ghoulia is not alone in signalling a shift in the ways that zombies may exist and what they may represent. The young adult novel *Warm Bodies* (Isaac Marion 2011) and associated movie *Warm Bodies* (2013) challenges and evolves the established pathway of zombie-human relations. In the older view, unchallenged since the seminal Romero films of the 1960s, the movement from human to zombie was a one-way street. Humans became infected, turned into zombies, and remained mindless human-eating zombies until their bodies finally decayed away. *Warm Bodies*, however, marked a profound shift. The central characters were young adults. Zombies were revealed to have various degrees of inner lives, retaining vestiges of their human selves that faded over time. Eventually some zombies devolved into skeletal figures called Boneys, creatures with no remaining shred of humanity or individual identity. Boneys will tear apart zombies or humans without qualm. Eating brains, the traditional meal of the zombie becomes more important in this context as it gives them access to the memories of their victims, allowing them to remember what it felt like to be human and delay or avoid becoming Boneys. The central character struggles to remember who he was before death and zombification, managing only to retrieve the first initial of his name, 'R'. R falls in love with one of the surviving humans and in his quest to keep her alive and comfortable with his presence, his path back to human-ness begins. Love and belief pulls the zombies back towards being human. As R develops increasingly strong feelings for the human he rescued his humanity reasserts itself and his body slowly returns to life.

This new universe gives us an entirely new continuum. Zombies take up an interim and transient position in a new universe between skeletal Boneys and fleshed humans. This shifts the ontology of the zombie universe. Zombies are no longer the opposite of living human. Instead, they are a transient phase from which an individual may emerge as either increasingly human or as increasingly Boney. The capacity to hold on to and even reconfigure 'self' post-zombification is also being seen in the soon-to-be-aired CWTV show, *Zombie* (2014). The focus of this television series is a female character – young medical resident Liv – zombified when zombies attack a party she is attending. Sense of self intact, Liv attempts to continue her (after)life and finds that by working for the coroner's office she can access enough brains to keep her human-eating tendencies in check and find a purpose to her existence. Like R she finds that eating a brain gives her access to slices of the memories contained within (<http://www.cwtv.com/shows/izombie/about>). Liv's

ability to continue this existence is premised upon her ability to pass as one of the living, essentially passing as human.

This new zombie ontology is extended in the young adult novel *The Girl with all the Gifts* (Carey 2014). In this universe, the polemic of human versus zombie is again disrupted by the evolution of a new group. Unexpectedly, zombies or ‘hungries’ as they are called, sometimes breed. The pivotal character of this book, Melanie, is the child of two hungries and as the story unfolds it seems that there are many, many more children like her. This unpredicted coupling results in children who are born zombies and therefore crave flesh, but who also demonstrate superior physical attributes and rational thought. These children, unlike their zombie parents, are capable of controlling their urges, of social behaviour, rational thought and affect, language and learning. They have a growing sense of self and a unique identity, but they are not human nor are they on an R-like journey towards (re)becoming human. These zombie children are an evolutionary leap. A new form of life suited to changed conditions.

The novel emphasises the power of social structures and culture. For the new group of young zombies, learning and socialization is key to their development; without this they risk falling into a vicious tribal existence. Melanie, the zombie-child central character of the novel, *The Girl with all the Gifts* (Carey 2014) represents the new generation whose zombie characteristics uniquely equip them to survive and thrive in a post-apocalyptic world. Melanie is characterized by her endless desire to learn; her thirst for knowledge is, in effect, stronger than her thirst for human flesh. Melanie is not human, but she does have a strong and growing sense of self and purpose, as well as a strongly developed empathy, much of which is linked to her ongoing education, whether from classrooms and books or from experience. As the story unfolds and it becomes evident that there are other zombie children like Melanie the need to educate them to ‘become’ provides the concluding narrative. What the humans perceived as ‘dead’ creatures are, in fact, the rise of the new world order. The book tells the story of the painful break down of the old order and the slowly growing realization – by Melanie and those around her – that this is a world coming to an end. There will be no recovery. Melanie and the other zombie children, evolved to thrive in the changed conditions will build a new order. This brings with it opportunity and responsibility.

## **Concluding Thoughts: Apocalypse Now**

These young zombie characters – R, Ghoulia and Melanie – represent an emergent shift in the zombie metaphor: from abject monster caught between life and death to evolutionary lifeform armed with the skills to survive the post-apocalyptic landscape. Given the close relationship between the representation of zombies and ways in which society is changing, this is an interesting movement, one with implications for the ways in which we depict the young and the educational provision we make

for them. The zombie was originally that which had lost its humanity and audiences of the time found this horrifying. This threat has underpinned the depictions of zombies every since. In an era the Pope has referred to as a “piecemeal World War III” (BBC News 2014) the question of what it is to be ‘human’ has rarely been more important. The AMC cable television series, *The Walking Dead* (2010–present) specifically takes up this theme, using the zombie apocalypse as the backdrop to a human drama that brings into focus the cost of survival in terms of our own sense of humanity. As it continues to evolve, the metaphor of the zombie is increasingly an exploration of what it means to be human rather than a depiction of decaying after-life or failed death. As the amateur movie reviewer known as [Colorscheme](#) notes, “This is how zombie-type characters are used best, when they force us to examine what makes us human.” Against this exploration of what it means to be ‘human’, it is fascinating to note that many of the most recent depictions of zombies speak to a sense of hope and a belief in the capacity of the young to flourish in the changed global conditions.

It seems pivotal that these newer zombies do not require a return to the previous state of living human to sustain a sense of self. If we are to believe in these newer models and to follow them through to their logical conclusion the new generation – an evolutionary move forward from our own – will create a new society that is better suited to the new worlds in which the young will find themselves and a new form of post-human. As Melanie says in relation to the way in which the surviving adult humans treat the children of hungries,

If you keep shooting them and cutting them into pieces ... nobody will be left to make a new world ... they won't be the old kind of people but they won't be hungries either. They'll be different. Like me, and the rest of the kids...they'll be the next people. The ones who make everything okay again (Chapter 71, para 51).

The young who grow up in contemporary times *will* be different. And the world *will* change. The emergence and resilience of the zombie apocalypse metaphor is evidence that we are experiencing rapid and painful change, individually and as a society. As Melanie says, the young people born into this new environment won't be the ‘old kind of people’ but neither will they descend into a self-less and abject existence of the traditional zombie. As Melanie notes, they will be ‘the next people’. All of this has potentially profound implications for education. In *The Girl with all the Gifts*, the character of Melanie's teacher acts as her protector and defender as well as her educator. Miss Justineau realized, as the book ends, that her world was gone but that it was her obligation to educate the ‘next people’. In the world outside youth literature, we cannot construct the young in our image or use schooling as a mechanism for unproblematic social reproduction. The world for which much of the schooling system has traditionally prepared young people does not exist for them. Like Miss Justineau, as educators it is our obligation and our joy to defend, protect and above all, educate the ‘next people’. But as we do, we should understand that the world and the future belong to them. They are the ‘ones who make everything okay again’.

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## Chapter 4

# The Dead Are Rising: Gender and Technology in the Landscape of Crisis

William Patrick Bingham

*I guess in my pictures you're either doomed or you've got  
yourself a hell of a job*

(George A. Romero)

This chapter investigates the gender-technology divide through the Zombie Apocalypse. Zombies ‘provide indexes of how we collectively [grapple] with past (and present) social issues’ (Platts 2013: 551), indicating that they are a social barometer of both our past and present situation. They may be “read” in a variety of ways, suggesting that the zombie is both metaphor and symbol, and that the zombie apocalypse narrative is largely allegorical. George A Romero’s *Living Dead* series begins in 1968 with *Night of the Living Dead* and has had numerous sequels.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, *Diary of the Dead* (2007) has been selected for exploration. While *DOTD* did not have a major cinematic release in the US, it has been selected for three very important reasons: it fits into the wider *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) franchise; it privileges an unorthodox, amateur filming and editing style that has become increasingly employed in the contemporary horror film<sup>2</sup>; and, finally, it represents American university students engaging with filmmaking education and simultaneously applying this amateur style to their own project before the Zombie Apocalypse pans out.

As this chapter investigates how technology and gender are bound together and questions the implications of this gender and technology relationship, *DOTD* offers a lens through which we may scrutinise the visual depictions of technology and how gender is determined generically through that depiction. The chapter, therefore, is broken down into three main areas of inquiry. The first deals explicitly with the textual representations of the gender-technology divide within the Zombie film. The

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<sup>1</sup>Romero’s Living Dead Franchise is comprised of these films: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Survival of the Dead* (2009).

<sup>2</sup>Was popularised by the *Blair Witch Project* (1999) and utilised sporadically until *Paranormal Activity* (2009) repopularised it with such a profound impact on contemporary horror films.

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second explores how George A. Romero's *Diary of the Dead* portrays women in education, with a particular emphasis on cinema production education. This links the debates surrounding women filmmakers and educational practices that remain gendered (Jacobs 1996; Ayalon 2003). The last area questions *how* women join specific disciplines that may be predominantly male-oriented, which is evidenced through *DOTD*'s apocalypse narrative as experienced through university students.

There is a common discourse regarding technology and gender that highlights a worrying division between male and female users and/or creators (Wajcman 1991 and 2006; Grint and Gill 1995). Keith Grint and Rosalind Gill define the gender-technology relationship as one that conceives 'masculinity and technology...as being symbolically intertwined, such that technical competence has come to constitute an integral part of masculine gender identity, and, conversely, a particular idea of masculinity has become central to our very definition of technology' (Grint and Gill 1995: 8). Further, Judy Wajcman considers how technology is 'both a source and a consequence of gender relation' (Wajcman 2006: 7), which 'when a new piece of technology arrives...it is already inscribed with gendered meanings and expectations' (Wajcman 1991: 90). Furthermore, gender-technology relationship is a problematic term in itself, suggesting that there is reciprocation between both gender and technology, whereas in actuality, and as suggested through Wajcman and Grint and Gill, technology is inextricably bound to masculinity, maleness and patriarchy. Therefore I have elected to employ the term gender-technology divide, as there is a clear distinction between the encoded gender of the technological device and the creation of that device (read male). As Wajcman identifies: 'the masculinity of the engineering world has a profound effect on the artefacts generated' (1991: 102) and 'particular technologies are produced not in relation to specific and objectively defined needs of individuals, but largely because they serve the interests of those who produce them,' (1991: 100). These notions bind technology to a masculine arena, whereby the user may or may not be male, but the creator *is* male.

Whilst this debate typically is situated within the fields of sociology and gender studies, little interest has been devoted to its impact upon film studies. Though there is key critical work in feminist film theory that questions the representation of the female body (Mulvey 1975) and female filmmakers (Kaplan 1983), the visual depiction of this gender-technology divide is highly prevalent within many, if not most, mainstream texts, and is often, if not determinedly, excluded from feminist film theory. However, what remains to be discussed is the intrinsic link between technology and the horror film (and subsequently the Zombie film).

To join technology, gender and the Zombie film, an exploration of the filming style itself is integral to our understanding of the role technology plays not just within the creation of the film, but also the film itself. *DOTD* is shot in a style commonly referred to as 'Found Footage' or 'shaky cam'. These types of films centralise technology within a film's diegesis as the camera becomes both prop and medium. Many of the films that have employed this aesthetic are films that focus on the domestic sphere, such as *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* (2007), *Quarantine* (2008), the *Paranormal Activity* Franchise (2009–2014), *Paranormal Entity* (2009), *The Last Exorcism* (2010), and *Sinister* (2012).



More importantly, the domestic sphere (typically the 'feminine' domain) has been controlled by technology, culminating in a prison-like space for traditional gender formations. Judy Wajzman argues that 'domestic technology has reinforced the traditional sexual division of labour between husbands and wives and locked women more firmly into their traditional roles' (Wajzman 1991: 87). Because of these domestic, technological advancements, men have further ensnared women into their roles as housewife, regardless of their ability to work outside the home. Of course, these technologies were designed to make housework lighter, but they were still time-consuming (83).

*Diary of the Dead* follows Jason Creed (Joshua Close) and Debra Moynihan (Michelle Morgan), two university students who are part of a film crew shooting a student film in the woods near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (the location of most *Living Dead* films). The film begins with a camera crew filming the exterior of an apartment building that has two ambulances positioned diagonally in front of the building's entrance. There are three stretchers with covered bodies being wheeled to the ambulances. A voice over indicates that there was a double murder and suicide, explaining why the local news crew is there. While the female news anchor begins telling the tragic story of a father murdering his son and his wife, then taking his own life, the medics begin shouting that the woman is moving on the stretcher. The dead woman sits up, gets off the stretcher and bites one of the EMTs in the throat. Pandemonium ensues as the other bodies begin to move and the local police shoot at the walking dead, unable to stop them from eventually killing the female news anchor. As the scene continues, Debra begins speaking over the action, informing the viewer that this was a live broadcast that was unaired and has been included in the documenting of events she and her boyfriend Jason decided to compile to ensure that the 'real story' is told.

The scene jumps to the students filming in the woods, which, not so ironically, is a horror film about a mummy called 'Death of the Dead'. The filming ceases as news reports begin to flood in about the dead rising, notifying people to return to their homes and wait for governmental assistance. At this point, two of the actors leave to return to their homes. Jason's girlfriend Debra is still in her dormitory and he insists that they go collect her. Upon arriving, the dorm is completely empty, save for a looter and Debra. Debra is frantic and states that she wants to go to her parents' house as she has been unable to get into contact with them. The rest of the film crew, their elderly white, British, male teacher, Jason and Debra begin their long journey to her house. Along the way many in their group die by being bitten by zombies. They encounter three different groups of people along their journey, the first being an elderly mute man who helps them repair their broken down RV, a group of African American militiamen who are intent on dominating the new terrific landscape, and a group of American soldiers that rob the group of their supplies and weapons. They end their journey (after discovering Debra's family has all been turned into Zombies) at the actor's house who left at the beginning of the film. He has turned into a sociopath, keeping his zombified family in his outdoor pool, and picks off the remaining members of the group, save Debra, who has locked herself in a panic room. At the end, she states that she had to finish the film; that the world must know the truth about what really happened that day that the dead began to rise.

## Dead Rising

Zombie films are a sub-genre of the larger horror genre. As such there are universal properties that can be associated with these films. For instance, horror films, argues Carol Clover, often feature female victims in compromising situations where they need to be rescued or saved by the patriarchal figure (1992: 8). Often times, these patriarchal figures are white males, usually situated within some authority role, such as the police officer, the father or the doctor. Though Clover presents her evidence through a psychoanalytic framework, relying heavily upon spectatorial positioning and highly indebted to Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1975), the zombie film often employ these similar spectatorial positions to elucidate inherent horror from the text, the context and the victim's certain peril. Whereas in the slasher film, the camera often takes on the property of the stalker figure through use of the I-Cam or what Clover refers to as the 'primary identification' (Clover 1992: 8). The victim is the object of that 'primary identification' and is referred to as the 'secondary identification'. These positionings are rendered binaristically as male/female, dominator/dominated. In the Zombie film, the characters are often the main source of 'primary identification', not the Zombies, and thus, the empathic character has been reversed, and the viewer experiences the inherent horrors of the Zombie film through 'primary identification'. Regardless of camera identification, the positioning of the spectator remains the same within the horror film, and thus the Zombie film, as the 'primary identification' remains with the victim over the monstrous (1992: 8). However, most horror scholarship identifies the primary horror viewership as being white male between the ages of 17–24 (Twitchell 1987; Clover 1992; Creed 2007; Wells 2000; Worland 2007), and thus implicates this spectatorial positioning as being coded male.

Moreover, where the Zombie film has traditionally rendered the monstrous other as indicative of the masses (Dendle 2007: 45; Platts 2013: 547–9), the stalker figure from the slasher film and the demon from the demon possession film typically are rendered masculine or substitute for the patriarchy (Jancovich 1992; Clover 1992; Berenstein 1996; Cherry 2009). As these readings suggest a rendering of the spectator as primarily male for the horror film, and subsequently the Zombie film, it also leads to the notion that the horror film is primarily a male genre (though this has been contested by several scholars, most notably by Brigid Cherry in 1999; 2001 and 2009).

Like with the horror film, the Zombie film is built upon generic conventionality (Platts 2013: 547), meaning that there are certain recurring features of a Zombie film that are identifiable across the medium (and extended into other forms of Zombie media). The most primary example of one of those generic conventions is the Zombie itself. For instance, in Romero's zombie films, the zombies move at a slow pace and can only be killed by severing the brain. Romero's zombies have set the model for most Zombie films, until *28 Days Later* (2002) and the *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) remake, gave the zombies the ability to run; though destroying the brain still kills the zombies.

Conversely, genre conventions and genre films also suggest an inherent gender trait. In other words, as horror scholars have previously noted, horror films typically draw in a large male viewership. The Gothic, often deemed the Female Gothic, has a similar tradition of attracting gender-specific readership, here being a primarily female tradition (Auerbach 1982, 1995; Ellis 1989; Heller 1992; Wolstenholme 1993; Kelley 2001; Clery 2004; Hanson 2007; Wallace 2013). Kate Ferguson Ellis even goes so far as to divide Gothic literature into two strands: the feminine Gothic and the masculine Gothic (Ellis 1989). It is a distinction evidenced through narrative structure, where the feminine Gothic centres itself on the home and the masculine Gothic typically concentrates on a travelling or re-conquering narrative. The Zombie narrative often involves a group travelling from one infested destination to an uninfested one, remaining within that 'safe place' until they are forced to evacuate the 'safe place' as it eventually becomes overrun by zombies, forcing that group to go in search of another.

Whilst the Gothic may seemingly be a disconnect from the Zombie film,<sup>3</sup> it uses similar tropes and themes. Mark Edmundson negotiates the contemporary Gothic along two strands, one more (inter)personal deemed 'Terror-Gothic', and the other, which is more societally focused is referred to as the 'Apocalyptic Gothic'. It is his renderings of the 'Apocalyptic Gothic' that are particularly striking for the debates around the Zombie:

Apocalyptic Gothic is collective Gothic: as terror Gothic would haunt the individual, so exercises in apocalyptic Gothic would haunt the society at large. The vision that affirms that when we usurp nature's role, especially through technology, what we create will turn on us, punishing us for our hubris, is first and most memorably rendered in...*Frankenstein*. (Edmundson 1997: 23).

Edmundson's claims immediately echo the contemporary zombie narrative<sup>4</sup> in that most zombies and the mass zombie infection of society are usually explained as consequences of governmental experiments (bio-medical, nuclear, radiation, etc.), our failure to protect the environment, or something that springs up out of our chaotic nature. Therefore, Edmundson's notion of the 'Apocalyptic Gothic' then suggest that there is a blurring of the masculine Gothic travelling narrative with the feminine Gothic domestic narrative, as identified by Ellis. As much of the Zombie narrative involves travelling, it also involves re-domestication, setting up a new life and starting over. For example, in *The Walking Dead* (2010), much of the characters' time is reinventing society (Rick's initial camp, the CDC, Herschell's Farm, Woodbury, the Prison), maintaining humanity and performing day-to-day chores (the women do the cooking, the cleaning and the laundry, whereas the men forage for supplies). Zombies disrupt this pursuit of recivilisation and the travelling aspect

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<sup>3</sup>For a more in-depth study of the connections between the Gothic and the Zombie, see Kyle W. Bishop's (2010) *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*.

<sup>4</sup>By contemporary, I am suggesting from Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* on ward, as this has been the most influencing film on both the Zombie and the Zombie narrative (Heffernan 2002: 75; Platts 2013: 550).

of the narrative repeats, leading the survivors to explore new territories and set up new safe spaces. In essence, the ‘Apocalyptic Gothic’ constantly negotiates gender roles, whether that be reaffirming them or transgressing them.

## Dead Technology

*Diary of the Dead* links these gender interrelationships in numerous ways, particularly in its travelling narrative in search of the ‘safe space’.<sup>5</sup> But where Romero’s most recent iteration of the *Living Dead* series departs from its original installments is through employment of the ‘shaky-cam’ aesthetic. This aesthetic champions amateur style for the purposes of legitimisation, but, in terms of the film’s narrative, it also predicates who the filmmakers are and why they are filming in this manner. The ‘shaky-cam’ employs hand held camera work as a means to capture the action and the narrative, purports an intimate portrayal of its characters and gives agency to a larger population. It provides an opportunity for anyone to be a filmmaker as opposed to the traditional Hollywood method of filming. ‘Romero-influenced zombie texts are often read progressively’ (Platts 2013: 550) indicating that this particular style “choice” suggests a break with traditional filmmaking techniques to provide a ‘progressive’ message. Further, Nicole Birch-Bayley reads *Diary of the Dead* as social commentary on the global media and their inability to present ‘the truth’ (Birch-Bayley 2012: 1144). It therefore puts power and the ability to create into the hands of anyone with a camera. Though Birch-Bayley makes an astute reading regarding the questionability of the global media, she ignores the ramifications gender have upon the global media and the dominance of technology over the media. Global media, then, being bound together with technology, still privileges the patriarch, which is further reinforced through *DOTD* as Debra is merely a participant in her boyfriend Jason’s documentation of the facts surrounding the devastating zombie apocalypse.

Foregrounded at the onset of the film is a news media investigation into the murder/suicide of an immigrant mother and son by the immigrant father. The lead female reporter, escorted by two camera men, is on the scene as the bodies are rolled out on stretchers and about to be carried away by waiting ambulances. This scene sets the precedence for the entire film, as Debra and Jason subsume their roles as lead reporter and head camera man. After the general details of the gruesome event are shared with the public by the female reporter, the bodies begin twitching behind her, allowing for the camera man to pan away from her figure and zoom in onto the bodies. The first zombie figure to arise is that of the immigrant mother and the camera man unrelentingly captures her grab a male rescue worker, bite his neck, sit up and get off the stretcher. Everything that is happening is done in a long-shot, giving the viewer a full picture of the zombie body as it moves slowly towards the camera

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<sup>5</sup>This notion draws from Ellis’ division of the Gothic narrative into two strands: the masculine and the feminine, where the former being the travelling narrative and the latter being the domestic.

(read, spectator). Debra provides the voice over for the opening sequence, contextualising it through the camera man's documentation of the unaired events, and Jason and Debra's desire to tell the 'real' story of what is occurring across the globe. The viewer learns through the voice over that this "documentary" has been pieced together and filmed by her boyfriend and finished by her.

Strewn within this scene are several implications surrounding the gender-technology divide. The lead reporter and the voice over narrating the events are both female. They are in front of the camera, part of the visual world, whereas behind the camera lies the male realm. As Judy Wajcman argues 'Technology is a key source of men's power and a defining feature of masculinity. This approach served as a compelling critique of popular and sociological arguments that were, and still are, characterized by technological determinism' (Wajcman 2006: 6). Deborah G. Johnson reiterates this claim, arguing that, 'technology and engineering represent the last bastions of male domination and appear somewhat impervious to gender change' (Johnson 2006: 3). Thus, like the development of that technology, men are both creators and created for, whereas women are the passive consumers. This interplay reinforces the traditional, patriarchal binary of man/woman, creator/consumer. The first position within these binaries assumes the position in power and the second one inferior and subservient. Evidenced from the text itself, the female reporter is only able to transmit her narrative through technology, which is controlled and developed by some patriarchal authority, inferred through the global media's dominance by technology, and thus by the patriarch. Debra's voice over has agency only through her deceased boyfriend's efforts to document the "real" events. Technology, then, stands at the forefront of *how* media is controlled and begs the question of *who* is controlling it.

As this harrowing opening scene fades away, the narrative slips into a montage of "real" recorded events, providing the relevant context for their documentary efforts. The montage highlights the "media's" inability to define or control what is occurring and shows man's efforts to control the uncontrollable. A continuous voice over from Debra provides further contextualisation for their role in the documentary, but what is constantly overstated is the role her boyfriend played to make the documentary happen. She details with technological agency the two high-tech cameras they used for shooting the film, how she overlaid music and narration, along with editing the final project, to provide effect to the completed piece. But what is most striking is that everything is indebted to Jason, her boyfriend. Debra claims that it 'was his idea' or 'his computer', seemingly dissociating herself from the project, that she had to complete *his* project. Her final words before "their" events are, 'Anyway. Here it is. Jason Creed's *The Death of Death*.'

What is at stake is not the issue of due credit and Jason's role, rather, it is the apparent subjugation of her role to his idea. In other words, she is positioning her part and role as inferior to his, which has little to do with it being his idea and more to do with the inherent role of men and women surrounding technology. Judy Wajcman argues that:

Cultural notions of masculinity stress competence in the use and repair of machines. Machines are extensions of male power and signal men's control of the environment. Women can be users of machines, particularly those to do with housework, but this is not seen as a competence with technology. (Wajcman 1991: 89)

Therefore, ideas bound up within technology do not illustrate competency, rather they signal that women are merely users. Debra does not see herself as the true creator of the documentary, though there are many instances within the film that she must 'wield' the camera and direct the action. Further, that direction is central to Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze'. The property of the 'male gaze' indicates male primacy, male direction and continued dominance by the patriarch. He objectifies 'she,' whereas, even if she subordinates her position in front of the camera as objectified 'she,' she remains in that position because he remains the 'wielder' of that technology (Mulvey 1975).

The zombie is therefore rooted within the 'very definition of technology.' Even the very notion of Romero's zombies are bound up with technology, as 'Romero's undead are created by a vague technology run amok,' (Pulliam 2007: 734). From this point, then, zombies, in Romero's diegetic *Living Dead* world, are in essence a product of male creation and male dominance. What does that say, however, about zombies and the zombie apocalypse?

If, as I am postulating, zombies are a result of a masculinist technology, then zombies should be read as masculinely encoded androids. They are a product of science and engineering, whether they be directly made in a lab, or infected through a virus as a result of science, as Wajcman, Grint and Gill, and Johnson suggest, engineering, the sciences and technology are bound together with masculinity and male agency. Essentially, they are the progeny of the patriarchy, no matter what the cause for their existence. Moreover, these are then the similar, hyper-real monsters from 1950s science fiction, they are indicative of the robots that take over the world en masse (depicted in *The Matrix* Franchise (1999–2003), *I, Robot* (2004)). But their claim over the human race still boils down to the patriarchal domination over society and culture. Though Steve Jones may be apt in referring to the zombie as a figure that is 'disruptive' and one that '[denaturalizes] norms, calling fundamental aspects of our social relations into question,' (Jones 2013: 526), the zombie's evolution both cinematically and within the diegetic realm of the *Living Dead* franchise (and subsequently most zombie film's under Romero's influence) still remains a product of maleness, masculinity and, ultimately, the oppressive patriarch.

## Dead Students, Dead Ringer

Where the figure of the zombie and the zombie apocalypse do destabilise the *status quo* of entrenched patriarchy is in terms of social organisation and the reformation of microcosmic civilisations. In other words, the small group of students in *DOTD* must unite to form a new albeit, nomadic community that must make sense of their new world and the horrendous dangers that come with it. Even though the focus on group formation and banding together to survive is a major narrative structure for the zombie film, it still revolves around individuals making sense of their situation, coming to terms with newly formed, collective ideals/ideologies, and ultimately about the individual's survival in that torrid environment. Students, then, are the

natural representational tool to reflect these aims. In other words, higher education students must be both guided and make his/her own way in the larger world outside of university and within it.

*Diary of the Dead* hyperbolises this situation through the zombie apocalypse by portraying how university students are affected by the world around them and that they are not immune to the dangers of the world around them. Moreover, university-aged students typically must find themselves alongside navigating their new adult selves through varying social and personal challenges. Kristen A. Renn (2004) highlights this very notion, summarising Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser's (1993) work *Education and Identity*, claiming that:

College students engage in a process of examining the systems of values and ethics taught to them by family and peers, creating new systems of beliefs and behaviors to match their self-definitions and lifestyles. They emerge from college with an identity forged in the academic and peer culture of the campus. This sense of self includes conceptions of body and appearance, as well as clarification of gender, sexual, and racial identity. (Renn 2004: 49)

What Renn is positing, through summarising Chickering and Reisser's work on identity and education, is that the post-university self is defined through the personal experiences and the re-evaluation of one's personal beliefs before entering into university and arrives at the end transformed and reshaped. In other words, university changes the student from a dependent individual into an independent one. Along that path, the student is challenged socially and academically, which challenges previously held systems of belief and previously formed social structures. Thus, Debra's character is simultaneously in the stages of self-definition as a university student, but also must adjust to the zombie apocalypse. The dire situation forces her, and the others in her group, not only to re-evaluate their day-to-day beliefs and identities, but also forces them to question and adapt to the newly terrific and infected world into which they have been catapulted.

Moreover, arriving to that stage requires hurdles and testing events. Not only are the students working on a collaborative film, learning relevant skills surrounding team work and learning to communicate, those skills must be applied instantly to band together to maintain existence in a world that is literally "ready to eat them alive." This innocuous project and the skills developed by it and that application is highly suggestive of Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of development in that, in order to grow both as an individual and as a student, a "crisis" to overcome must exist.<sup>6</sup> However, what is at stake for the individuals within the newly formed community(ies), both diegetically and within the university system, foregrounds issues of gender; and speaks largely to the ways in which women are represented diegetically, academically and through the gender-technology divide.

This recentralises the intentions of the essay, which considers how Romero has employed a specific aesthetic ('shaky cam') to raise issues between the media and its 'subjects;' but what has often been ignored in most filmic and education scholarship

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<sup>6</sup>I am not suggesting one theory of developmental stages over the other; rather, I am illustrating the application of those stages to the representation of students in *Diary of the Dead*.

is the representation of the student. As has been previously stated, countless work has been done on the representation of gender within the horror film (Clover 1992; Creed 2007; Badley 1995; Berenstein 1996; Cherry 2009; Jones 2013), gender within education (Jacobs 1996; Ayalon 2003; Bagillhole and White 2011), but not how gender is represented alongside the notion of being a student within film. This is an important area of inquiry that speaks largely to the representation of the (here) American university system and practices and how students make their way through those institutions.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, by exploring filmmaking education on film, it centralises those notions of the gender-technology divide, as certain disciplines have been identified as rather more masculine or rather more feminine (Ayalon 2003). The gender-technology relationship, and the scrutiny thereof, offers an insight into *why* more men enter, say engineering degrees, and more women (arguably) enter into the more liberal arts focused degrees (such as English literature and the modern languages).<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after the montage of news real footage of the impending and escalating zombie apocalypse, the narrative refocuses and surrounds the students' project. The viewer is transported from the chaotic urban landscape to a desolate, isolated one. Dense forest and oppressive darkness comprise the *mise-en-scene*, before the action plays out. The polished visuals from the opening sequence and the media footage montage are jarringly disrupted as the viewer must adapt to an unsteady, 'shaky camera' aesthetic. It navigates around trees, peering into the darkness, signalling to the viewer that the events happening here are somehow related to the previous narrative context. Even though there is darkness, there is a false brightness to the scene that does not register with the type of camera being employed. Thick trees and the looming branches are noticeably visible, but that oppressive darkness seeps between the gaps in them.

Without warning, the camera jilts downward, upward and side-to-side, as a woman screams in the distance. She appears in centre frame, wearing what looks to be a wedding dress that is extremely dishevelled and her hair is coming out of place in tufts. Initially, the viewer is lead to believe a zombie is chasing her, though he/she is immediately contradicted when a bandaged mummy appears mere steps behind her. The camera's personal gaze focuses intensely on the woman in peril, alters shots to capture the mummy close up, using a shot/reverse shot to intensify the woman's terror. Upon closer scrutiny, she looks out of place temporally as her dress has an aged, costumed-look to it. The camera joltingly captures the chase segment, when, outside the frame 'CUT' disrupts the action. This disruption foregrounds why she looks displaced from the opening narrative events. Upon further inspection of her facial features indicates that she is younger than previously registered. This is

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<sup>7</sup>This is a highly understudied area of film studies, particularly as universities and university students feature in numbers of major Hollywood productions with a large portion of them falling within the genres of comedy and horror. See, for example, *Black Christmas* (1974 and 2006), *Animal House* (1978), *The House on Sorority Row* (1983), *Scream 2* (1997), *Dead Man on Campus* (1998), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Cry\_Wolf* (2005), *Sorority Row* (2009).

<sup>8</sup>This is not to ignore the important contribution and continuous enrolment of men in these humanities-based subjects, rather highlights how women have historically been "conditioned" to enter into these liberal arts subjects (Bagillhole and White 2013).



when the notion that some type of (amateur) horror film is being recorded enters into the frame of narrative reference.

In spite of the fact that the action has ceased, the camera continues to capture its surroundings and the viewer is carried to the onset RV, where the director, the actors, the students and the teacher are waiting silently. This provides the viewer with additional context (mainly visual) about the student-led project and their project becomes an homage to Universal mummy movies from the 1930s, the original zombie films that followed and the low-budget filming style of Romero's original *Night of the Living Dead*. Furthermore, the (male) director maintains generic horror conventions by objectifying a woman-in-peril. Though women are present for the filming, their main roles are actress, the costume design and makeup application. They represent the stereotypical gender roles that have traditionally dominated the home (de Beauvoir 1953; Friedan 1963) and that have (here) carried into film(making) education. Furthermore, these female students do not have technological agency, in that they are rather in front of the screen (objectified) or accoutrements to the masculine role of directing the action. Their position does not dictate what the action is or how it will pan out, rather their role is to *enhance* that action, and much like woman was to enhance man within the home.

Technology, therefore, has huge dominance within film(making) education, which is further evidenced through the *male* teacher's/professor's (colloquial term for US university lecturers) presence. Beyond gender filmmaking practices, there is a clear reiteration here between filmmaking as being gendered masculine and film viewing or consumption being gendered masculine in terms of the zombie film. A male student chose to make a horror film, chose to incorporate the objectification of the female body, chose to make the mummy male (revealed once the action ceases, but also through the mummy's tall and stocky stature) and chose to employ female students in traditionally feminine roles.

Though gendered education is typically divided along the humanities versus sciences line, the implementation of high-tech, visual technology suggests that there is also a division within the different faculties themselves. More technical disciplines within the humanities, then, are gendered masculine, and highlight unchallenged gender divisions within the university system.

The convergence of these issues is hyperbolised through the zombie apocalypse in *Diary of the Dead*. Thus, the juncture of the gender-technology relationship and issues of gender parity across the university system become central to Romero's representation along gender lines and through the status 'college student'. In other words, by portraying students as such, it shows that personal development and growth are foregrounded and forced upon these younger members of their society – the zombie apocalypse sends this process into overdrive, and hence, the development of multiple microcosmic communities springing up across the *Living Dead* franchise, and more locally, within the immediate world of the characters in *DOTD*. The viewer follows the development of this (student-led) new community formation from its inception until its dwindling-down to two members. What has yet to be stated, though, is that Debra is the survivor of her relationship (Jason dies at the very end of the film) and becomes the ostensible new leader of her newly founded

community. Moreover, as the narrative progresses, Debra becomes a cogent leader that is able to negotiate across hostile lines of communication and force (running into the rough gang in the warehouse) and must also overcome her newfound independence from her parents (she is forced to kill her undead father and mother in her family home). She is supported and encouraged by the other members, growing from her initial rescue from her university dorm (coded helpless or damsel – her dorm is a tower) and moving up the hierarchical ladder towards eventual leader.

Seemingly, this narrative arc would be seen positively, as she is fighting the patriarchy (both in terms of leadership and fighting off the zombies) for her survival and for the survival of her community. But what disadvantages the positivity revolved around these struggles remains rooted within the gender-technology divide, which consequently begins at home (Friedan 1963; Wajcman 1991, 2006; Grint and Gill 1995), carries forward into the university system by dividing gender through discipline (Jacobs 1996; Ayalon 2003) and is reinforced in university educational roles and responsibilities (Bagilhole and White 2011, 2013).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the ways in which gender intersects the zombie film, technology and education through *Diary of the Dead*'s presentation of student filmmakers making sense of and surviving the zombie apocalypse. Moreover, it also explored how the zombie apocalypse is used to hyperbolise the role of women within these three disparate areas that have been aptly united through the film's narrative and visual style. Through this investigation, I illustrated *how* film studies through both the practical side, in regards to the film and its narrative, and the theoretical side may work to expose gendered educational practices within itself, but how that works as a case study to highlight the gendered division across the university system, and thus, the originations of this problem. By breaking the chapter into the three areas of first zombies, then technology and finally education, it allowed the process to work as a layering function, whereby the root or central, defining narrative of gender (dis)parity may be highlighted, explored and challenged. Furthermore, as Romero's work is often seen to be more socially progressive and a challenge to the *status quo* (Heffernan 2002; Pulliam 2007; Platts 2013), illustrating how the patriarch resurfaces to maintain dominance is heightened and demonstrates that there is an unrelenting grip even amongst those who would wish to challenge and/or destroy the very notion of it.

There are many more modes of inquiry to be made in these three areas about gender (dis)parity. Further, there are many differing methodological approaches that could yield different results. The restraints of this chapter do not allow for every type of inquiry. However, there is much more to be said about the representation of students across the media and how they are a reflection of their academic environments; as is there much more to be said about maleness and masculinity in horror studies, zombie media scholarship and education.

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## Part II



### At the Window

I saw a fat, slimy, bald zombie  
It had a wart, scabs and it was dribbling.  
His eye looked mouldy, it was blue like veins.  
It's cheeks looked squidgey.  
Blood, guts and gore were coming out its body  
as his arm trembled, it hit my window.  
I screamed.  
(By Amber)

## Chapter 5

# Into the Black: Zombie Pedagogy, Education and Youth at the End of the Anthropocene

Jason J. Wallin

What does the zombie teach? While this speculative question has been redressed through the interpretation of the zombie as a symptom of colonialism (*White Zombie*) contemporary consumerism (*Dawn of the Dead*, *Land of the Dead*), ecological destruction (*The Bay*) and geopolitical warfare (*World War Z*), there might insist a more pervasive ontological lesson at the crux of our fascination with zombies. That is, while the meaning of the zombie has been intimately linked to the “unsettled ecologies” against which it symptomatically emerges, this essay will speculate on the zombie in relation to a more pervasive albeit ‘passive’ ontological program (Cohen 2012). Consequent of the zombie’s destruction in such video games as *Call of Duty: Black Ops: Zombies* (Ideaworks Game Studio 2011), its exploitation in Curry’s (2006) *Fido*, and oppression in Romero’s (2005) *Land of the Dead*, it might be suggested that what contemporary zombie fiction passively ‘teaches’ pertains to the question of what *counts* as properly and recognizably human (Nayar 2014). Herein, the pedagogy of zombie fiction finds its backdrop in both the question of what constitutes human life and more poignantly, in the active production of those oppositions and caesura that distinguish man from non-man (Agamben 2004). How zombie fiction functions to habilitate and reify the division of human and non-human life ought to constitute an ethical pedagogical concern in that such divisions perpetuate materially via the commodification of nonhuman life, exclusion of ahuman worlds, and violent mistreatment of nonhuman life in the contemporary educational milieu.

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## I

Relative to the question of what counts as human persists a compelling ontological paradox inhering the heart of contemporary zombie studies. Rehearsed quite simply, this paradox commences with the suggestion that our contemporary fascination with zombies is symptomatic of the fact that we have ourselves *become zombies*. That the zombie is thought to function as a psychical-symbolic representation of contemporary human life constitutes an interpretive gambit in zombie studies literature. Familiar interpretive readings include analogizing the zombie to the ceaseless appetite of contemporary consumerism in Romero's (1978) *Dawn of the Dead*, the zombie's representation of racialized oppression and exploitation under neoliberalism in Curry's (2006) *Fido*, or the zombie as a representation of the agitated and restless affective state of the subject under neoliberal capitalism (*Resident Evil* and *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*). While it is well established that the zombie can be thought as a reflection of life organized, manipulated, and managed under industrial and post-industrial regimes, it concomitantly functions as a figure against which the human is opposed in a bid for physiological, taxonomic, and species preservation. Herein, the zombie functions as a foil for what the human is not. *Alive 4-Ever* (Meridian Digital Entertainment 2011), *Left 4 Dead* (Turtle Rock Studios 2008), *Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare* (Rockstar San Diego 2010), and the *Dead Rising* (Capcom Production Studio 1 2006) series each constitute a haptic engagement in a simulated war for the preservation of the human from zombie infection.

The symbolic destruction of the zombie throughout a litany of contemporary video games and zombie fiction points to a more pervasive, albeit implicit ontological problematic. As contemporary video game design suggests, the ease with which one might gun down, destroy, or mutilate a zombie pertains directly to its status as distinctly non-human (Rosenberg 2011). Yet, to take seriously the idea that the zombie figures as an intensive aspect of *human* life, or rather, to intimate that *we are zombies*, is to suggest that the symbolic obliteration of the zombie functions as a means to eradicate a form of alien difference that would shatter the image of anthropocentric purity and dominion particular to human life. It is this very scenario that inheres AMC's *The Walking Dead*, insofar as the show fabulates a scenario in which all humans carry the zombie virus, or rather, the latent alien potential to *become zombie*. Herein, the destruction of *zombie-becomings* might be thought as a means to defray thinking not only the death of the image of 'man' but to render unthinkable the complex relationship of humans and ahuman life. Such relations are indeed evaded in *The Walking Dead*, which reifies patterns of familial melodrama and xenophobic anxiety over the threat of the zombie's alien queerness. Where compassion for zombie-life is depicted via the teenage character of Lizzy Samuels, it is portrayed pathologically.<sup>1</sup> For her 'equal' valuation of human and zombie life, or

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<sup>1</sup> While Samuels is portrayed as morally and socially unhinged throughout the fourth season of AMC's *The Walking Dead*, of specific import here is the automatic horror with which her ethical treatment of the zombie is met.



rather, her conceptualization of a flat ontological relationship between humans and zombies, Lizzy is deemed a threat to the community and murdered by her surrogate 'teacher', Carol.

The 'problem' of ontological difference underpinning Lizzy's murder is inverted in Jonathan Levine's zombie romantic comedy, *Warm Bodies*, in which the introspective teenage zombie *R* falls in love with Julie, a human survivor of the zombie apocalypse. Saving Julie from certain death at the hands of the zombie horde, *Warm Bodies* follows *R*'s progressive salvation through heteronormative romantic love, by which he is ultimately cured and renormalized as fully, properly human. His alien queerness resolved, the final scenes of *Warm Bodies* depict a fully human *R* witnessing the triumph of the human species from the rubble of the apocalypse. While comprising inverse scenarios, the 'pedagogical lesson' of both *The Walking Dead*'s Lizzy Samuels and *Warm Bodies*' *R* pertains to 'overcoming' the zombie and reifying the human as an orthodox image for the investment of desire. Put differently, the lesson of negation and the rejection of alien difference particular to both Lizzy and *R* pertain to a rejection of inhuman becoming as a 'positive' condition for the continuation of civilization and the image of man respectively. It is here that the zombie might be understood in terms of what Agamben (2004) dubs "a state of exception" in that the zombie becomes the exteriorization of that which is internally excluded that a normative image of human life can be preserved (p. 37). This is to say that the 'pedagogical lesson' of both Lizzy and *R* occurs against a biopolitical backdrop through which the question of what is human is answered through the marginalization of *life* not yet captured in the orbit of Humanism (Braidotti 2013).

It is here that the destruction or rehabilitation of the zombie figured in contemporary youth media and video games enjoins with the much broader ontological task of both making the human and reifying its centrality in the collective imaginary. Put differently, it is through the oppression, exploitation, and annihilation of the zombie that the human becomes recognized as categorically different from non-human life and elevated as a species above others. Such processes of constructing the human have long been a preoccupation of both posthuman and monster studies scholars, who have attended to the ways in which the divisions between species are established and further, how such divisions consign particular species to 'blessed salvation' and others to the "abattoir, camps, or death" (Nayar 2014, p. 81). Across an ever expanding body of zombie fiction, the division of human and zombie life is conceptualized relative to *human* survival, if not the literal survival of the species in an era of great environmental and socio-political uncertainty, then as a means of conceptual survival with its attendant presumptions of an ordered and stable anthropocentric world. It is this very presumption of a stable, human-centered world that the zombie threatens, and indeed, the world threatened by the *apocalyptic* force of the zombie is one largely fashioned from the perspective of anthropocentric separation and dominion. Yet, the zombie does not simply portend a world without humans, but rather, of humans astride forms of chemical, viroid, and microbial life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>If zombie-life can be thought as a screen for a people yet to come, or rather, a revolutionary people in the process of becoming, the zombie composes an 'malevolent art' for the deterritorial-

Palpating the contact zone between human and inhuman life, the zombie diagrams a trans-species or trans-classificatory becoming that affronts the “pastoral fantasy” of Humanism” as a life both socially and spiritually transcendent from the complex materiality of ecological emplacement (p. 89). It is in this vein that the perverse alien nuptials of *becoming zombie* is characterized as a corruption of human life. The threat of such ‘queer’ corruption figures throughout the BBC series *In the Flesh* (2013), in which the show’s teenage protagonist Kieran Walker faces social derision and alienation upon returning home albeit cured of so-called *Partially Deceased Syndrome* (PDS).

It is via the annihilation of the zombie as a diagram of trans-special life, or rather, as a diagram of human and inhuman filiation that a historical division is reenacted. As Agamben (2004) develops, Human life exists only insofar as it is able to both “transcend and transform the...animal which supports him” (p. 12). Across the registers of politics, theology, and biology, the ecologically bound life of the ‘animal’ life is counterposed to the transcendent ascension of the human, producing between them both a caesura and distance intimate to what it means to be human (p. 18). While portrayals of the zombie vary according to the “unsettled” environmental, social, political, and scientific milieu from which they emerge, their alliance to both feral animality and vegetative affectation remain consistent to their ontological becoming (Cohen 2012). Such lines of alliance are sketched out in both Cronenberg’s (1977) *Rabid* and Brooks’ *World War Z*, each of which link the zombie to infection by mutated strains of rabies. Danny Boyle’s (2002) *28 Days Later* speculatively connects zombie infestation to the transmission of ‘Rage’ virus spread from chimpanzee to human, while Barry Levinson’s *The Bay* (2012) figures the zombie as a grotesque nuptial between human and parasitic mutant isopods. *Left 4 Dead*’s futuristic horror world finds its analogue in the image of a domesticated pet gone wild, while Naughty Dog’s (2013) *The Last of Us* traces the genealogy of zombie outbreak to human infection by mutated parasitic *Cordyceps*. To what this cross-section of zombie-fiction attends is not only to the mixed, trans-species ecology of the zombie, but the potential corruption of bounded human life via animal, vegetable, and microbiological couplings. Herein, the feral animality of the zombie palpates the frightful proximity of the animal “always lying in wait at the very heart of the constitutive disavowals and self-constructing narratives enacted by that fantasy figure called “the human”” (Wolfe 2003, p. 6). Put differently, the animal and vegetative becomings of the zombie figure as the horrific prospect of the ‘human’s’ ecological disidentification, or rather, its conflation with those forms of animality, vegetative, and viroid life against and opposed to which the human is produced. As Derrida (2002) develops, the very image of human centrality and dominion is predicated on its separation from the instinct-driven, irrational, and ecologically enmeshed figure

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ization of what *is*. Here, zombie-life resists the very prospect of a future or rather, a future continually reterritorialized in a mirror image of what *is*. Apart from what *is*, the zombie continues to function as a unique cine-sign for surveying and assessing a life form born of the deprogrammed body, its savage metronomic pulsations, and the extreme revolutionary deterritorializations of capitalism (Land 2011).

of the animal. The annihilation of the zombie as an inhuman life driven by instinct, irrational desire, and alien material impulses might hence be thought as a tableaux upon which inter-species dependency and internal, heterogeneous multiplicity is resolved (Agamben 2004). Herein, a hierarchy of ontological relations and faculties are reified and violently affirmed through the concomitant production and eradication of the zombie as that *which we are not*. Yet, insofar as the “the human” requires and idea of the animal *which it is not*, the zombie must continually return, wave after putrid wave, such that the human fiction can be made to persevere.

## II

Invading zombie every sphere of the contemporary public imaginary, the repetitive annihilation of the zombie functions coextensively of what Agamben (2004) dubs the ‘anthropological machine’ of Humanism, or rather, the isolation and elimination of the “non-human within the human” (p. 37). Informing upon the question of what registers as human *proper*, Agamben’s ‘anthropological machinery’ finds its corollary in the material processes and idealist *teloi* of education. Born from its Renaissance conceptualization in Rousseau’s (1962) *Emile* and the Neoplatonic hierarchization of life figured in the *Great Chain of Being*, the “natural” *teloi* of education is made to reflect in the image of universal Humanism, or rather, the imperial destiny of the “Eurocentric paradigm” (Braidotti 2013, p. 15). What is ‘natural’ about education, Rousseau avers, is its power to transcend contingency and ‘denature’ the human from those nonhuman, instinctual, and irrational impulses ‘other’ to the Eurocentric ideal of consciousness, rationality, and self-discipline (Lewis and Khan 2012; Braidotti 2013). Such a division of human and non-human life is founded on the fabulated projection of man *above and beyond* the mutable life of animals and further, the attribution of ontological superiority to human life (Steel 2012; Thacker 2012). Organizing life itself from the perspective of human centrality, the world becomes a *world-for-us*, or rather, a world governed by human ideals as its organizing metric (Thacker 2012). That, for example, Rousseau’s conceptualization of education is naturally disposed to rational social progress and individual perfectibility situates the values and morals of transcendent Humanism as a measure of all things. Rousseau’s *Emile* not only reifies a human-centered image of ‘natural order’, but founds difference as pejoration. As Rousseau articulates, ‘natural education’ must become recalcitrant to the horrors of “mixing”, “disfigurement”, and “deformity” as perversions of the spirit in which education is thought *ought to* labor (Lewis and Khan 2012, p. 10).

From this ‘modern’ outset, education presumes the ideal ‘face’ of Eurocentric Humanism according to which life itself becomes correlated. In this scenario, ‘other’ life is rendered either familiar through its domestication into dominant schemas of intelligibility *for-us*, illegitimated, or condemned to death. The school’s anthropocentric valuation of life as it is for humans might otherwise be known

through the degraded status of animals in the material practices of the institution. In the USA alone, an estimated 12–20 million animals per year are killed for the purpose of dissection in biology class laboratories.<sup>3</sup> Implicate with mass industry, many of animals used in such school dissection labs are bred for the express purpose that their deaths will function in service to the knowledge and experience of the student. Such precedent for the *utility* of animal life in secondary classrooms are corollary to the multi-million dollar enterprise of animal research in Universities, which report continual increases in animal ‘biomedical’ experimentation, stress testing, vivisection, and genetic modification. In less overt ways, the conceptualization of the animal as an object *for us* insists as a ‘hidden’ supplement throughout the North American curriculum. Insofar as the study of home economics is influenced by livestock industry lobbyists for example, the animal becomes a literal object of consumption. Elsewhere, the animal is almost completely disappeared from history as anything other than a vanishing mediator of human progress. Where animals do insist within the educational imagination, they assume a degraded, Oedipalized status through which they become domesticated classroom-pets or banal caricatures of school identity.

The subjectivization of youth by the ‘anthropological machines’ of schooling produce as a generality the presumption of a world given to anthropocentrism. Such anthropocentrism is confirmed in the presumption that the world can be submitted to the knowledge we have of it, and further, that the world is as it is for us<sup>4</sup> (Thacker 2012). Yet, astride this generality persists a series of particular processes for making the human. The disciplinary molding of the student’s libidinal drives according to the homogenous routines of the school, the shaping of moral character in the image of social good, and the investment of student desire in discourses of progress and perfection each function as passwords for the registration of the rational Human. Yet, amidst these varied modes of production, it is the educational organization of the faculties that assume special status. Schooling produces the material conditions whereupon the heterogeneous collective of organs and life forms that compose the human are organized in a manner “[repressing] the chaotically dispersed and relational manner of our existence” (Colebrook 2011, p. 9). Education treats both the brain and eye as privileged organs of the human proper, insofar as each function in

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<sup>3</sup>The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) argues that no specific statistics exist on the number of animals used in vivisection labs across the U.S., let alone world-wide. The ALF argues that this is due to the nondisclosure of industry information by biological suppliers. The inexact statistics on dissection pointed to by the ALF are corroborated by a number of Anti-Vivisection authorities ([http://animalliberationfront.com/Philosophy/Animal%20Testing/School\\_Lab/school.htm](http://animalliberationfront.com/Philosophy/Animal%20Testing/School_Lab/school.htm)). Most suggest avowedly conservative estimates on dissection at 12 million, while others, taking into account dissections in elementary and middle school, suggest 20 million (<http://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-experimentation/classroom-dissection/>).

<sup>4</sup>A common characteristic of contemporary educational thought is its contraction of life forces to prior interpretive commitments through which difference is brought into conformity with prior images or foundation for thinking. Such a strategy already insists that analysis proceeds via the reflection of some transcendent meaning, image, or concept with which the new is made to conform.

the image of human transcendence through rational progress and optical distance from the mutability of the world respectively (Steel 2012). As students know well, the material practices of schooling aim not only to treat the ‘head’ above all things, but to pattern the organism according to the assumed primacy of cognitive, intellectual, and contemplative faculties (Colebrook 2011, p. 12). It is in this way that schooling functions to overdetermine the organism in the image of rationality and transcendence by circuiting desiring-production to a particular image of the body hierarchically submitted to the brain and the attendant ideals of consciousness, unified self-awareness and rational progress commensurate with the “disembodied subject of Western reason and cognition” (p. 15). Such overdetermination finds a primary division of human and non-human life, for what distinguishes man from beast but the former’s ostensible capacity for both disembodied rational ascension and the ‘natural’ disposition to seek truth above and beyond the chaotic impulses and alien drives of life. Through the hierarchization of the faculties, schooling aims to systematically overcome inhuman difference by selecting only those desires that desire human transcendence, the discovery of constants, and methods for mastery over both self and world.

The organization and investment of schooling *in making the human* is threatened by the zombie as a monstrous disidentification of both schooling’s Humanistic *telos* and the ontological image of Eurocentric Humanism in which students are institutionally determined. It is upon this ontological battleground that contemporary youth are continually projected in the demand that they become recognizable through submission to the anthropological machinery of the school and its active repression of ‘illegitimate’ ontological becomings. This symbolic war against ahuman life is ubiquitously performed in schools, where the threat of a student becoming a disinterested ‘vegetable’ or unruly ‘animal’ marks an immediate concern for the school’s bureaucratic power and target of disciplinary processes. Concern over such becomings have an enduring political legacy, for as Agamben documents, the “image of the animal in human form” (*enfant sauvage, homo ferus*) and vegetal life associated with cognitive difference, somnambulistic and comatose states have since Aristotle constituted aspects of the human *excluded* in the composition of the human (Agamben 2004, p. 15). As a monster of both animal and vegetable becomings, the zombie is hence treated in ways that preserve the motile borderline between human and ahuman life. Perhaps no such treatment is as significant in preserving this borderline as the trope act of negating the zombie’s ability to procreate by *removing its head or destroying its brain*. Where the institutional production of the human is predicated on the organization of the faculties around the ‘head’, it is the exclusion or eradication of the head that ultimately shores up the borderline between human and zombie life. The ‘headshot’ or destruction of the zombie head not only performs the symbolic exclusion of the zombie as an acephalous ahuman, often revealing the zombie’s ‘base materialism’ via the continued persistence of its vestigial limbs (*Walking Dead*), but further, forcibly excludes animal and organic life from the construction of what it means to be a *fully* human subject.

### III

The eradication of the zombie assumes political significance insofar as it signals the submission of instincts to the biopolitical organization and regulation of the State (Agamben 2004). As in Levine's *Warm Bodies* (2013), the alien drives of raw life (*zoë*) are habilitated upon the institutionalized face of the *human being* (*bios*) by which life itself is conditioned and submitted. Such reterritorialization is characteristic of modernity, wherein instincts become superseded by institutions through which instinct itself is reinvested, or more simply, where institutions *become* instincts. The war against zombies is hence a war that pertains to the question of how instincts *ought* to be submitted as to render us subjects in the image of a civilizational ideal. It is here that the lives of students are politically invested insofar as their status as institutionally recognizable subjects is hinged on the submission of instincts to the regulatory body of the institution, its rules, axioms, and constants. Herein, the mutilation and destruction of the zombie marks not only the exclusion of nonhuman life from the human, but normalizes the investment of instincts within socio-political formations that exclude modes of desiring-production not submitted to the biopolitical care, management and surveillance of the State.

It is in this modern image of institutionalized instincts that zombie fiction consistently figures in the survivor's often imperfect search for civilization, or rather, the reconstitution of civilization in such orthodox social forms such as the Oedipal triad (*28 Days Later*; *World War Z*), the utopian fantasy of romantic pioneerism, or reconstitution of the walled-in city-State steadfast against zombie nomad hordes. Even where such investments go awry, zombie fiction recurrently demonstrates the investment of survivors in the representational schemas of State power. Echoing Brooks' (2007) implicit critique in *World War Z*, Larsen (2010) writes that "the real problem [of zombie fiction] lies with the "heroes"—the police, the army, good old boys with their guns and male bonding fantasies. If they win, racism has a future, capitalism has a future, sexism has a future, militarism has a future" (np). The destruction of the zombie and sublimation of its queer materialism finds an alliance with those 'institutional instincts' cathected to power, delusions of superiority, and investment in biopolitical regimes of semiotization (sex, gender, race). Herein, the surfeit of zombie fiction premised on the eradication of the zombie's perverse materialism maintains the 'institutional instinct' of anthropocentrism as a basic assumption of how life *ought* to go and what life *ought* to persevere.

Where zombie fiction is invested in the expulsion of the inhuman within, the repression of ahuman becomings, and hierarchization of life submitted to the presumption of institutionalized anthropocentrism, it implicitly functions as a public pedagogy that informs upon the question of what it means to be human. Yet, insofar as the project of making the human is predicated on asymmetrical relations amongst species, or rather, the hierarchization of life from the perspective of *human life*, the human emerges against a speciesist backdrop complicit in the naturalization of exploitative human-nonhuman relations and the normalization of material violence against nonhuman life-forms (Nayar 2014). As the repression of species

boundary-crossing and human-ahuman nuptials, the repetitive eradication of the zombie constitutes a public pedagogy that preserves an inherently speciesist conceptualization of life. Herein, the mutilation (*Dead Rising*) and enslavement (*Fido*) of the zombie not only preserves the human as a primary image for the investment of desire, but renders difference, queering, and alien perversity into ontologically inferior forms of becoming. It is here that the public pedagogy of zombie fiction shares affinity with the ontological project of formal education insofar as each are passively founded upon a commitment to the “illusory beautiful life” of anthropocentrism and its naturalized image of human life superior to the ‘base materialism’ of nonhuman life that education seeks to ‘overcome’ (Colebrook 2011, p. 36). The obliteration of the zombie shares with formal education both a desiring-investment in the preservation of the human and rejection of that which disidentifies or threatens the mutation of its ‘blessed’ Eurocentric image (Agamben 2004).

#### IV

What does the zombie teach? If the zombie is indeed a state of exception for what the human is not, then it reveals the divisions and caesura by which the human *proper* is conceptualized. As Fudge (2002) articulates and zombie fiction redoubles, the human is made alongside ‘other’ life from which it is distinguished, or differently, “[i]t is by “disavowing” animals that we construct ourselves” (p. 7). In this performative division of human and ahuman, zombie fiction diagrams an image of ‘illegitimate’ or mutated life against which the human proper is continually counterposed in a performance of literal and conceptual survival pertaining to the Humanist ideals of self-regulation, dominion, and transcendence above the miasma of material life. Indeed, what distinguishes the human from the zombie but the former’s supposed freedom from base drives, its bounded self-regulation, and uncontaminated ‘divine’ spirit. It is this image of the human that is materially repeated in education, the history of which is similarly defined against those ‘degenerate’ and ‘disfiguring’ materialisms that would break from the teleological presumption of human transcendence over the world. Such anthropocentric convictions are reified in much contemporary schooling, for as rapidly mutating environmental conditions threaten the sustainability of planetary life, it is ‘business as usual’ for education, which continues undiscerning of the complex material exploitations and ontological hierarchies in which it is invested and to which it persistently contributes (McKibben 2011). Herein, the anthropological machinery of schooling represses the necessity for contemporary youth to rethink the material relationship between schooling and ecology, and further, the necessity of schooling to ethically intervene and transform those ontological models that support the speciesist exploitation of nonhuman life.

While enjoined to the reification of anthropocentrism, the pedagogy of zombie fiction palpates an unusual pedagogical lesson in its demonstrations that human centrality is *always-already* allied with nonhuman life. That is, insofar as the conceptualization of the human necessitates thinking a host of nonhuman beings upon which

it relies for its differential uniqueness, the human and nonhuman are *always-already* affiliated. Further still, the vaunted celebration of the uncontaminated human marks a failure to acknowledge that *we have never been humans proper* by fact of our constitution by microbial and amoebic intelligences that are not *our own*. Ansell-Pearson (1999) dubs this “the filthy lesson of symbiosis”, where the conceptualization of life no longer functions “in accordance with the superior laws of race or blood, genus or species” (p. 182–183). That humans share significant similarities in genetic makeup with such varies species as orangutans and pumpkins attests that to be *human* is to think only a single scale of ontology or rather, to insist upon the illusion of anthropocentrism as a habitual ontological refrain (Hroch 2013). The lesson of symbiosis articulated by Ansell-Pearson (1999) is extended differently by Wolfe (2003), who contends that ‘human life’ constitutes a ‘fictional image’ that for its fabulated quality might be thought as both historically contingent and further, as an image of thought that might be disidentified in support of ontological difference. It is in this vein that youth might escape the reactive destruction of the zombie impelled by survival horror games and popular zombie fiction in lieu of the zombie’s ‘putrid pedagogical’ revelation that “there is another world and it is this one” (Wark 2014).

That contemporary zombie fiction functions as a means to think the human in an age of apocalyptic precarity<sup>5</sup> obfuscates that the zombie has concomitantly become a conceptual resource for rethinking onto-ecological relations between human and ahuman life at the end of the anthropocene. Counterposed to the bounded and uncontaminated ideals of Humanism, the zombie palpates a materialist image of reality in which the categories of human, animal, and nonhuman are radically deterritorialized. Such ontological ‘decoding’ posits not only the disidentification of ‘man’ upon the ecological backdrop from which it is abstracted, but further, elicits the undetected nonhuman life that *always-already* insists alongside the ‘human’. From factory farm contamination in *The Bay* (2012), waterway pollution in *Mud Zombies* (2008), and toxic exposure in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), zombie fiction palpates the unthought nonhuman life of pollutants, chemicals, and toxins with which the human is involuted. *28 Days Later* (2002), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Contracted* (2013) posit a similar image of the human astride the virulence of microbiological life, resituating the image of the human in relation to the ‘dark materialisms’ of its supporting ecology (Cohen 2012). Zombie fiction is hence not simply a confrontation with animality, but with the alien materiality of a world that is no longer a *world-for-us* (Thacker 2011). Put differently, the confrontation of zombie fiction is not simply one in which humans face their disavowed animality, but more radically, a world that no longer repeats in the image of anthropocentric domination and control. The putrid lesson of the zombie is that human life is inexorably wed to inhuman worlds popu-

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<sup>5</sup>Symptoms of this mutating Holocene suprabound. Increases in oceanic temperature over the past half decade have been linked to a fourfold intensification in the frequency of disasters related to violent weather and the concomitant emergence of so-called ‘mega-storms’ of unanticipated virulence and intensity (McKibben 2011). The ocean today is more corrosive than at any point in the past eight hundred thousand years, with pH fluctuations accelerating ten times faster than forecast. Familial ice core marker layers containing fallout from atomic testing in the 1960s have begun to disappear from ancient Himalayan glaciers, marking the accelerated erosion of glacial sheets.



lated by virulent microbes, toxic effluvium and accumulations of waste that mark both the disintegration of Edenic idealism and the termination of anthropocentric conceit. Herein, the disintegrating and dross life of the zombie illustrates the failure of both the transcendent illusion and the Humanist fiction of a bounded and self-regulating human 'separate' from subtending dark ecologies of fragmentation, sickness, and putrification (Land 1992, p. 131; Morton 2010).

## V

For as much as the zombie functions as a state of exception against which the human is defined, the zombie concomitantly diagrams a dilated ecological alter-world with which the human and its fate is inexorably imbricated. As Jagodzinski (2014) articulates, human and natural history are now undifferentiable.

Hence, where zombie fiction invests desire in the violent negation of the zombie, it finds an ontological myopia, for the figure of the zombie is symptomatic of the fact that the anthropocentric worldview espoused and reified in Western thought is shattered by forces of environmental decay and the rise of a new 'Eaarth' that no longer reflects in the Edenic 'green' fantasies of Humanism or in the conceit that the world submits to the human-all-too-human standards imposed upon it (McKibben 2011). It is within this ontological theater of war that youth desire is contemporarily 'caught'. In the school, desire is both shaped and invested in the lingering presumption of a standardizable world *for-us*, the reification neoliberal subjectivity and its attendant characteristics of free choice, self-fashioning, and auto-identification. The 'public pedagogy' of zombie fiction and video games overcodes desire similarly by founding the narrative and affective presupposition that human survival and progress is predicated on the subjugation of 'undomesticated' nonhuman life. To rejoin an earlier adumbration, the reification of anthropocentrism and its fiction of human dominion courts an ontological misrecognition that the human insists as a species both distinct and hierarchically differentiable from nonhuman life-forms. This posed, the investment of desire in the image of anthropocentrism is never fully assured, and as with Lizzy Samuals' perverse post-apocalyptic 'flat ontology', there insists alongside the *doxa* of anthropocentrism other potentials for conceptualizing both life and death.

The ontological theater of war palpated in both schooling and zombie fiction has immense stakes for the lives of contemporary youth. For more than any previous generation, it is our youth who will confront the fact that the passive and overt pedagogies of anthropocentrism perpetuated in schooling and the broader public no longer correspond to the face of a changing and 'darkened' planet.<sup>6</sup> The inevitable

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<sup>6</sup>As Jagodzinski (2014) articulates, research emerging from the work of such leading climatologists as James Hansen of the Stockholm Resilience Center have identified that no less than three of nine planetary tipping points have now been eclipsed. These include global warming, transformations of the nitrogen cycle, biodiversity loss, and the radical transgression of the planetary 'carrying capacity' by upwards of 30 %.

confrontation with a post-anthropocene world is figured throughout zombie fiction, which experiments with the fabulation of *becomings* out-of-synch with the orthodox production of the *human*. From the ruination of biological essence, alliance with the dark materiality of the planet, and overturning of transcendent aspiration, the zombie palpates a post-human world that imagines a moment when human life and vitality “will no longer be the fashion”, but rather, apprehended as a prejudice against all that is inhuman, ‘unthinking’, and dead (Cioran 2012, p. 90). There is no doubt that for contemporary youth, the experimental boarder crossings and putrification of normality figured by the zombie have become a fulcrum for challenging the status quo. Today, zombies proliferate in the areas of activism (*Occupy’s Night of the Living Debt*), performance protest (Jillian McDonald’s live performance *Zombies in Condoland*), and LARPING (*Humans vs. Zombies*, *Zombie Manhunt*), where they function to alter orthodox relations to social space through mass ‘occupation’, disrupt identity politics by resisting constituted modes of identification, and shock common sense by forging a confrontation with the disavowed prospect of man’s end. In this vein, the force of ‘zombie pedagogy’ emerges via its counter-actualization of bourgeoisie values and romantic idealism into which many youth continue to be socially inculcated. That is, where youth are continually told to identify themselves according to preconstituted regimes of sexual, gendered, racial, and species identification, the zombie palpates a multiplicity of unthought eco-ontological relations for thinking how a life might go (becoming-animal, becoming-vegetable, becoming-molecular). Where schooling insists upon the adaptation of the body to the routines of the institution, the zombie forges ‘new’ instincts for the occupation and mutation of institutional and social space. Where the ‘happy curriculum’ of schooling promotes the ‘beautiful life’ of bourgeois Humanism, the zombie figures as an anathema that rejoins life to its inescapable material imbrication with death, decay, and putrification. And where the business of schooling continues irrespective of the exploitative and speciesist attitudes it repeats, zombie fiction forces an encounter with both ecological catastrophe and the decaying fiction of man. For contemporary youth, the zombie hence figures as an articulation of desiring-production out-of-step with the prevailing social *doxa* of how life *ought to go*. Yet, the zombie presents youth with more than an opportunity to detect how desire might be differently organized. It palpates an image of life that however horrific plots an escape from the myopia of anthropocentrism and the modellization of life from the vantage of a single species.

## VI

For its confused materiality, vegetative-animal intensities, and complex of alien instincts, the zombie figures as an anathema to orthodox education and threat to the idealized image of human life espoused therein. Where it is not predicated on negation and opposition, youth interest in zombies might be located in the resistance the zombie portends for the conceptualization of life given institutionally. Such resistance is germane to both the ‘permanent revolution’ of youth and wearying

categories of all-too-human social identities as awareness grows for the material complexities and ‘dark’ ecological relations that subtend the human organism. That zombie fiction breaks from the ontological presumptions of the school is significant, for its fabulation of a post-anthropocene reality out-of-synch with the world *as it is for us* detects the failure of schooling to apprehend both the limits of ‘human thought’ and further, the complicity of schooling in the production of speciesist and exploitative attitudes toward nonhuman animals and inhuman life. That is, the messy ecology of zombie life not only diagrams what is unthinkable from the perspective of bounded ‘man’, but the complex, horrific, and ‘dark’ ecology that transcendent ‘man’ must necessarily disavow that its fictions of dominion and control be maintained.

It is between the anthropocentric world of the school and the post-anthropocene ecology of the zombie that contemporary youth are schizophrenically splayed. That the acceleration of environmental tipping points and mutation of planetary ecologies have rendered the perfunctory routines of schooling questionable is today a moot point. Yet, the potential for schooling to be reinvented in a manner capable of attending to the material imbrication of education and ecology remains dramatically limited. Astride the neoliberal mandates of ‘progress’ and ‘innovation’, education remains largely entrenched in the albeit accelerated anthropocentric ideals of dominion and material exploitation. Redoubled in the public pedagogy of popular culture, the threat of the zombie as a symptom of anthropocentric unraveling is reterritorialized in the logic of capitalism, where for example, the zombies of Curry’s (2006) *Fido* are domesticated as a ‘standing labor reserve’ or rather, where the apocalypse translates into market opportunity as illustrated by the mass proliferation of ‘zombie studies’ courses and books throughout North American Universities and Colleges. Rather than another course *on* zombies, what is required today is a pervasive zombie ‘deadagogy’ capable of interrogating not only the construction of the human proper, but its material, speciesist and colonial implications.

The zombie’s connection of ‘human life’ to the inhuman and nonhuman lives that support it continue to be evaded through the popular pedagogical disavowal of animal, vegetative, and microbial ‘companion species’ (Haraway 2007). Herein, the adversarial conceptualization of the zombie disavows an unfathomable world that runs counterpart to the one ‘given’ to human thought. Put differently, the disavowal of the zombie continues to be complicit in the reification of anthropocentric attitudes ignorant to the continued abuse of nonhuman animals, the exploitation of inhuman life, and marginalization of nonhuman intensities (speeds and slowness), scales of existence, and qualities of consciousness.<sup>7</sup> While the zombie undergoes its own orthodox reterritorialization in popular culture, that it continues to figure as a

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<sup>7</sup>Where the highest aspiration of education is to elevate human consciousness – that is to say a consciousness that reflects in the image of a unified self-aware subject – it labors to repeat a discourse that sustains the human as the horizon of *being* while presuming conscientization as a privileged mode of emancipation, hence covering over those varying scales and durations of molecular revolution that are not *of the subject*.

‘dark’ revolutionary force for thinking about nonhuman life is important, for where the zombie remains undomesticated and unrecognizable as human, it potentially functions to dilate the delimited images of ontological becoming proffered institutionally. In this ecological moment, such existential dilation is intimately wed to an ethical reconsideration of both the imbricated fate of human and nonhuman life, and further, the necessity that education become adequate to the disidentification of transcendent man as it stands on the precipice of radical ecological transmutation (MacCormack 2012). If it is true that we are indeed zombies, or rather, that the zombie constitutes an occulted potential of ahuman difference, it remains a compelling concept for the experimental desire of youth, for whom the detection of new modes of existence (*ethikos*) and ecological relations (*ethos*) will constitute *the* significant ethical question of the future – should there be one.

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## Chapter 6

# From Prom Queen to Zombie Barbie: A Tutorial in Make Up, Gender and Living Death

Esther Priyadharshini

*...The zombie ...seems to have evolved into an abject symbol that forces the survivors in post-apocalyptic narratives to confront their own internalized notions of definitions and borders and to realize those notions are as fragile as living tissue and can and will be eventually consumed*

(Strong 2013, p. 4).

This chapter is preoccupied with a set of questions circulating around zombies, femininity and public pedagogy. What can the zombie offer women? How can we read acts of making up as zombies by (predominantly young) women? What meanings arise from zombie enactments that seem to tear down traditional performances of femininity? In relation to the hugely popular YouTube zombie make up tutorials, what is the ‘pedagogy’ at play, i.e. what is being taught/learnt through zombifying a female archetype? And can these tutorials say something to nascent theorisations about ‘public pedagogy’?

Public pedagogy is commonly understood as relating to educational processes that operate outside the spaces of formal, institution-based education. It relates to intentioned and/or serendipitous moments of teaching/learning, including mechanisms and interactions that facilitate individual or societal learning. The outcomes of such occasions may or may not fall into neat political patterns of ‘critical/emanipatory’ or ‘conservative’ education but tend to be more amorphous, making them harder to read. A related challenge is the under-theorisation and overuse of the term ‘public pedagogy’ which points to dominant or traditional understandings of pedagogies, especially those that have developed in institutional contexts of education (typically school based education), overdetermining our ability to ‘see’ how these public pedagogies might work in practice. The worry is that pre-established notions of pedagogy rooted in “existing cultural models and vocabulary of teaching, learning, and curriculum” (Burdick and Sandlin 2010, p. 339) can confine or obscure

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understandings of what may otherwise be on offer. Hence the drive to develop a robust, theoretically informed understanding of public pedagogy is also partly a move to challenge and re-think foundational understandings of more traditional, institution based pedagogy.

Burdick and Sandlin's (2013) review of attempts to develop the idea of public pedagogy points to three strands: humanist, relational and posthumanist understandings. The first strand relates to the most dominant and visible of current understandings of pedagogy, i.e. of educational processes of *transfer* or transmission of 'established learnings and meanings' that rely on the assumption of rational, humanist subjects. The second deals with forms that show a high degree of intentionality by the creator/educator but one where *relational* meanings depend on affect and embodied interactions, and thus one where educational outcomes may be unpredictable. The third strand focuses on *monstrous* or radical encounters that 'rupture certainties' of identity, language, image and even the self of Western theory and practice.

Central to this last strand is the emphasis by authors (Wallin 2008, 2010, 2012; Lewis and Kahn 2010) on the ethics and possibilities of a pedagogy that does not favour the dominance of the 'human' over all else. Elements of popular culture that involve anomalous beings like zombies, faeries, or ghosts in uncanny encounters are therefore useful to these conceptualizations. This seems to have fostered notions of a pedagogy where the traditional laws of "recognition, identification, and belonging (to a particular class, race, gender, species)" (Lewis and Kahn 2010, p. 10) are suspended, in effect disassembling existing conceptualizations and upsetting favoured subject roles for humans. This, the authors contend, ought to allow new ways of imagining an inclusive democratic life and a freedom for all categories or positions. Another equally promising effect is the move away from the already known – the familiar and representable – to the more vulnerable position of seeking and maintaining the form and nature of the unrepresentable (Wallin 2012). Staying with the familiar "representational logic" can restrict new thought possibilities, new 'theorizations of difference', and constrain 'newness' from entering the world. Thus the possibilities of a posthumanist perspective on public pedagogy allow a broader democratic and ethical space where the boundaries between human, animal and material are less precious. This chapter attempts to follow such impulses to make sense of a popular 'zombie make-up tutorial' offered on YouTube.

## Being a Zombie

Zombie enactments are a popular feature of contemporary culture. Traditional Halloween based zombie characterizations, urban zombie walks, political protest marches featuring zombies, zombie cosplay involving favourite film or television zombie characters, zombie themed adventure games that create a survival quest set in abandoned buildings – are some of the avenues through which one can express one's inner zombie. This rise of the zombie motif in popular culture and particularly

in public enactments has been considered in some depth by a range of writers (Strong 2013; do Vale 2010). One compelling explanation is that zombies seem to be the perfect narrative device through which social anxieties can be expressed (Dendle 2007; Stratton 2011; Keebaugh 2013). The value of the zombie in critiquing the present (including oneself and the structures within which one is embedded) and offering radical perspectives on the future adds to its popularity, particularly in protest movements. Time and again, the regenerative potential of this ‘malleable’ (Pulliam 2007) living dead figure – whether as narrative, metaphor or as theatre – is offered as a key explanation for its popularity.

Of course, zombie enactments themselves are subject to the capitalist commodification they may be protesting against. And, most often the consequences of public zombie enactments or indeed the intentions of the zombie-actors are multiple, nebulous, and full of promise that may or may not come to fruition. The flexibility of the zombie motif combined with the diversity in intentionality and outcomes of enactments makes zombie themed events hard to categorise or predict. For instance, while urban zombie walks are said to offer “a harmless release of oppositional energies, it *might* also lead to the production of new structures of value and feeling that could manifest in unexpected and politically regenerative ways” (Orpana 2011, p. 171–172, emphasis added). It seems that further analysis of these politically ambiguous forms of resistance alongside the evident pleasure in playing the zombie is required to make better sense of public zombie enactments. Nevertheless, the persistent allure of this symbol and the ‘affectionate identification’ (do Vale 2010) of so many with it deserve attention in terms of the ‘education’ that such enactments also signal. The pedagogy of such enactments though, will be hard to grasp if approached from traditional understandings of teaching and learning encounters that are predicated on rationalist objectives, outcomes and evaluations.

Perhaps these enactments are at their destabilizing best when they echo a post-humanist pedagogical sensibility, i.e. when they channel their indiscernibility to question taken for granted boundaries and generate spaces/moments that reveal the intersections and interdependencies between previously distinct category constructions. Schneider (2012) supplies a good example when she juxtaposes the zombie protesters of the Occupy Wall Street movement enacting ‘dead inside’ banker-capitalists alongside Ibsen’s play *John Gabriel Borkman* in which the protagonist is a dead (unscrupulous) banker being played live on stage. She questions what is going on when ‘live’ protests are played by the living dead, and ‘dead labor’ plays live on stage? This breakdown of seemingly distinct living and dead categories exemplifies the potential and power of zombie enactments.

Particularly striking amongst the range of enactments are those women who perform the zombie in ways that despoil traditional notions of femininity and humanity. But is the ‘Female Zombie’ something of an oxymoron? Do zombies (in as far as one can generalize about them) “do” gender? Do they possess gendered bodies that can perform femininities and masculinities in recognizable ways? Can they continue to exhibit gendered behaviour from the pre-apocalypse? It seems as if most zombie fiction and film (with the exception of newer romantic novels and movies like *Warm Bodies*) exploit the notion that “[d]iscrete genders are part of what



‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture” (Butler 1990, p. 190). Therefore authors and filmmakers tend to emphasise the zombie’s trickster-like traits by queering the sexed and gendered pre apocalypse body, usually in contrast to the survivors, whose seemingly stable sex and gender boundaries are crashing around them (Murray 2013). It has been noted that in the “world of the post-apocalyptic narrative, women are freer to act tough and be independent because it is evident that the world has been turned topsy-turvy” (Inness 1999, p. 123). Definitions, categories and expectations of human personhood are upset in the zombie even though zombie fiction has been found to both suggest alternative constructions of gender and sexuality, as well as reinscribe traditional patriarchal and heteronormative binaries (Murray 2013).

But what of women in ‘real’ life who choose to enact the zombie from an unambiguously feminine role? Or to pose the question in another way, what is going on when women choose to ‘zombify’ archetypal femininity? What sorts of identities are being chosen for zombification by different women and what is the effect? Zombification in these instances invariably involves despoiling an archetype of classic or hyper femininity. The process of zombification seems to invoke the feminine archetype to perfection before tearing it down. These archetypes are predominantly the beauty queen/prom queen, the cheerleader, the bride, the housewife, the (nubile) school girl, the (sexy) nurse, and variations of the Barbie personas which offers several permutations like the Prom Queen Barbie or Nurse Barbie for zombification. The costume choice for female zombies around Halloween predominantly revolve around these archetypes (see amazon.com for zombie costumes for women).<sup>1</sup> The popularity of female archetypes for zombification suggests a degree of consciousness and an agency in choice, and highlight the context of a culture of hyper femininity. What these sorts of enactments – the despoiling of the hyperfeminine – signify, are a potentially rich source of theorization for educators.

## **YouTube Make Up Tutorials**

Set within the same range of cultural and aesthetic expression are the zombie make up tutorials on YouTube. They raise questions about the meanings of the double labour of these tutorials – the labour of ‘doing makeup’ to transform the archetypal hyper feminine into the grotesque zombie as well as the labour of ‘tutoring’. What is the tutoring about? Is it simply what meets the eye – a lesson in make up skills, or something more? What are the possible ‘lessons’ of tutorials that go to great lengths to build up manifestations of hyper femininity and then trash and de-humanize it?

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<sup>1</sup>It would be interesting to examine if the choice of character for male zombies (usually a policeman, office worker, convict, priest or rock star) also speaks about masculinities in comparable ways.

The Prom Queen Barbie Zombie makeup tutorial by Michelle Phan makes an intriguing case through which these questions can be explored. Phan is a 27 year old American internet sensation, a makeup artist with close to 7 million subscribers on YouTube. Her slick make up videos, each feature a mini story, for example her anti-Valentine's day 'being a heartbreaker' make up tutorial for single women, a range of Halloween looks, the Gothic Lolita look, anime looks, bad girl looks, Tim Burton looks, celebrity looks (Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift), and most popular of all, the Barbie transformation tutorial. They all feature Phan applying make up to herself with detailed, step-by-step instructions, explaining the rationale behind certain techniques or colours, the right make up products, and a running commentary on how the look can be achieved or modified to suit personal facial characteristics, all delivered in her girl-next-door voice over. This is almost always accompanied by cleverly chosen sound tracks that reinforce each video's unique message and 'feel'.

Elsewhere, Phan's assertion that "*Makeup IS art—the only difference is it's on a moving canvas that constantly changes throughout the day,*" (<http://michellephan.com/about-me/>) and her background in the art of portrait painting help understand how these particular skills may have been acquired. Here is a master technician, skilled at both metamorphosis through make up, as well as mass communication. Her entrepreneurial skills are evident in her numerous sponsorship deals from cosmetics brands, make up lines (IQUU and em Cosmetics), personal website, a popular blog spot, her YouTube multichannel network, cleverly named FAWN (For All Women Network) and spots in big brand commercials. Most of her YouTube work seems to arise in response to her largely female fans' questions. She has said, "*Without my followers, I would be working in a void – like a teacher in an empty classroom. Their enthusiasm gives me the motivation and inspiration to educate and share every day.*" (<http://michellephan.com/about-me/>). It seems that her skills, reach and huge audience (she is believed to be the second most subscribed female Youtuber) make her a Youtube 'tutor' par excellence.

Discussions about the status and function of YouTube and particularly beauty bloggers on YouTube tend to focus on their non-critical relationship to the capitalistic framework with in which they are embedded, and to which they owe their success. Chang (2014) analyses the presence of Asian American female beauty bloggers like Phan and the ways the sphere constructs specific racial and gender performances for the beauty community that seeks to contain radical difference. It is true that the how-to videos largely promote and privilege "specific body types, consumeristic behaviors, and gender and racial performances" (2014, p. 7). Other educationalists have critiqued the mixed nature of YouTube outputs that can position them "either a reservoir of genuine enlightenment, or another playpen in the capitalist fun house" (Kellner and Kim 2010, p. 30). Notwithstanding the larger capitalist, conservative framework of YouTube, it seems that the Zombie Barbie make up tutorial produces meanings and emotions that escape these confines to speak in a critical voice to young women growing up in a culture of hyperfemininity.

## Making Up as Prom Queen Barbie

The particular tutorial under consideration is Phan's Halloween special from 2012, 'The Prom Queen Barbie' tutorial, a popular video watched over 13 million times by October 2014 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHkJpjjPIvM>). This was not her first attempt at tutoring viewers in achieving a Barbie Doll look. Interestingly, her earlier offering in 2009 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4-GRH2nDvw>) was also a Halloween tutorial even if there was no zombie transformation of Barbie at the end. Her comment that Barbie's look *IS* 'creepy', creepy enough to satisfy Halloween standards of monstrosity are telling and are echoed 3 years later in the 2012 tutorial. The video lasts just under 11 min and takes the viewer through detailed attention to eye, skin, and hair make up, finishing with accessories. I describe key elements of the tutorial below, paying attention to the variety of products required, the skill/knowledge required to use them to create the desired look, the knowing soundtrack and the ironic sound bites from Phan herself, before considering the nature of the 'zombie pedagogy' embedded in the tutorial.

The video begins with a face shot of the perfectly made-up, pouting, Prom Queen Barbie doing a robotic dolly wave to viewers, to the sound track of 'Prima Donna'. In the next few seconds, the zombie version of the barely recognizable Prom Queen Barbie fills the screen to a horror sound track. This cuts back to Prom Queen Barbie with Phan's voice-over claiming, "*I don't know which one's scarier. Regardless, I'm going to show you how to recreate both looks*". Phan's witty sound bites throughout the video tutorial openly refer to the 'scariness' and excessive femininity that a true Barbie look imparts, even while she labours to meticulously recreate it.

Step 1 requires hair restrainers that keep hair out of the face with Phan's early warning, "*because we're gonna be beatin' your mug*". The focus moves to the eyes, starting with a white cream base to create the perfectly blank canvas for Barbie's complex eye make up. White powder is used to set the cream so that it does not smudge. Then the layers of colours are applied – first 'hot pink' eye shadow, then 'true blue' colour is spread with mathematical precision to the 'outer third' of the eyes. Then the instruction to use a window-wiper motion to "blend away" the edges of the colour bands. Phan then advises viewers to "*just keep applying the colours – until you feel like a drag queen. Just kidding*". Pink is added to the centre of the eyelids, to make eyes look more "animated". The video then demonstrates the cues that particular colours offer: "*when you are going for a Barbie look, you can never go wrong with white, hot pink and blue. It's a fool-proof colour combination for that Barbie look*". While white liner at the water line helps create "*wide, dolly-looking eyes*", matt black liquid liner is applied to the outer edges of the eyes. Key tips in creating the Barbie look are offered throughout, as in the injunction to avoid thick lines which might cover up the pink.

After black pencil liner is used to give the appearance of fuller lashes, an eye lash curler is deployed to '*Barbie them up*'. Generous coats of volumising mascara are applied to the lashes before the application of "*the most ridiculous looking flirty fake lashes you can find. The more ridiculous-looking, the better. And if you really*

want the full Barbie effect, show your bottom lashes some love and add your push-up bra for the lashes here.” At this point in the video, the eyes are finally made up to Barbie standards. And even though slickly edited, the video is just into the first two and a half minutes.

Throughout, the video is accompanied by a sound track that fades to accommodate Phan’s voice over and then rises to fill in the silences. The snatches of the song (by Marina and the Diamonds) emphasise Prom Queen Barbie’s Prima Donna “attitude” and her identity as a voracious consumer/possessor of material, emotions and energy, readily acknowledging the by now well established link between Barbie, ‘the bitch who has it all’, and insatiable consumption (Steinberg 2011).

...I get what I want cause I ask for it,  
Not that I am really deserving of it...  
I know I’ve got a big ego,  
I really don’t know why it’s such a big deal, though...

...I can’t help that I need it all  
The Prima Donna life, the rise and fall  
You say that I’m kinda difficult  
But it’s always someone else’s fault  
Got you wrapped around my finger, babe  
You can count on me to misbehave...

The allure of the resistant, misbehaving female subject with an attendant sense of power is evident. Barbie’s appetite for capitalist consumption is signaled in this instance as part of a persona that knowingly misbehaves from a position of power, something that doll play may not always signal. All together, the mood evoked is upbeat, akin to that of a pre-party preparation in a young woman’s bedroom, capturing the excitement, anticipation and exhilaration of an imminent (girl’s) night out.

From the eyes, the tutorial moves on to making up the “*perfect plastic-looking skin – which means you have to conceal dark circles, blemishes, broken vessels, red nose, wrinkles. If it’s not on Barbie’s face, erase it.*” There is no effort to conceal the hard work that must go into achieving the slow and painstaking erasure of any human-ness to complete the plastic doll look. After concealing, there’s contouring, to create the illusion of a different facial skeletal shape, getting as close as possible to Caucasian Barbie’s profile. Phan’s tutorial instructs users to choose a colour that is a few shades lighter than their skin colour to highlight the high points of their face – the bridge of the nose and cheek bones. More blending ensues before the use of powder on a brush to set the make-up so it does not smudge. The key tip here is to keep “*your face as matt as possible*”.

Then the attention moves on to Barbie’s hair. Phan covers her own jet black hair with a hair net and then places a “*plastic fantastic platinum blonde*” wig over it with the advise that “*If you want to look more like a doll, try and find a wig with bangs*”. Then what appears to be the first product placement of the video is introduced – “*Coastal Sense’s Blush Palette’s pinkest pink is the blush to add to your cheeks. The cheeks must look like they are blushing*”. Permanently. Then comes another layer of contouring: “*Using a colour that is 3 shades darker than your skin colour, add dimension to your face*”. By now, it is inescapable that what is

being accomplished is a truly startling transformation that can render any kind of human face, non-human.

Then another product placement for lip gloss is followed by the instruction “*and of course, this has to be pink*”. Application of this is “*to make sure that your lips are perfectly sculpted in. If you have full lips like myself, try and size them down a bit as this will make your eyes appear larger and more Barbie like*”. Then the contact lenses in blue are inserted, followed by the instruction to “bling it up with fake diamonds and jewels”. Two more touches complete the bonafide Prom Queen Barbie look – the placement of the victorious Prom Queen’s tiara and finally, ‘nose enhancers’. Phan claims that nose enhancers are an old fashioned trick – once inserted into nostrils they are supposed to push out her Asian nose, bringing her that bit closer to the goal of Barbie’s perfect profile.

This exhaustively detailed, witty and ironic tutorial lays bare the amount of labour required to achieve ‘Look 1’ – the Barbie look. What Phan also demonstrates is the effort that needs to sustain the doing of gender, in this case, that of hyper feminine Barbie. The question of what is being demonstrated in the doing of such unreal, excessive femininity is worthy of further exploration. The impeccable doll that is Barbie is such a hard look to attain that there is something eerie even uncanny, in its layered perfection. Its glamorous, apparently shallow and gloriously unrestrained, over-the-top doll-ness invokes camp. Lord’s (1994) analysis of Barbie hits the mark: “Barbie... may be, for some gay arbiters, the apotheosis of female beauty. The doll is built like a transvestite” (p.213). When Phan talks of applying colours on to the face ‘until you look like a drag queen’, she is picking up on the same theme. The efforts to display femininity – like the ‘push up bra’ effect for the lower lids, the wide dolly looking eyes, plastic skin, permanent blush, plastic fantastic platinum blonde wig with bangs, all combine to push the ‘feminine’ to such extremes that they become caricatures that must float away from any ‘real’ or ‘original’. And it seems that this departure from the mundane or real, is precisely what may be alluring about over-the-top doll play. It needs to be performed, and performed outrageously, in an alien manner, rather than appear as a facsimile of something already in existence.

This thesis that the otherworldliness of Barbie in particular and dolls in general ‘possess an allure’ (Kotani and LaMarre 2007, p. 56) is also exemplified by Phan’s choice of soundtrack, Prima Donna, which paints a portrait of an unapologetic ‘bad girl’. Kotani and LaMarre are on to something when they say that “there is a “certain something” of femininity that can be a source of satisfaction, if only in the form of game, as play” (p 56.). They go on to analyse the use of shojo (Japanese ‘girl’ cosplay) as a form of “regeneration” for girls in a culture excessively determined by patriarchy. Taking the rest of Phan’s statements about make up and its place in the world (<http://michellephan.com/about-me/>) into consideration, it seems that making up oneself into different personas is not only a route to frivolous fun and games – while it is essential that there is plenty of that – but also to an experimentation with self-presentation, and other worldly positionings, and different personas. This is at some distance to a critical reading of such play as ultimately subservient to patriarchal, capitalist culture.

## Decomposing Barbie

Phan's video though, does not end with the monstrous plastic fantastic Barbie but goes on to pile further layers of excess by shifting viewers from Barbie's otherworldly femininity to the excess of an otherworldly destruction of femininity through the creation of Zombie Barbie. If Barbie cosplay could be argued to be symptomatic of some sort of regeneration (trite or otherwise) in a culture linked to patriarchy, what might Zombie Barbie offer?

First a description of how 'Look 2', the Zombie Barbie look is created. Part 2 of the tutorial begins with shots of Zombie Barbie to an eerie sound track. In the same upbeat, cheery tones used for part 1, Phan continues, advising viewers that "*If you want to look like the perfect Zombie Barbie, then liquid latex, tissue paper and fake blood will be your best friends*". The tutorial then instructs viewers on how to prepare the tissue paper, peeling off its separate layers down to the thinnest possible layer; how to make sure the paper is ripped into long strips with rough and jagged edges "*because this is going to help simulate ripped flesh*"; how to use a sponge and liquid latex to create a "*make believe wound area*", on which very quickly, the first layer of tissue paper is applied; then dabbed down with the sponge and more liquid latex. The tutorial continues with instructions on how to apply repeatedly, 3–4 layers of tissue paper.

Phan then proceeds to make up another wound on her neck, and after waiting for the liquid latex to dry, instructs viewers on how to paint foundation liquid over it to make it blend with the skin: "*Don't apply too much otherwise it will look a little too fake*". By now, to the learner/viewer who is up close in the minutiae of zombie make up, notions of what is or isn't real or fake are pretty hard to distinguish, and Phan's reassuring advice is to, "*just add a little foundation colour so it's not too white looking. But don't worry because we are going to cover it up with blood anyways*".

While waiting for everything to dry, the paradoxical process of "*decomposing yourself with make up*" begins. Darkening and blackening the eyes contribute the first "creepy factor". Phan then proceeds to cut open the by now dry latex layers while warning viewers to "*Be VERY, very careful. Use tweezers instead of scissors for this if you are really afraid of cutting yourself*". She wields the scissors expertly though, to cut open the layers claiming, "*Perfect. Now I have ripped flesh!*" Then comes the addition of "*gore*" to this layer by adding a mix of non-Barbie colours: brown, red, black and purple: "*Wherever the wound is deepest, should have the darkest colours*".

Then Phan makes an insightful comment into the business of using make up to achieve contrasting looks: "*All right guys, this is one of the few make up tutorials where I'm telling you it's okay to make yourself look ugly. Since Barbie is perfect looking, it's hil-ar-i-ous to make it look like she is rotting away. And, if you're bad at make up, no worries. Zombie make up is very forgiving. This is the only time I'm advocating that it's okay to have raccoon eyes.*" Here she exposes the allure of playing Zombie Barbie, which is to turn the horrific plastic fantastic-ness of hyper-feminine Barbie into a different kind of horror. The 'hilarity' stems from poking fun

at the fake woman that is Barbie, an ideal that can be quite literally made-up and undone by any woman with make up skills learnt from the tutorial. In the doing of this, Barbie with her fake smooth skin and non-human hues of pinks and blues and perma-blushes seems to turn 'more human' with decomposing tissue and dripping blood. Hyper-femininity offers little in the zombie apocalypse with its crumbling social norms, but there is certainly something that demonstrates a closeness to a generic human-kind that perfect Barbie could not offer. The zombie straddling life and death seems to breathe both life and death into the plastic non-human that is Barbie. In doing so, grotesquely gendered Barbie also gives way to a genderless specimen. She turns into 'It' – an object creature, neither human nor plastic, neither man nor woman and neither dead nor alive. The zombification process appears to query the boundaries and foundational categories of life itself.

Achieving look two is as laborious a process as achieving look one but it feels qualitatively different and even, 'liberatory'. The exhilaration, the pleasure and politics of de-spoiling femininity seem to reach a crescendo in a frenetic finish to the tutorial:

Keep adding on the black and brown to the blood to make it look like it's oxidized, disgusting and old. You want to make more wounds by tearing your latex flesh. ...And it's even more fun when you're adding the good stuff to the wound area. Remember guys, use a combination of black, brown, red and purple. And if you want to look even more disgusting, add green. Alright, if you really wanna look like you are dead, add dead white contacts. Wow. I look like a hot mess. ... If you want to take it up a notch, start painting veins on your neck. The veinier, the better. ...This is the BEST part – adding gore and blood. This right here is thick blood and I'm adding it to my wounds. Notice how it sticks on better? Like it has bits of muscle and adipose tissue sticking out? Eeewww... Honestly, it looks like barbecue sauce. The juicier you make your wounds, the better. If you happen to have left over juicy blood, add this to your hair. And for the finishing touch, drum roll, drum roll, mmm... blood.... A glass a day, keeps the doctor away (pretends to drink a bottle labelled 'vampire blood'). ...Add this fake red blood on top of your wounds. Don't be shy with this stuff guys, because you get to do this once a year. And don't feel bad if you think this looks ugly. People will remember you over all the girls dressed in skimpy Halloween costumes. Why? Because you're gonna scare the crap out of them.

The faster pace and repeated references to veins, adipose tissue, muscle, blood, torn skin, not to mention the pretend act of drinking blood, all combine to give the feeling of a tutorial that has slipped out of control and a world slightly out of kilter. But there is also reference to the ultimate objective of dressing up as Zombie Barbie for Halloween, i.e. Phan emphasizes that the aim is to be explicitly 'memorable', to outdo the mundane-feminine 'skimpy' Halloween costume that could be far easier to accomplish. So the labour of making oneself as Barbie or decomposing into the zombie version has a tangible outcome, which is also a way of standing out against the backdrop of a restrictive hyper-feminine culture. In fact, we are reminded that the labour entailed by Zombie Barbie cannot simply end with the Halloween outing, as Phan finally adds, "*Good luck showering because your bathtub is gonna look like a crime scene*".

The despoiling of the feminine achieved through zombie make up seems to echo the exhilaration of 'trash the dress' (TTD) events at which brides (sometimes with their grooms) spoil the perfection of their pristine wedding clothes and capture it

through video and photography sessions that are seen as the alternative to their more traditional wedding day performance. Here, the aim is for photographers to document married women in the post-wedding TTD session, wearing their once white, now decrepit wedding dress and placed in incongruous spaces like swampy fields, muddy rivers, or decaying, gothic buildings. These sessions position themselves as the alternative, even the antidote to traditional notions of wedding culture and normative behavior by bride and groom, who are required to be photographed in demure, pristine and predictable postures. In overturning the norms of looking and being looked at, TTD events, like zombie transformations, contrast the traditional expectations of women.

Analysing the TTD photographs, Michele White notes how,

Disgusting fluids and filthy bodies, which women incorporate by presenting as zombies or moving through mud, may encourage viewers to look briefly, but they are difficult to gaze at. These images shift viewers from looking to a kind of tactile feeling, including imagining how emotionally painful it is to get dresses dirty; thinking about open and broken bodies; and remembering the sticky, erotic, and disturbing aspects of being wet and filthy (2011, p. 645).

White observes that these more “dissonant” wedding images “begin to undermine cultural assertions of dyadic gender, heteronormativity, whiteness, cleanliness, and bodily coherence” (ibid). At the same time, White (2012) also notes that photographers still manage and promote the ‘oppositional functions’ of TTD events to preserve their creative and cultural cache. As with make-up tutorials on YouTube, these femininity deforming events nevertheless offer women a space of resistance to the dominant patriarchal-capitalist background in which they function.

## A Zombie Pedagogy

Mieke Bal’s book *Double Exposures* (1996) begins with an explanation of the classical Greek word “*apo-deik-numai*” – untranslatable into English, and best understood as meaning exposition, exposé and exposure *as well as* the ways in which they are connected. Bal explains the connections thus:

...Something is made public in exposition, and that event involves bringing out into the public domain the deepest held views and beliefs of a subject. Exposition is always also an argument. Therefore, in publicizing these views the subject objectifies, exposes himself as much as the object; this makes the exposition an exposure of the self. Such exposure is an act of producing meaning, a performance. (Bal 1996, p. 2)

This triumvirate of exposition, exposé and exposure offers a way of understanding how the Prom Queen Zombie Barbie YouTube tutorial may be understood as a monstrous public pedagogy.

This tutorial then can be read as not just about teaching/learning about applying make up for Halloween night. The act of applying makeup becomes a tool for making up different selves. The demonstration of this is an exposition, an argument,



and, a very visible exposure of multiple, even incoherent wishes and desires. Several views, beliefs and emotions form part of this exposition, interrupting and contradicting each other. The irony of the ‘Barbie is creepy’ message overlaid on a laborious attempt at recreating oneself as Barbie is unmistakable and makes it harder to offer a definitive verdict on either the tutor’s or viewers’ intentions or politics. As feminist scholars have pointed out, irony is a “versatile device which allows a speaker to articulate certain views whilst disclaiming responsibility for, or ownership of, them” (Benwell 2007, p. 540). It renders actions/words slippery and thus does not automatically signal anything specific. However, while the tutorial involves a plethora of cosmetic products usually known for embedding users in the hyper-feminine, consumerist culture, the demonstration does so in ways and forms that mock this very culture.

Because the tutorial is replete with contradictions and ironies, it is impossible to assign a single or predominant value to the tutor’s intentions or identify an audience’s learning with any certainty. The organization of traditional pedagogy would find such messiness, unknowability and incoherence impossible to accommodate, even irresponsible. But as this exposition suggests, this undecidability need not be a loss to participants in this pedagogical space. As Moraru notes about the zombie, “...the thing’s thingness itself, its muteness or incoherent mumbling, pinpoints with unmatched eloquence the incoherence of our wishes and justifications” (2012, p. 121).

Thus the act of transforming oneself into the monstrous is also an act of exposing oneself. Both for the tutor and the women who chose to be zombies (if only for a night) the combination of cosplay and make up helps imagine and enact alternative selves that transcend binaries of male-female, human-doll, zombie-non-zombie. The meaning of such play is multiple and ultimately “emphasizes that the self not only narrates fiction but is partly fictional as well. It is through interaction with stories that we can imagine and perform ourselves” (Lamerichs 2011). This notion that the fractured fictional may yet help salvage the ‘actual’ may be a strange one but by querying the insistence on coherent, unified selves, and the attendant demand for clarity of message as the route to illumination in pedagogical encounters, the zombie Barbie tutorial points to the possibilities of the eloquence of mumbling incoherence.

While YouTube tutorials may appear to be politically ambiguous (both conservative and radical at the same time) and pedagogically contradictory (caught in the cycle of consumption while making a point against it) when viewed from the standpoint of traditional, institutionalised notions of pedagogy, they nevertheless offer an exposé of hyper-feminine culture. This exposé is also an exposition of the resistance that doll play in the form of excessive, plastic fantastic Barbie offers. Zombie Barbie adds another layer of resistance by breathing ‘life’ into Prom Queen Barbie with its emphasis on rotting flesh, blood, adipose tissue and veins. In doing so, this zombie pedagogy also reveals the inevitable intersections between human and non-human, dead and living, woman and doll, self and other.

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# Chapter 7

## Pedagogy and the Zombie Mythos: Lessons from Apocalyptic Enactments

Phil Smith

### Introduction: The Pedagogical Intention

Since 2005, while teaching undergraduate Theatre and Performance students, I have regularly been using a ‘tactic’ that draws upon the ‘living dead’ mythos. It has been deployed on modules within Theatre and Performance degree courses, including the Performance, Space and Environments module at Plymouth University (UK) and the Site, Landscape and Performance (later Site Projects) module at the former Dartington College of Arts (UK). In these modules, first year students are introduced to the practices of site-specific performance and encouraged to expand their ideas about what a performance space might be.

The outcomes intended by the deployment of a zombie teaching ‘tactic’ are manifold: to challenge students’ ideas about how uninteresting everyday space is; to sensitize students to the performance of everyday life; to illuminate the spaces of the city as potential stages for performances; to encourage use of narratives of popular culture as lenses for a socially critical ‘looking’; to introduce non-conventional walking practices; and to test out the adopting of personae in a post-dramatic manner allowing students to re-imagine themselves in a wilder, less conventional mode without endangering themselves or others.

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## The Tactic

The preparatory instructions for the zombie exercise are simple. Students are asked to walk for a while (between half an hour and two hours), individually and separately, usually in an urban terrain, while adopting the perspective of a particular persona; they are asked not to act out the part of that persona, but to try to experience the environments around them through the fictional senses and associations of their given role. The students are asked to avoid encounters with others during the exercise.

When this ‘tactic’ is used during classes I usually stand by the door of the classroom and whisper the description of a persona in the ear of each student as they leave; some are given roles such as ‘fox’ or ‘ghost’, but mostly I ask the students to imagine that they are “the last human survivor of a zombie apocalypse”.

While my subjective memory of students’ responses is a very positive one – much general enthusiasm (“cool!” and so on) peppered with an occasional “I never experienced things so intensely” and “I saw the city completely differently” – I had not attempted to systematically record these responses or precisely assess the effects of the task. I had merely noted its worth as a stimulus and effective introduction to exploring with a hyper-sensitivity to the narratives and textures of built environments and this had encouraged me to repeatedly deploy it.

These impressions were reinforced early on in the use of the ‘tactic’ when my colleague in Wrights & Sites (a collective of site-based performance artists), Cathy Turner, who had used a variation of the tactic with students, remarked in a 2006 email that one of her students “had a great time pretending that people were zombies and commented that she’d thought it would just ‘feel silly’ but it really made her look at everything in a different way” (email, 10.2.2006 Sent 13:57 RE: Proofing Catherine.Turner@winchester.ac.uk). However, my doctoral research, conducted some time after my first use of the zombie tactic, had taught me that subjective readings of the reception of performances and exercises are often at surprising variance to the results of more systematic monitoring. Therefore, in 2014 I set out to make a short study of my students’ responses to the zombie task.

In early 2014 I set a class of 20 first year undergraduate Plymouth University Theatre and Performance students the ‘walking in personae’ task, with just over half assigned the role of survivor in a zombie apocalypse. I asked them to help me with this research by writing for me a reflective page or two on their experiences. I received ten of these texts based on students’ walking in a ‘survivor’ persona.

Shortly after collecting the reflections of my students, I used my presence as ‘Mytho Geography’ on the Facebook social media site to invite ‘friends’ to undertake the same task and to send me reflections on their experiences. In this case I only offered the survivor persona. I received ten written responses and one by sound file of a reflective recording made during the exercise itself. My intention was to compare the responses of these ‘friends’ with those of the students; the former group consisting of older individuals with some (sometimes considerable) familiarity with site-based and walking arts, the latter coming to these practices for the first time.

Those who participate in the initiatives and discussions provoked through the Mytho Geography Facebook presence have an interest in practices such as urban exploration, site-based performance, psychogeographical ‘drifts’ and dérives, and walking arts. Although I have not met all the actively engaged Facebook ‘friends’ (numbering in their hundreds from a ‘friends’ list of over 3,000), I have met many and am in regular online dialogue with many more. From these meetings and exchanges I can confidently assess the vast majority of these ‘friends’ as much older than my students. Some postgraduates do join as ‘friends’ but very few undergraduates. Many ‘friends’ are senior academics, many are established figures in the fields of live art and walking arts. Their involvement in these fields is often a deep and longstanding one. In asking volunteers from this group to test out the tactic, I was motivated by a curiosity about what, if any, differences would emerge in the responses of a set of experienced self-selecting individuals on the one hand and a group of students, set a class task and approaching a novel activity within a module based on unfamiliar practices, on the other.

My hope was that by comparing the reflections of the two groups, alongside an analysis of individual reflections from both sets, some variegated patterns of affect, association, performance, perception or critical seeing might emerge from which some, at least provisional, conclusions might be drawn.

## The Question of a Commonly Understood Mythos

One, perhaps remarkable reflection of my own concerning the use of this zombie tactic over the years is that I have no recollection of any student ever asking me to explain or clarify it. Students have sought clarification on how to walk as “someone underwater” or as “a recent arrival in heaven or hell, you choose”, but never, to my recall, have they queried or asked for a further explanation of the zombie task. Generally, their faces light up in recognition and they stride away in excitement, occasionally in apparent trepidation, but in all cases there is no hesitation. It would appear that there is an agreed and common understanding of “zombie apocalypse” into which they can instantaneously tap.

Yet, is there a common zombie narrative or ambience? Evidence against there being such things seems to lie in the radically and observably uneven transformations of the ‘zombie’ over the years. In movies alone the zombie has changed often; George Romero’s groundbreaking and paradigmatic cannibal zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), modelled on the lumbering vampires of Ubaldo Ragona and Sydney Salkow’s *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), were preceded by a zombie largely drawn from colonialist narratives of Caribbean voodoo and slavery with a brief interlude for Cold War-inspired radiation zombies in the 1950s.

While Romero’s 1968 film seemed to establish a powerful model monster, since then there have been numerous and profound variations on his living dead figure, including high-energy running zombies (usually dated to Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* [2002] but actually prominent in the 1985 movie *The Return of the Living*

*Dead* directed by Dan O'Bannon), intelligent zombies, perhaps beginning with the hulking soldier 'Bub' in *Day of the Dead* (Romero, 1985), and increasingly 'human' and identifiable-with zombies (such as those suffering Partial Death Syndrome in the recent BBC TV series *In The Flesh* [2013 onwards]), zombies that "are not the dead risen... they are simply the infected living" (Williams 2011: 141).

Kyle William Bishop has attempted, in a recent overview of American movie zombies, to identify characteristic 'eras' of post-1968 zombie movie production; with the Developmental zombie (early and tentative responses to Romero) peaking in the early 1970s, the Classical zombie in the early 1980s (typified by Lucio Fulci's piggy-backing on Romero's 1978 *Dawn of the Dead*), the Parodic around 1990 (begun by *The Return of the Living Dead* and its sequels) and the Renaissance zombie (including *Shaun of the Dead* [Edgar Wright, 2004] and three new movies by Romero peaking in the first decade of the new millennium (Bishop 2010: 12–8). However, within and across these categories of change the anomalies run so thickly as to challenge their meaningfulness. How exactly does one categorise the Knights Templar zombies of Amando de Ossorio's *Tombs of the Blind Dead* (1971), the cannibalistic-supermarket-shopper-zombies in Willard Huyck's eccentric *Messiah of Evil* (1973) (predating Romero's supposedly paradigmatic mall shoppers by five years), the toxic 'zombies' (the director refutes this term) of *Nightmare City* (Umberto Lenzi, 1980) or the zombifying linguistic infections at work across the radio waves in *Pontypool* (Bruce McDonald, 2009).

This picture of a fragmenting mythos becomes pixelated when we consider the exposure my students may have had to zombie figures and scenarios in other forms: mash-up literature, gaming, flash mobs and 'zombie walk' parades, graphic novels, animations, allusions in popular music and design, various kinds of merchandising, and so on. Yet, despite this explosive variegation, the students seem consistently confident about understanding what is referenced from a few words about a "zombie apocalypse".

Perhaps some explanation lies in the sub-genre's resistance to precise categorisation. Zombie-horror has long exhibited tendencies towards purloining and interweaving, reflexivity and self-referencing. Unremarked features of one film later surface as the primary qualities of another. Evan Calder Williams has described how these qualities are present from the beginning of the modern movie zombie, how Romero "establishes the rules of the genre.... [while] already screwing around with those very rules.... [the movie] "misreads" source material that was never there" (Williams 2011: 76).

Many contemporary makers of zombie films began as fans of the sub-genre, their uneven efforts pioneered by J. R. Bookwalter (*The Dead Next Door*, 1989) and apotheosised in the homage to Romero that is *Shaun of the Dead*. Such is the intensity of the interweaving and sharing of sources by these makers (with a comic formulation in pseudo-handbooks such as Max Brooks's *The Zombie Survival Guide* [2004]) that, particularly under conditions of the acceleration of the exchange of images and commodities in a globalized economy, in some sense, every manifestation of the zombie mythos now contains an essence of its other parts. So, while my students (and indeed, Facebook 'friends') are unlikely to have seen more than a few

of the movies cited here, where they have encountered the mythos it is likely to have taken a coherent, interwoven and multiply inflected form.

Also on the side of the argument for a cogent, common mythos is the impression that not only is there some abiding quality in the post-Romero zombie that retains the important part of its essence, however multitudinous the variations upon it, but that it is its very instability and uneasy fundamentality that are crucial to its resilience and flexibility as a common mythos. The modern 1968 zombie has an explicitly destructive, subversive and paradoxical foundation, articulated by George Romero when describing how during the making of *Night of the Living Dead* the crew “talked a lot about the themes that were in the film, the disintegration of the family unit, the idea of revolution and that stuff” (quoted in Hervey 2008: 26). Since then many critics and theorists have drawn attention to the resonance and convenience of the zombie as a metaphor for ‘dead labour’, exploitation, alienation, social breakdown and excessive consumerism.

It was, thus, that when I came to address a highly variegated collection of 21 accounts of zombie exercise experiences by students and Facebook ‘friends’, I did so able to draw upon a complex and multiplicitous mythos, only a part of which I expected my respondents to reference or access, and yet some part of which I suspected I might find resonant in each report.

## **The Reflections of the Students: Disruption, Embodiment and Nascent Critical Looking**

Reading and analysing the two sets of reflections of students and FB walkers, I detected recurrent and divergent themes, both across the two groups and differentiated by them. Among the students’ accounts (designated by letters [A–J]) recurrent themes included the disrupting of their usual routes or ways of journeying, a sense of heightened and sometimes performance-like embodiment (presumably informed by their theatre studies) including particular attention to listening, transformation of their experience of everyday space, and a developing critical view of that space through the pessimistic gaze of the zombie narrative.

The various disruptions to usual routes or ways of journeying included changes of trajectory: “I crossed the road three times unnecessarily” (H), “I crossed the road 6 times on one street.... took back streets” (D), “reluctantly moved away from the area I knew and headed toward an area I was unfamiliar with” (H).

There were also breaks from usual behaviour in relation to other pedestrians: “began to move away from people” (D), “found myself always steering clear of the people passing” (A). One student reflected on a disruption of habitual destination-orientated walking: “my walking was beginning to feel aimless” (H). The everyday traversal of familiar urban space was made problematic. Passersby might still be ignored, but now by conscious choice: “most definitely avoiding eye contact” (A).



The students were conscious of playing an embodied role. One “made sure I sped up” (H), while another “seemed to slow my movement” (C), yet another was repeatedly “looking behind me” (D). A number reported a heightened, and embodied, emotional response to the task: “I felt an overwhelming sense of hunger” (H), “hunger, thrust and mystery” (I), “makes me feel sick” (B), “[I]mpatience and aggravation resonated throughout my body. I fidgeted” (H), “a deep sense of sadness feels (sic) my body” (B). Physical experiences can be intense: “my heart beating... bum...bum...bum. I start to run faster and faster... the blood rushing to my head” (B). Along with an emphasis on seeing familiar spaces differently, hearing (real and imagined) is intensely engaged: “I passed an eerily silent primary school” (H), “[T]he caw of a small group of seagulls above my head started to sound more like a cry for help” (H), “my footsteps echo” (E), “my ears filled with dead murmurs and clumsy footsteps” (C), “I could hear the occasion (sic) groan” (A).

This heightened awareness extended to perception of the environment. Familiar urban spaces were seen in transformed ways: “The spaces performed for me” (I). In some cases fictional layers were laid across spaces that took on a charged quality, including a participant’s flat that at first felt “safe. However, if the affected caught on, I’d be trapped” (H), a cafe where “a milk spillage... reminds me of someone being ripped apart in front of me” (F) and, most commonly, shops which became places to “raid” (D), where a participant was ‘watched’ from within “the darkness of the broken down shops” (E) and that were changed from “comfortable and safe” places to ones that were “run down, with smashed glass all over the floors” (B).

It is perhaps worth noting that the students were participating mostly in the retail orientated centre of a city that has suffered from the economic fallout of the global financial crash of 2007–8. Many shops remain empty and, while not derelict, many, lacking any immediate prospect of reopening, are in disrepair. What the students describe is a largely fictionalised perception of this city centre, but not without grounding in reality; while the city’s streets are not “filled with blood stains” (B), in Plymouth’s centre it is far from unknown, particularly after the weekend, to find its pavements stained with drops or streams of dried blood. Between May 2013 and February 2014 (covering the period of the exercise), Police recorded 1634 crimes of public disorder, anti-social behaviour, violent and sexual offences, weapons offences and criminal damage and arson committed in the “City Centre” (‘Detailed statistics for Plymouth City Centre’ <http://www.police.uk/devon-and-cornwall/216.02/crime/stats/> [accessed 31.3.14]). Students do not experience apocalyptic levels of violence, but awareness of the threat of violence may well influence where some of them will go at certain times of the day. Their changed perception of the city during the zombie exercise perhaps constituted something other than fictionalisation. Indeed, some responses suggest that the pessimistic gaze of the zombie apocalypse encourages a kind of critical seeing, the bleak mythos highlighting certain existing qualities in a questioning manner.

One student remarks on how “[N]othing really mattered” and how this changed their view of ‘desirable’ real estate: “I didn’t care about the ‘superb apartments’ of the Mayfair House” (H). This malaise infected the functions of the city: “A ‘for sale’ sign, pointless. A ‘no left turn’ sign, pointless again” (H). Two of the

respondents noted litter and waste in the city centre; one asked: “Did I really want to be the only survivor if I’m going to be living in this environment?” (H) Another found the landscape overwhelmingly broken, declaring that “all I see is empty buildings and derelict shops” (B), while a third felt the dread of this terrain as the work of both the landscape and themselves: “[T]he buildings that I stepped into were intact yet decaying and withering away within my mind” (C).

Perhaps even more intense and exaggerated than these impressions of a dread city landscape is the skewed portrayal of its inhabitants, transformed by the narrative into “a grotesque vulgar form” (C), “humans [that] did not appear as humans, but beasts, foul creatures that were destined to embody me as one of them” (C). Even apparently benign behaviours are morbidly inflected: “2 people are sitting down reading a book, almost still, looking lifeless” (F), “someone trips over and their friend runs over to help, but I just imagine someone running over to eat them and get some fresh meat” (F). The family unit is infected: “When I saw families go past me with a baby in a pram, I saw a small zombie creature glaring at me with red eyes of anger and thirst of (sic) my blood” (A). In their description of how “a group hidden in shadows hiss and leer at me, their minds too decayed to be more imaginative” (E) one respondent writes as if referencing a memory of actual verbal abuse; using the zombie mythos to identify aggressive sexist behaviour.

Four student participants note how their *ways* of perceiving space were changed: “made me picture the city differently” (D), “[the] experience helped me to.... see the area of performance in a different way” (C), “[M]y experiences dawn on me” (I), “my idle attitude to my surroundings had changed so drastically” (J). A fifth recorded a challenge to reassess their personal values: “I suddenly thought of hometown friends, and my family. I felt sad... then I felt happy that I had felt sad. I entered back into the studio space appreciative of what really does matter to me” (H).

While two of the participants noted how they ‘read’ an imagined narrative *onto* the events they saw on the streets – “A van with its hazard lights flashing meant activity had happened here recently” (H), “I could hear the high pitched sound of several car alarms going off.... every time I walked past a place which was playing music” (A) – more often the participants described how they wrote themselves into the narrative: “I search for an accomplice (sic)” (F), “I quickly found a chair leg with a large screw sticking out” (D), “a woman held a door open for me and my mind was reluctant to thank the lady for this gesture and I didn’t.... an over voice pushed through this as if to say ‘stay back’” (C), with this last respondent recalling how she thought: “when will this nightmare end?”

Perhaps surprisingly, given their apparent familiarity with the living dead mythos, absent from their accounts is any referencing of previous applications of zombie narratives and metaphors to their everyday experience or immediate environments. In critical writing, the Romero-originated living dead are often described as “us”, creatures that “[N]ot too long ago.... were on their way to a supermarket or a softball game” (Larkin 2006: 21). There are no “blue bloods or celebrities among zombies” (Russell 2005: 7), they represent “our fellow citizens.... with no leader and no motive beside hunger” (Waller 1986: 275). This role was always intended; Romero

describing them as a “blue collar kind of monster. He was us” (quoted, Hervey 2008: 57). Yet, despite this democratic quality, and the students’ apparent ease with the mythos, there is no evidence of their deployment of it, previous to the exercise, as a lens through which to view, analyse or test their ‘real world’.

### *The Reflections of the ‘Friends’: Reflexivity and Complexity*

The responses of the Facebook ‘friends’ of Mytho Geography (here assigned numbers [1–11]) contrast unevenly with those of the students. As well as differing life experiences and longer-practiced skills in wandering and observing brought to the exercise by these ‘friends’, another difference arises from locations. While the students explored in persona within an approximate half mile radius of their city centre campus, the ‘friends’ explored in a variety of urban, rural and coastal spaces, including ones in Amsterdam, Halifax (Nova Scotia) and London.

Despite contrasting conditions and depths of experience, there are a number of similarities between students’ and ‘friends’ responses. Similarly to some students, three of the ‘friends’ note their disruption from the everyday, including (5) who noted “I have no appointments to keep – humanity now moves at my pace”. Like many of the students, a number of ‘friends’ acknowledged their self-conscious embodiment of the exercise: “shuffling at funereal pace with a rolling gait down the prom, I was the one who looked like a zombie” (4), “[M]y walking pace did not increase, as I had expected it too. Walking too quickly... increases the chance of encountering a threat” (5), “I began feeling somehow insubstantial myself, while the natural world became more vivid” (3), “the sun comes out, and I no longer care about anything other than its warmth on my face and the feel of my body walking... I am dead to the undead” (1). This crossover extended to intensified hearing: “a few earnest souls out running... I can hear their measured breathing before I can see them and can hear their muffled feet” (6), “a painting with a soundtrack” (3), “[N]obody moves... still and silent.” (2), “[T]he housing estate is quiet” (1), “a raven... croak[s]” (8), “[S]ilence” (11).

Three of the ‘friends’ noted their divergence from a familiar route, but in general they make less of this than the students, perhaps more habituated to the idea of going ‘off the beaten track’. On the other hand, the ‘friends’ are far more sensitive to traffic, five of them (1, 2, 4, 6 and 11), perhaps more committed to a partisan personification of ‘walker’, making some connection between vehicle drivers and “insensate” (4) behaviour.

‘Friends’, like students, apply the metaphors of the zombie narrative directly to their environment: “Walking past the church, I think about all those inside, accepting the consecrated host, and this morning it makes more sense” (6), “I flickered in and out of believing it [the mythos] with a sort of double-consciousness in which there was an underlying awareness that I was imagining” (3). “I’m increasingly unsettled... I have created this discomfort today – it doesn’t normally reside in the landscape – or perhaps it does but I’m not sensitive to it” (8).

The ‘friends’ maintain no greater distance from the role-playing elements of the exercise than the students; many of them describe an intense immersion. The ‘friend’ (9) who sound recorded their walk becomes audibly frightened: “(suddenly gasps) seeing the (inaudible) just made me jump. Making me quite nervous. Just thinking about it as a possibility (voice trembles) makes me quite nervous”. One ‘friend’ is sensitized to ‘scenes’ that might come from living dead movies: “Under the overpass is a child’s faded pink plastic toy push chair, on its side” (6). For others, the experience is as immediate as it is reflective – three of the ‘friends’ (4), (5) and (8), describe how they seek out higher ground, (9) contemplates hiding in “burrows” and another identifies “[D]efensible ground” (2) – while (3) describes a lingering inhibition that “let me resist the urge to swat away the dark shapes of people who got in my way” and “an underlying delight and satisfaction in thinking of myself as the only person left alive!”, while another describes deeply inhabiting the narrative: “I feel less safe ‘in my back’.... Could I already be a zombie?... feeling sick, starting to gag a little, found dead in the middle of a field.... I am becoming clay” (8).

Alongside such immersions, the ‘friends’ describe changed perceptions of their surroundings not dissimilar to those experienced by the students: “a man on a bicycle smiles.... no, wait.... his automatic nervous system twists his zombie face into a rictus” (1) (this is very similar to C’s encounter with the person holding the door, above), “[T]he anxiety is pervasive.... located in the landscape.... it has certain characteristics; spreads like mist or tentacles or fungus” (8). Where there *is* a difference, however, is in the greater degree to which the ‘friends’ address these changes self-consciously, not simply as a switch from an everyday to an apocalyptic narrative, but as the changing of perceptual means themselves: “gaze oscillated from what was close at hand and what was in the distance.... I botanised and excavated, peering into windows, feeling textures and glancing down every street” (5), “a tactic.... helps me see that I see” (11), “found myself noticing the bark of trees with enormous pleasure... watched the shape of ripples... feeling completely immersed in the tiny subtle shifts in movement as the wind changed.... a heightened awareness of the physical world and a self-forgetting” (3).

A similar variation – of degree rather than substance – is evident where the ‘friends’ describe their critical viewing of both the landscape and its inhabitants through the lens of a living dead mythos: “My terrain was a mixture of concrete and dead wood... sites of abandonment.... I wanted to fill these sites with people and the everyday” (5), “eventually all this is going to grow over... I like the idea of these golf courses going wild” (9), “the fluent walkers on the prom (swathed in hoodies and anoraks with scarves around their mouths), were not only the real zombies, but they led dog zombies on leads with puppy fat falling off their bodies. Beneath the dubious glamour of the apparent each dog was a Baudelaire poem on walkies” (4), “the planner who tore the guts out of Exe bridges and started building a race track... destroying the ancient humane streets and leaving an undead, unintuitive inner circle” (2), “zombie kids... whizz past on their bikes, turning right in front of an oncoming car. They seem to have no regard for life or limb... because of course what are these to the undead?” (1)

The greater complexity of these viewings seems to arise from a greater sense among the ‘friends’ (despite two of them, unlike any of the students, expressing concern about their ignorance of zombies) of the affordance to critical application of the living dead mythos. ‘Friend’ (7), for example, explicitly applies a Marxian interpretation of the mythos to fellow commuters on a railway station: “the thought of the fleshy mass, being transported to work, willless (sic), unresisting was genuinely frightening. A vision of the ‘system’.... And I’m part of it! Am I a zombie too?”, while ‘friend’ (1) appropriates the mythos to their own meta-narrative of radical pessimism: “I often despair at humanity’s sleep-walking tendencies, our acceptance of business as usual, consumerism, and inequality, and our head-in-the-bandages stance on issues like climate change. I suppose I think.... a zombie apocalypse is unlikely to change things drastically.”

Some of the ‘friends’, unlike the students, challenged and explored the contradictions of the mythos itself, sometimes as they simultaneously deployed it critically: “I.... became quite torn, like a child who relishes the prospect of having a toy shop to themselves, but has no one to play with” (5), “I couldn’t help myself – my brain was ticking away, inventing a world in which the zombies were harmless or I was invisible” (3), “I’m not even sure what a zombie is...perhaps zombies are inherently conservative” (1), “I could not see my fellow humans as ‘zombies’. They were too alert, too goal oriented, too lively” (7). For one of the ‘friends’, this critical reflexivity wed to a hyper-sensitization to the landscape led them on an extended meditation (of which the following quotation is but a fragment) on the nature of the mythos itself (engaging with themes that have been explored theoretically elsewhere [Clark 2006]): “[B]ut now the doubts and questions arise. What do zombies do? How would they kill me? .... Is zombie rape out of the question? .... I become interested in the word, in the zig-zag of the ‘z’ and the wombiness of the ‘omb’ and the mateyness of the ‘ie’. Matey zigzag womb. I imagine the zombie devours somehow, with a soft mouth.... Shall I be mumbled to death by a soft, bad z-womb?” (8)

## Conclusions

The accounts by the Plymouth students of their experiences during their zombie exercises suggest, at the very least, an increased sensitization to their immediate environment that was either novel (‘seeing differently’) or reinvigorated by the mythos-based task. For some, the exercise remained mostly in the fictional realm, an overlaying of living dead narrative upon the surface of the city. For others there was an interweaving of fictional zombie narratives with their everyday experience of the city and with the narratives of the city. Where this took place, there was evidence of the beginnings of a critical ‘reading’ or ‘viewing’ of the city through the lens of the zombie’s metaphorical narrative.

The accounts given by Mytho Geography’s Facebook ‘friends’ suggest that, with a greater immersion in the performative practices and skills of street exploration (practices and skills that the students’ modules encourage and seek to provoke the

students to develop for themselves), a use of the living dead mythos as a lens for critical urban exploration can access immersive, reflexive, metaphorical and analytical complexities. They suggest that the simple zombie exercise can be a gateway to a reflexive and reflective critical looking; indeed, one of the students, (D), reflects directly on the mythos itself in their account – “even though it was a cloudy and fairly gloomy day it made me realise how dark I imagined the zombie apocalypses and I asked myself why it couldn’t happen on a sunny day” – suggesting that complexifying had already begun for this student, ready to be deployed in future exercises.

The theorist Evan Calder Williams has pointed out the transparent qualities of the social metaphor of the zombie mythos, arguing that many interpretations of living dead movies “aren’t really readings: they just describe what happens in the films” (Williams 2011: 78). Instead of replacing existing zombie narrative elements with equivalents from economics or politics, Williams suggests that we submit ourselves to the “perspectival dizziness of the tracking back and forth” (79) of symbols between an interpreted ‘base’ in some fundamental reality and their expression in ideological fictions, as a means to “model and map what happens when seemingly spectral shifts in the global architecture of a totality... touch earth and produce real consequences” (80). Just such a “tracking back and forth” is present in a number of the reflections, both of students and ‘friends’.

From its origins in 1968, the Romero living dead have been affordant to a modeling of symbolic transitions. Galen Ross, who plays a leading character in Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), describes how the retail goods in the film’s mall setting “are only symbols... [that] have lost their meaning. The film’s characters... realise that none of it is valuable anymore, because there’s no longer any context for it” (quoted, Russell 2005: 94). The zombie exercise enables familiar symbols – coffee shops, family life, rural vistas, seaside promenades, car traffic – to float free from their contexts; a *verfremdungseffekt* that disrupts familiar processes in order to expose their ignored significances.

The zombie exercise invites students to indulge in the possibilities of a fictional overlaying of the everyday (with its promise of increased intensities and pseudo-dramatic excitement) and to interweave fictional apocalypse with the symbols of the familiar and the embodiment of the walker. The movement of these elements around each other seems to allow the springing free of symbols from their “context” in order for them to perform a dizzying and reflexive “tracking back and forth” that can reveal things to the student not only about their familiar world, but also about the critical apparatus that they are usually expected to deploy upon it. At the same time, the subtle, non-theatrical embodiment of the walker allows students to explore transgressive personae and behaviours, at odds with usual public etiquette and yet without danger to the students or those in their imagined narratives.

There is a critical violence here; it can be traced back to a 1968 zombie that “debunked everything that had served to vanquish evil in prior ‘monster’ flicks: individual heroism, teamwork, science, knowledge, religion, love, the family, the media, the army and the government” (Hervey 2008: 27). To this dismantling of symbols and paranoid criticism of the status quo, the zombie exercise adds the

reparative qualities of an exploratory walk for which “paranoid style is not enough. The drifter must also cultivate a complementary depressive consciousness; one of weaving and healing.... segments, fragments and compartments (these fabulous tactics of modernism and postmodernism) are sewn together” (Smith 2010: 179). With its interweaving of fictional and real narratives and potential for reflexivity, the zombie pedagogical ‘tactic’ can challenge the contradictions of the excessive mythos upon which it draws, as well as the idea of a familiar and safely contained everyday life.

There is a caveat, however.

During their walk, one of the Facebook participants took in an actual apocalyptic landscape: “Walking across the bridge is always a serious proposition; my head is full of remembered images of the harbour packed with warships, the knowledge of the submarine net slung across the mouth.... towards the Basin are the Narrows where the explosion happened. A blizzard of glass and flames, smoke, blood and snow. On the harbour floor is a huge crater, the force of history still pushing violently outwards” (6).

This refers to the explosion of an ammunition ship in the harbour at Halifax (Nova Scotia) in 1917, the largest man-made blast prior to the development of nuclear weapons. The explosion and subsequent tsunami killed around 2,000 people, injured 9,000, and obliterated nearly all structures within a half mile radius, including an entire local community at Richmond and a small community of Mi’kmaq Native Americans sheltering temporarily in a local cove.

In the account by ‘friend’ (6), the zombie narrative adds nothing to the “serious proposition” of this real world apocalypse. In the only comparable moment during the other zombie walks, ‘friend’ (1) describes how they “emerge onto Cathedral Green, where the dead and buried probably outnumber the living and the undead” and that, significantly, this is where “my walk comes to an end”.

The collision of fictional and actual apocalypses draws attention to the limitation of the zombie mythos in addressing real holocausts. Zombie movies in general avoid real apocalyptic sites – there are no Hiroshima zombies, no Auschwitz zombies, no Rwandan zombies. In the recent slew of Nazi-zombie movies (following the commercial success of *Outpost* [2007] and *Dead Snow* [2009]), it is the National-Socialists and not their victims that ‘walk’; genocide is skirted in order to layer one popular articulation of ‘evil’ over another.

A particular and limited victimhood was present in the Romero-originated mythos from the start; his living dead are symbols of alienation, exploitation and ordinariness, but not the destroyed bodies of industrial scale organised murder. Romero’s living dead possess certain poignant qualities; caught in their night dresses and work clothes, ordinary folk transformed by no fault of their own, sometimes protected by their families despite their threat. Attempts to add a further layer of identity to the ordinariness of these victim-monsters (as in the 1990 remake of *Night of the Living Dead*, when the living dead were controversially made up to look like the emaciated inmates of Nazi death camps) is to repeat, or even to cancel out, a content that is already present. In (6)’s account of her visit to the Halifax harbour, the fictional zombie narrative is dropped and the walk is changed; the walker

conjuring from the zombie mythos a metaphor for the continuing abjection of history, its refusal to die, its undead force still “pushing violently outwards”.

So, in certain historical-geographical contexts, a teacher might need to exercise caution around the use of the zombie exercise. It is not a suitable means for addressing real world holocausts, genocides or mass loss of life. Nor, indeed, issues of personal bereavement or fears of dying and the dead. There is no dynamic by which the victims of genocide, nor any actual deceased individual, can renew themselves in the living dead mythos.

However, to the alienation of everyday life and the oppressive exploitation of productive labour, the zombie offers a model of collective refusal to conform, soldier on or fade away quietly. The horror confronted by the zombie mythos is not one around death, rather it is about an excess of life, about a life that is not convenient, a life that will not lie down, that refuses to end: “the structurally wrong realizing its systemic origin, its rational composition, and its militant potential” (Williams 2011: 143). The life energy repressed in the original model of the Hollywood zombie, of African slave workers in the plantations of the Caribbean, erupts in ‘Night of the Living Dead’ and has yet to be fully returned to either stupor or chains. The absurdly excessive impetus of the post-Romero zombie is not explained by back stories of satellite radiation (*Night of the Living Dead*), gas (*Return of the Living Dead*), sonic machines (*The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* [Jorge Grau, 1974]) or viruses (*World War Z* [Marc Forster, 2013]), and thus begs an educative question: what is the historic source of its symbolic power? This works something like a ‘MacGuffin’; unhitched from structural causality, it brings the students to the question of historic causes and symbolic potential without providing an answer. The zombie is a useful figure of provocation for those seeking to encourage phenomenological and embodied learning among young students; its excess of life and meandering trajectories make the zombie tactic a potent departure point for introducing walking-based critiques of the city like those of the situationists, and vitalist critical theories like those of Jane Bennett (2001, 2010) or Deleuze and Guattari (1988).

While, the zombie exercise may be problematical in sites of morbid excess, the reflections described here suggest it is effective in spaces of the everyday where it can be a tool for exposing performances already in motion within the apparently ordinary, drawing upon an excess of life to reveal the everyday’s wonders and grotesques. In such a realm of the familiar, the ‘tactic’ is a means for students to first disrupt the circulation of their assumptions and then reflexively re-examine them in the reparative contexts of site-specific performance, exploratory and performative walking, and reflective writing.

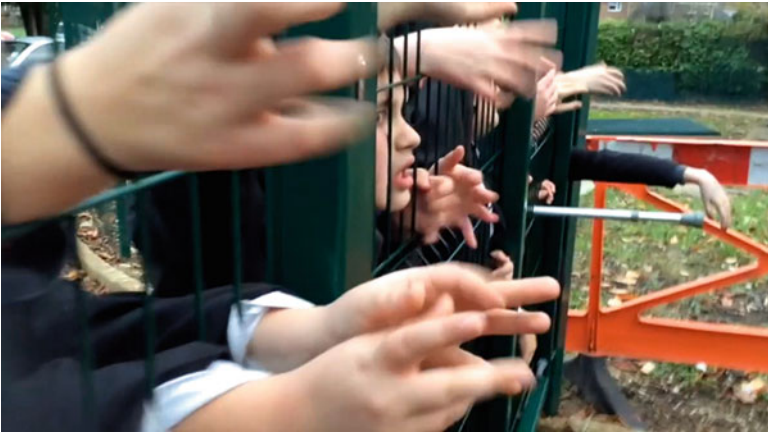
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## Part III



### Scared

Scared by a pitch black room,  
screaming your name over loud drums.  
Scared by monsters scoffing down eyes  
and swallowing raw meat in one.  
Scared by flesh eating shadows waiting  
and waiting for you, watching you.  
Scared by things clawing at your back,  
by people banging at doors and windows,  
by being blinded by men crawling around you.  
Scared by being grounded to the floor.  
(By Natsha)

# Chapter 8

## Staying Up Late Watching *The Walking Dead*

Jennifer Rowsell

*Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things that  
escape those who dream only at night.*

(Edgar Allan Poe, "Eleonora", 1841)

### Introduction

Zombies flank the Jerusalem walls? Zombies invade a southern plantation in the United States? A television show with characters on the run from zombies? Videogames devoted to zombie chases like *Planets vs. Zombies* or *Minecraft*? I am baffled by the zombie revolution and the writing of this chapter solidified my continued bewilderment about the allure of zombie worlds. In the chapter, I unravel fascinations with zombies from three different optics. One is more of a landscape optic that speculates on contemporary fascinations with zombies and apocalyptic texts that have earned increased popularity. The other optic is a portrait view of a tween's keen interest in zombies, drawing out aspects of her life as sedimentations of apocalyptic themes. The third and final optic is a brief close-up and personal account of my own struggles with zombies and researching young people about their investments and ruling passions with gothic, apocalyptic, and zombie worlds.

Conceptually, I draw on theory from Louise Rosenblatt (1995) on aesthetic readings of texts and Dorothy Holland (1998) and her colleagues' analyses across diverse settings as *sites of self* and as *figured worlds*. Rosenblatt's writings on aesthetic responses offer the chapter a window into how the imagination is a means for exploring other realities and for performing alternative realities. Holland's writings texture my argument by showing how Roxanne, the focal participant of the research reported in the chapter, makes zombie fiction a site of self that furnishes figured worlds for her. The chapter is informed by a year-long research study with Roxanne, an adolescent girl who loves zombies and who enjoys sharing the motivations for her interests and connections that she feels with iconic zombie stories such as *The*

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*Walking Dead* television series (Darabont 2010). The chapter is structured around the three successive optics – portrait standing back to theorize aesthetic readings of zombies; frontal or portrait optic of Roxanne and her figured worlds and zombies as providing a site of self; and finally, a close-up view of researcher reflexivity about conducting the research.

## Optic One: Transacting with Zombie Worlds

Rosenblatt outlined a theory of transaction that is a fitting conceptual frame for the role of zombie fiction and gothic worlds for tweens like Roxanne featured in the next section. In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt argues that schools should “assimilate knowledge about humankind and society” that deal with students’ actual life (Rosenblatt 1995: 3). Readers bring different experiences to a reading event, which make text understanding idiosyncratic and subjectively shaped. In Rosenblatt’s work, she addresses “the uniqueness of the transaction between reader and text [which] is not inconsistent with the fact that both elements in this relation have social origins and social effects” (Rosenblatt 1995: 27–28). Rosenblatt’s transaction model starts from the text as a stimulus by focusing on a reader’s attention so that all past experiences are activated. As a reader digests meanings as in selecting, rejecting, and ordering, the text regulates what is held in the forefront of a reader’s mind (Rosenblatt 1995).

When reading literature, a person is inducted into a fictionalized account of reality, imagining him/herself within aspects of that reality, relating that imagined reality to something in real life, and learning something about him/herself in the process. Literature thereby objectifies worlds that readers can relate to and transact with. Rosenblatt speaks of transactions that take place when a reader makes meaning from texts. In this way reading is an active process wherein readers emotionally and intellectually react to texts. Shoring up subjectivities, interests, and backgrounds, readers negotiate their own lived experiences with textual stories. An aesthetic response invites readers to transact with the text, which is why Rosenblatt believes that “the greater the reader’s ability to respond to the stimulus of the word and the rhythm, sound, and image, the more fully will he be emotionally and intellectually able to participate in the literary work as a whole” (Rosenblatt 1995: 48). Thinking about the television show, *The Walking Dead*, in relation to Rosenblatt’s aesthetic response, I would argue that the zombies take a backseat to the human characters and the dynamics between characters. Thinking about Roxanne, who is featured later, what Roxanne and I share in our equal appreciation of *The Walking Dead* is a transaction with character stories. Roxanne and I enjoyed talking about the love triangle between Rick-Lori-and-Shane, we talked about characters we like and dislike and why. It is the human intrigue, relationships, moments that drive our interest and the zombies are a part of the story arc and move stories and characters along. But, taking up Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, reading should allow for “living through” texts (Rosenblatt 1995: 38) and the compulsion to watch the show is con-

necting with characters' lives and the choices that they make. Part of the draw of shows like *The Walking Dead* resides in their interweaving of regular life, emotions, values, beliefs thrown together with phantasmagorical, gothic worlds like imminent zombie invasions. Throughout this chapter I use the term 'gothic' as an overarching category for films, television, and fiction that depict apocalyptic worlds that involve such otherworldly figures as vampires, werewolves, witches, and zombies.

There is a moral piece to the stories featured on *The Walking Dead*, like kindness matters when all else is lost, or, that good people die. Typically, gothic tales foreground characters who wield power immorally like The Governor in *The Walking Dead* series. People who would normally not co-exist are forced to be together and the compelling dimension of the story, to my mind, relies on the foibles of human nature. During our many conversations, Roxanne and I talked about the idiosyncrasies of characters.

Originating in Britain with such classic tales as Walpole's (1764) *Castle of Otranto*, early gothic stories were a reaction to religious zealots and to crimes by religious leaders. Moving into the United States in the nineteenth century, gothic fiction became a way to exert agency. That is, with a belief that phantasmagorical worlds can avenge wrong-doings, gothic figures could come back to haunt and torment the living. What is more, gothic tales often explore the Janus-faced nature of being human. That is, there are idealized versions of self as in beautiful, smart, successful, upwardly mobile and perhaps even up-standing citizens (not that all of these things naturally go together), but then in stark contrast, there are darker, ugly, macabre, ghoulish, and evil selves and there is an alluring draw to moving across these two extremes. Think about the haunting picture of Dorian Gray in the attic that Oscar Wilde writes about in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde 1993) where beauty and hideousness/good and evil mirror each other. Defying a sense of defencelessness, gothic fiction allows individuals to explore darker, ambivalent selves without guilt and judgement. Gothic figures cannot be created equal in that one might have a hidden desire to be a vampire, witch, or werewolf, but it is unlikely that one *wants* to be a zombie; more often than not, protagonists in apocalyptic stories are running from zombies. Perhaps zombies are the lowest on the gothic figure hierarchy?

Harking back to my own days studying Edgar Allan Poe's works like "The Raven" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" during my English Literature degree, I remember exploring alter egos and darker sides of self. Classic and contemporary gothic texts explore and contest social, cultural, psychological, and personal issues by crossing thresholds through narrative tropes and social mores. Playing on fear, surprise, even terror, all gothic stories have five basic motifs: (1) a haunted house; (2) a young heroine or hero; (3) a villain or monster; (4) a dark, oppressive setting; and (5) societal taboos. As Crawford notes,

... beneath its trappings of ghosts, monsters, and psychopaths. Gothic horror asks important philosophical questions about human nature. It can be an invaluable aesthetic tool for helping teens develop their moral compasses (Crawford 2008: 33).

There has been literature that links adolescence with gothic fiction (Rodabaugh 1996). Rodabaugh talks through characteristics of adolescence and their relation-

ships to Gothic fiction: extremes of emotion; journey of self-revelation; the individual against the unknown; rebellion against authority; and, sympathy with the outcast (Rodabaugh 1996: 69). She talks about how adolescents grow beyond black and white definitions and begin to view characters in stories in shades of gray. What often happens in gothic fiction is a hero or heroine set off to discover themselves and, along the way, they encounter metaphysical forces that allow them to explore alternate selves and to perform a very different identity and life. There is an appeal for tweens to witness how Gothic characters grapple with powerlessness and then transform themselves in order to overpower (Trites 2000).

Part of the draw and attendant transaction with gothic literature is the insurmountable odds for survival – facing an unknown enemy. Adolescents like Roxanne face unmapped terrains within these kinds of story worlds and the lure of them makes them think across more transparent, I would argue superficial binaries, like good and evil. Take characters like Bella in *Twilight* being inducted into vampire life and over the course of the books and films viewers see a slow, steady evolution of Bella as a character into a powerful, physically strong, confident woman in contrast with her character at the beginning of the story when she was insecure, tentative, and on the margins. Wellington (2007) talks about typical characteristics of the Gothic – shifting subjectivities, confrontations with authority, ambivalence, confusion and fear. These vicissitudes in characters and character development are as sophisticated as Odysseus in Homer's *The Odyssey* or Lear in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Giroux (2010) talks about the role of 'the living dead' in two senses – the first is a sociological commentary on normative structures such as the family or work or social class and the living dead problematizes these endemic structures and the other sense is a commentary on institutions like schooling which try to produce certain kinds of citizens. Drawing on this kind of literature, I am arguing, as other authors in the collection argue, that individuals transact with zombie worlds to shape and perform identities that resist being boxed-in. Roxanne is precisely this kind of young person. But, there is something more that I see here, there is something about embodying the apocalyptic that transaction does not capture that the notions of sites of self (Holland et al. 1998) and figured worlds (Holland et al. 1998) does capture.

## Finding Agency Through Figured Worlds and Sites of Self

To account for the active agency of individuals across contexts, spaces, and places, Holland and colleagues (1998) developed a language of description for enacting agency. Figured worlds are as-if realms that we create to perform certain kinds of identities. As Holland et al. describe it,

'Figured worlds' are social spaces created by, and at the same time creating, the interactions of persons within that space: "First, figured worlds are historical phenomena, to which we are recruited or into which we enter, which themselves develop through the works of their participants" (Holland et al. 1998: 40–41).

Holland et al. (1998) found that as they crossed a wide range of situations with different practices that there was a dense kind of interconnectedness between intimate and public values. With Roxanne in-mind, as an adolescent girl of Islamic faith, she described how *The Walking Dead* and *World War Z* (Forster 2013) are an escape for her into vampire and zombie fiction because they contrast her everyday lived experiences and values with the complex, dark world of gothic tales. In this way, the apocalyptic stories that she read and watched, mostly *The Walking Dead* and late at night, Roxanne frequently articulated how the show allowed her to escape from her daily routines, homework, and cultural practices.

Holland and her co-writers claim that “people tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland et al. 1998: 3). They argue that identity is a concept that works to connect the intimate or personal world with the wider world of social relations. In the case of Roxanne and her family, their viewing space at home connects with larger media worlds and the ideologies and discourses that accompany them. Identities are located in these ‘figured worlds’, as spaces where social encounters are experienced and realized. They are collective, ‘as if’ realms that can be experienced in narratives or through artifacts (Pahl and Rowsell 2010), and these narratives and artifacts open up figured worlds. Holland’s theory of identity rests on identities-in-practice being bound up with figured worlds. Identities are part of the accumulation of history; they are ‘history in person’ (Holland et al. 1998; Holland and Lave 2001). In *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, the authors examine figured worlds such as the world of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

Holland et al. (1998) introduced a phrase that I have drawn on significantly to think about Roxanne and her particular situation and that is ‘site of self.’ Sites of the self represent, for instance, culturalized selves and how culture can be cultivated and sedimented within particular spaces such as kitchens. Interpreting the relationship between self and culture, Holland and colleagues discuss how individuals often seek out plural worlds and how subjectivity is formed out of sensory, social, and embodied engagement with these worlds. Indeed, there can be plural sites of self-fashioning and sometimes these sites of self are not complementary. The key point here is that there is no universalized notion of self and that there are not only multiple selves in play, but also our multiple selves shift as we move across sites and sites invite different selves. In this way, zombie stories represented a site of self for her. Sites of self (Holland et al. 1998: 32) give individuals spaces to mediate identities and to perform and shore up alternative identities.

Within sites of self, individuals are inducted into particular discourses, texts, and sets of practices that shape identities. As Holland and colleagues articulate it, “they [individuals] treat these discourses as the media around which socially and historically positioned persons construct their subjectivities in practice” (Holland et al. 1998: 32). On a grander scale, gothic fiction could be viewed as what Appadurai (2000) describes as ‘mediascapes’ (domains where media inflects discourses, ideas, and texts) which have certain literary conventions that gothic writers play on, and have played on since their inception, such as haunted castles, young innocents, villains/monsters, dark, oppressive and sinister settings, and unpredictable and maybe

even lewd behaviours. These darker, evocative traits are evident in such iconic gothic tales as Charlotte Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and film classics like *The Shining*. Certainly what maintains Roxanne's interest and fascination are the villains and the haunted, dark settings and the young innocents in the zombie and horror stories that she reads and watches. During our conversations she was most animated when she talked about how characters in *The Walking Dead* reacted or interactions between characters on the show.

## **The Portrait Optic: Roxanne and Her Zombie Worlds**

As a portrait optic, I focus on Roxanne, aged 14, whom I met some time ago through her Mum, Nandra who is a family friend. Born in Ottawa, Canada, Roxanne moved to Toronto in 2004. Nandra, her mother, is from Somalia and she moved to Canada in 1993. As a result, Canada is the only home that Roxanne knows and though she has strong connections with friends and family from Somalia, she identifies as a Canadian Muslim. Roxanne has several interests that include music, movies, dancing, hanging out with friends, drawing, and playing videogames. Roxanne particularly loves fashion and music (she is a huge fan of Beyoncé). I first noted her interest in zombies when I visited her family and Nandra would tell me that Roxanne stayed up too late watching *The Walking Dead*. Roxanne is what I would describe as 'a night owl' – her Mum says that she loves to stay up late and watch sci-fi and horror movies.

To sit in Roxanne's home is to sit in a sea of texts, screens, and artifacts. There are TVs on and iPads being tapped and swiped, and magazines being read. Roxanne is perfectly comfortable and at ease in her busy environment. Her family's television room has cushions all around the room and a blanket and floor lamp. Nandra has created an adjoining sitting room for more formal events and she is strict about who can sit in there. Most of the time, Roxanne can be found in the TV room or seen chatting in the backyard with family and friends. Roxanne loves tween shows like *The Next Step* about a group of dancers at a dance studio as much as she enjoys zombie shows and movies. That is, she does not exclusively read and view zombie, vampire, or what I call in this chapter 'gothic' texts and reads across a range of text genres, but I am focusing here on her interest in zombies because that was the focus of the modest research study.

## **The Research**

When I set out to design and conduct the research I had hoped to accomplish the following: have a pre- and post-interview; collect drawings and artifacts about zombies; read and analyze Roxanne's journal/diary; and, document home visits through field notes. Unfortunately, after getting ethical approval to collect all of this data, I



only managed to: conduct a short pre- and post-interview; collect one or two drawings; analyze very short journal entries (which were few in number, only five); and I had field notes from my six field visits. I do not regard the research as a failed study, rather I regard it as indicative of so many other research studies that I have engaged in – it has its own story and the nature of the data and Roxanne’s story makes the implications no less significant.

Harking back, my main impetus for working with Roxanne was her self-proclaimed love of zombie worlds. However, she has not been an ‘easy’ or performative participant which made the research challenging as well as interesting and insightful. I am used to participants who are fairly easy to interview and observe. Given that I primarily conduct research in schools (Grenfell et al. 2012; Pahl and Rowsell 2010; Rowsell 2013; Rowsell and DeCoste 2012), research participants have generally been willing, eager participants given that data collection is usually a dimension of their schoolwork and assignments. However, with Roxanne, her participation was voluntary and I encouraged her to do whatever she likes. When she did participate, it tended to be informal conversations that we had and quick notes or drawings that she created while we watched *The Walking Dead*.

Roxanne and I chose several zombie texts and we agreed to look across media genres so that we read a book, played a videogame, and watched a film, and television show. For the book genre, I shared a novel with Roxanne entitled, *The Zombie Chronicles: Apocalypse Infection Unleashed* (Peebles 2012). We agreed to read *The Zombie Chronicles* at the same time – I hated it and Roxanne claimed that she loved it. It is a story about a female protagonist, Val, who is bitten by a zombie and, as a result of the bite, is scheduled for a lethal injection. Told from the perspective of Dean, the male teenage narrator, he recounts the adventures of his group of friends as they navigate a zombie world after zombies take over what was one of the few safe areas in the United States. A year before this event at a local fair in South Carolina, a deadly virus decimated the world leaving swarms of brain-eating zombies haunting the world. In order to save Val (who is his good friend and who ends up being his estranged sister), there are a series of narrow escapes after their helicopter lands in the heart of Zombie Land in the deep south of the United States. The small group of teenagers move from one near-death experience to the next inundated by zombies and the book ends without resolution as they continue their adventures. Rather arbitrarily I chose this novel given Roxanne’s keen interest in zombie shows like *The Walking Dead*, and while she said that she loved the book, I was not quite convinced. When I talked about specific scenes like when the teenagers were trapped in a plantation house in the deep South surrounded by zombies, Roxanne could not describe specific details about the scene. Or, when I discussed the different romances in the novel, Roxanne again was vague on people and events. I have a feeling that Roxanne may have started the novel and put it aside.

In order to dig deeper into Roxanne’s interest in zombies, I gave Roxanne a videogame, *Lollipop Chainsaw* and again, she did not have much to recount about the experience other than enjoying it. She talked about *other* videogames such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Call of Duty*, and *NBA 2K13*, but I did not get the sense that she really liked to play *Lollipop Chainsaw*. After the failed attempt to spark interest in *Lollipop*

*Chainsaw*, I turned to *The Walking Dead* because I knew that Roxanne liked it and I liked it too.

By my second visit to their home, Roxanne and I got in the habit of rewatching parts of episodes at different points in the storyline. These moments stand out for me as a researcher because Roxanne was so animated about and invested in the plot, adventures, and histrionics of some characters. The most allusive moments over the course of the research for me were our conversations about *The Walking Dead* and what these conversations signalled about Roxanne's ability to: interpret characters and plotlines on the show; to think in sophisticated ways about character decisions; and, to describe what zombies and the apocalyptic did for the plot of the show. These are the moments that I concentrate on in the chapter.

### ***Visiting Roxanne***

To conduct the fieldwork I visited Roxanne six times over a calendar year and each visit ranged between an hour to an hour and a half. Patterns arose over the course of these visits where I would arrive, have tea with Nandra and we would have a conversation about life and Roxanne's activities, school life, etc. Usually visits with Nandra lasted around 20 min before Roxanne would emerge from the TV/media room and we would talk about school and friends and eventually zombies. Sometimes our zombie conversations about *The Walking Dead* or *World War Z* or *Lollipop Chainsaw* would last about 10–15 min. Conversations felt a bit contrived when we spoke exclusively about zombies, instead we both preferred to watch scenes from a *Walking Dead* episode and then we would debrief after. I did notice out of the corner of my eye Roxanne drawing quick pictures of zombies (two are featured below in Figs. 8.1 and 8.2) or she would write quick, furtive notes about scenes and episodes (as seen in Fig. 8.3), which I later realized were more out of duty because I always assigned her homework tasks when I left such as writing in her journal and Roxanne wanted to get them done. Although Roxanne did not regularly keep a journal, she does draw pictures constantly in a notebook.

The prose is descriptive and lacking in affect compared with the exuberant, lively Roxanne I have come to know who bounces into and around rooms, dances to music and is very chatty. When I asked her about the empty journal and occasional, short notes like this one, Roxanne just shrugged her shoulders and laughed. Roxanne is a perfect example because she is highly creative and passionate about stories and the trajectory of characters in stories and human intrigue, but this passion and fascination so seldom surfaces at school for her. Although I appreciated how she drew pictures and made notes, I also recognized these were token gestures and blamed myself as a researcher who failed to find the right, most appropriate tools to excavate Roxanne's identity mediation.

Our interview dialogues shed some light on what inspired her to watch zombie movies and why she is drawn to them. Case in point, here is an excerpt from our pre-research interview below:



Fig. 8.1 Zombie scenes by Roxanne

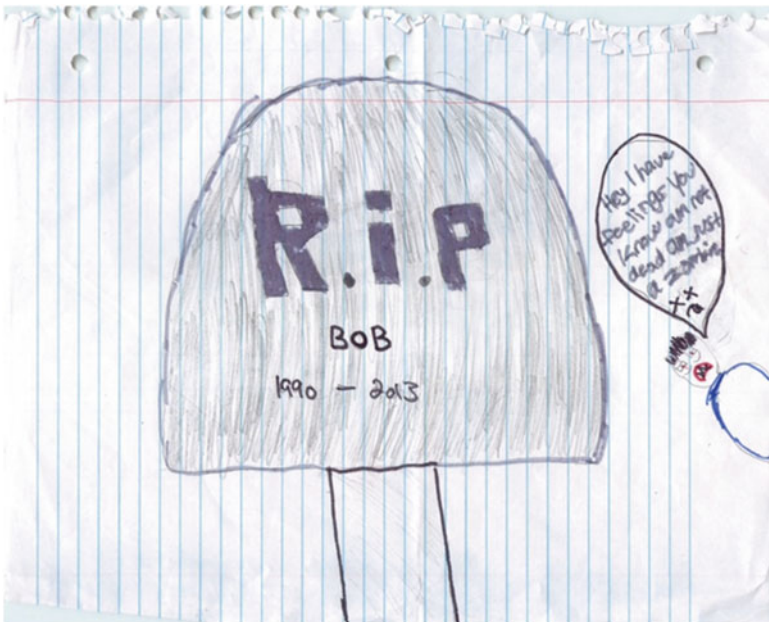


Fig. 8.2 Zombie scenes by Roxanne

*I read the book, The Zombie Chronicles, it's about a group of people who keep moving from different places, they meet some people and lose people on the way and finally they found what they are looking for which is a home. When I read this book it was not as good as others –I would give it a 5 out of 10. The end said to be continued which I didn't like because I want to know what else happened.*

*By: Roxanne, For: Jennifer*

**Fig. 8.3** Roxanne's anecdotal notes

1. J: How long have you watched and enjoyed zombie movies?  
R: I've liked horror movies all my life. Zombie movies became more popular since I was about 9.
2. J: What sparked your interest?  
R: I think I got my interest from Asha (Roxanne's sister) because she's always liked horror movies.
3. J: What specific zombie shows or movies do you like?  
R: I like almost all zombie movies, even comedies. I'm not so fond of older movies. I like the more recent films because they look more real (special effects) and I just don't usually like old movies. My favourite zombie movie is *World War Z* when the zombies climb up on each other to get over the wall in Israel.
4. J: What other movies do you like?  
R: I also like other horror movies, comedies like *Grownups* and teen movies like *High School Musical*.

Rather than being enthralled by the blood and gore, Roxanne preferred to talk about how characters react in scenes and plot intrigues. What is also clear in the interview excerpts is how connected Roxanne is with her sister, Asha, and derives her interest in horror and zombies through her sister's habit of watching apocalyptic movies and shows.

During our conversations while watching *The Walking Dead*, Roxanne and I talked about the notions of good and evil and how people are not really like that. Take this particular observational field note that I wrote about a February 2014 visit (my last one):

As is our habit, Roxanne and I watched part of *The Walking Dead* with her cousins, Step Dad and Nandra around. We talked about the romance between Shane and Lori when Lori thinks that Rick is dead. Roxanne shared that although she likes Lori, she didn't like the way that she handled her relationship with Shane when Rick returned. The conversation made me appreciate all of the meanings that Roxanne gets out of relationships and love triangles in the series than just zombies attacking the small band of people in the show. She did like a scene when Rick reappears and kills wandering zombies though. Feb. 2014

It is precisely the vicissitudes of characters that Roxanne seized on. There were even moments when Roxanne related to zombie stories – albeit in a subtle and couched way. Over the course of my six visits, there was one interaction that stood out for me during my fourth visit to see Roxanne. Enough time had transpired that I was familiar with family routines and Roxanne felt more comfortable having me around. During this visit, Roxanne shared with me that due to a move to a new neighbourhood, her family moved from one neighbourhood to one about 40 min away by car, Roxanne had to move schools. She felt quite ostracized in her new school and she did not meet any friends. It was the only visit when Roxanne was quiet and less talkative. During the visit, Nandra shared that Roxanne was one of the only Muslims in the school and felt out of place there. Seeing how unhappy she looked, Nandra pulled her from the school and put Roxanne back into her old school where she had many friends and felt at-home. The story stood out for me because it signalled a rite of passage for Roxanne, a sense of isolation and even a degree of bullying that Nandra shared. It was during this visit that we spoke the most about *The Walking Dead* and *World War Z* and I did remark that these storied worlds gave her solace. It is difficult to interpret exactly what happened during this visit, whether she transacted more with *The Walking Dead* and connected more strongly with it as a figured world that represents a site of self because of her religion and feeling like an outsider, vulnerable, alone, defenceless, or, whether she simply wanted an escape because she did not have friends and connections at school. All I can do as a researcher is note the qualitative difference of this field visit compared with other ones.

Ultimately, taking stock of the modest research study, Roxanne taught me two valuable lessons that I carry with me. The first one is more of a reinforced conviction that I hold and have held for some time: young people have so many hidden talents and proficiencies that rarely surface in schooling environments. The second lesson is the concluding optic of the chapter and that is what I learned about my own tendency as a researcher to pre-emptively force conclusions and that I need to step back and truly make the familiar strange as an ethnographer to piece together what is really going on.

## **Close-Up Optic: What Roxanne Taught Me About Research and Zombies**

The aspect of this modest research that I simultaneously loved and struggled with is how intangible and embodied zombie worlds are. Aside from anecdotes, stories, and observations, I have very little raw, hard data to offer the reader about

transacting with zombie worlds. Roxanne is a young woman who is not high-achieving (in the schooling sense – in life, she is very much high achieving), her grades are moderate and she struggles in subjects like math, so I have not conducted research that, necessarily, upholds the virtues of gothic worlds and zombie fiction for school achievement (if indeed we are looking to schooling for virtues or for exemplary definitions). As a researcher, I cannot claim to have learned a lot about zombies and a tween's love of zombies. What I did learn, however, is how flexible one needs to be as a researcher. I went into the research study thinking that I could neatly tie up the research showing how Roxanne transacted with zombie worlds and found sites of self and although I saw some traces of this, it is not evident enough to draw out larger findings. Indeed, Roxanne loved staying up late to watch *The Walking Dead* because she admired the interesting characters and yes, because it was an escape.

Over the course of an hour, Roxanne draws pictures of zombies, she watches *The Walking Dead*, and she dances to Beyoncé. At the same time, Roxanne is devout and reads *The Koran* and then she can move onto gossip about Hollywood film stars like Bradley Cooper or Justin Bieber. Roxanne typifies, to my mind, the complex repertoires of practices and mediascapes (Appadurai 2000) that tweens negotiate on a daily basis. It is certainly a level of complexity and multimodal sophistication that is not reflected in contemporary curriculum and pedagogy and in this way, we can learn much from watching young people like Roxanne and spending some time understanding zombie shows and contemporary gothic tales. This finding I have acknowledged previously (Rowsell 2013; Rowsell and Decoste 2012). The question is, how do I reconcile Roxanne's diverse and variegated interests that certainly align with my previous research with *zombies*? Honestly, I am not sure that I can.

In terms of conducting the research, Roxanne is tough to pin down and resistant to observational gaze. Fair enough, why should anyone accept being observed? Roxanne and the research that I engaged in with her have both taught me a lesson about conducting research: not only is it unpredictable (which I have learned many times before), but also, participation is not obligatory or deferential but shaped around the subjectivities of the researched. In fact, Roxanne showed me what it is to be a rhizomatic young person in the world (Leander and Boldt 2013) – playing apps on iPads; watching TV shows; viewing Instagram; listening to Beyoncé – sometimes at the same time and sometimes in isolation. Roxanne possesses the kinds of literacy practices that other researchers have described as embodied and affective (Leander and Boldt 2013); as layered literacies that are dialogic (Abrams 2014); as im/material (Burnett et al. 2014a, b); and as sedimented (Rowsell and Pahl 2007). In the end, this chapter is about more than brain-eating zombies, it is about how much can be learned from young people like Roxanne, both theoretically and methodologically.

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# Chapter 9

## Girls, Ghouls and Girlhoods: Horror and Fashion at Monster High

Karen E. Wohlwend

### Introduction

How does a zombie doll in a popular horror franchise for tween girls serve as a productive site of contestation among overlapping visions of girlhood? In this chapter, I examine *Ghoulia Yelps*, a zombie character in the popular Monster High fashion doll franchise, not only as a toy in a global flow of licensed consumer goods but also as a site of identity construction and digital media production where facile notions of girlhoods are both enacted and reimagined (Forman-Brunell 2012). Monster High is reconceptualized here as the site of converging cultural imaginaries (Medina and Wohlwend 2014) in which children play in and out of gendered futures around fashion, adolescence, diversity, and schooling. Critical analysis of tween girls' digital play with a zombie doll on social media reveals the resonances, slippages, and paradoxes among identity texts produced about, for, and by girls. After describing the scope of the Monster High franchise and how it materializes expectations for characters, consumers, and players, I next examine how these dolls and identity texts circulate three dominant imaginaries of girlhood. Finally, I analyze YouTube videos of girls' play with the Ghoulia Yelps character to see how tween's foregrounding of horror and wielding of zombie tropes opens opportunities to rupture and reimagine girlhoods.

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## “We Are Monster High!”

Monster High, a toy franchise by Mattel, is a fashion doll series targeted to 8- to 12-year-old-girls. The Monster High dolls are designed to attract girls who have outgrown the massive Disney Princess franchise in the tween market niche previously occupied by MGA’s Bratz – “girls with a passion for fashion”. Like Bratz dolls, Monster High characters are teenage fashionistas, but with a ghoulish twist. Each character is the offspring of classic cinematic monsters in horror films: Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy, and so on. The 12-inch fashion dolls index their monster parentage through distinguishing features such as distinctive hairstyles, skin colors, clothing, and accessories such as horror-themed pets.

At approximately twenty USD, Monster High dolls are more expensive than Barbie dolls which are marketed to a younger consumer. Furthermore, rather than stand-alone doll clothing and accessories packs to dress a single doll, there are multiple versions of each Monster High doll. For example, there are at least six versions of the Ghoulia doll with different costumes and hairstyles that tie into a film, video game, or themed occasion. One version is dressed for a European fashion spree in “Scaris, City of Fright” while the Dead Tired Ghoulia version is dressed in pajamas for a slumber party or in MH terms, a “creepover”. (Punning is a running device for coating Monster High products with a veneer of horror.)

### *Engaging Doll Players Through Character Narratives*

Webisodes – two-minute online videos on [monsterhigh.com](http://monsterhigh.com) – supply most of the fantasy narratives that revolve around a small set of teenage “monsteristas” and their friendships, shopping trips, parties, concerts, and boyfriends. One of its producers described the tone of a planned film project, *Monster High Musical*, as the convergence of several horror films “*Beetlejuice* meets *Grease* meets *The Addams Family* meets *Edward Scissorhands*” (Zimmerman 2010). Rather than a foundational literary or film narrative that provides a cohesive storyline for dramatic play (e.g., anchoring fairy tale films in the Disney Princess franchise), the Monster High characters depend on their parentage and links to classic horror films for doll costumes and character traits: the grayed skin, stagger, and unintelligible groaning of brain-eating zombies, the fur, claws, and howling of werewolves, the pallor, fangs, and Transylvanian accent of vampires, and so on. New characters are constantly introduced with regular arrivals of “new ghouls” at school, expanding the franchise and narrative possibilities. Although the Monster High franchise includes an ever-increasing number of dolls, the supporting media narratives feature a much smaller set of core characters: Cleo DeNile (queen bee character and daughter of the Mummy and Cleopatra), Ghoulia Yelps (daughter of zombies, slave to Cleo DeNile, and the focus of this analysis), Draculaura (a vegan vampire and daughter of Dracula), Clawdeen Wolf (daughter of werewolves), and Frankie Stein (daughter of

Frankenstein and Bride of Frankenstein). The social relationships among characters are complex: each character has a sub-group of girlfriends and a boyfriend, marked by pins on her or his Monster High student profile and linked through other fictional social media on the Monster High website.

High school is simply the backdrop for the parties and social dramas that happen in webisode narratives. Common in children's media, the high school setting sets up the doll characters as older girls that tweens might admire...and want to purchase. The dolls are designed to appeal to young girls beyond preschool age by eschewing the friendly innocent ingénue typical of princess characters and offering an edgier "cool girl" character, signaled through the fashion choices that mix teen vogue and horror motifs. For example, innocence and a princess motif in one of Mattel's most recent Disney Princesses doll, *Frozen's* Elsa, manifest in a wide-eyed expression with friendly smile, thick blonde hair, and Barbie-doll body in a rigidly upright pose, hands lifted slightly away from her sides, fully-clothed head-to-toe in glitter-encrusted tiara, pastel blue ballgown, and translucent snowflake-speckled cape. By contrast, a Monster High doll's is more uncovered than covered, exposing the mid-ribs, shoulders, or thighs of body with a model's anorexic torso and long legs, topped by a very large head with heavily-mascaraed eyes, full and unsmiling lips, and colorful highlighted hair. The characters' costumes are hip with intentional juxtaposition of fishnet, plaids, sequins, fur, and lace, with accessories and patterns stylized from monster features: stitched flesh, claws, fangs, unraveled bandages, dripping blood, exposed brains, and so on. Regardless of the gruesome undertones, the characters' activities largely focus on familiar Barbie territory: shopping, clothing design, hair styling, and makeovers. Despite the ostensibly scholastic setting, the webisode narratives largely feature extra-curricular activities such as parties, rock concerts, and dating. In short, this is schooling and horror in the service of a fashionable teenage popularity.

### ***Reaching Child Consumers Through Flows of Commercial Goods and Digital Media***

As a top-selling toy line for Mattel, Monster High is a highly successful franchise that blends character narratives and advertising messages with children's everyday uses of consumer goods. These products make up the stuff of imaginative play and storying as characters materialize through tween's interactions with the extensive Monster High line of products that promise an edgy allure, capitalizing on the desires of teen wannabes for fashion design, jewelry, crafts, cosmetics, and new media:

- Dolls and accessories
- Crafting kits for fashion accessories such as headbands and jewelry
- Doll-making and clothing design sets: "Create a Monster"
- Cosmetics

- Halloween costumes
- Clothing: pajamas, underwear, tunics, leggings, hoodies
- Accessories: jewelry, hats, earmuffs, gloves, baseball cap, fishnet tights, leg warmers, arm warmers
- Electronics: karaoke machine, cell phone and tablet cases and skins, headphones, digital alarm clocks, cameras

Each Monster High product is an intertext (Kinder 1991) that connects to and must be read with other commercial products in the scope of the brand's transmedia (e.g., toys, video games, school supplies, snacks, vitamins, shampoo, and other goods linked by the same anchoring media characters and narratives). The transformative power of the transmedia comes from the repetition across time and space where products are taken up, read, played, and used all day, every day – each use a remaking of the toy's meaning (Collier 2013; Pennycook 2010). “Transmedia franchises place co-branded content, and with it their ideological messages and inducements to consumption, throughout our virtual and spatial environment, where our individual traversals will encounter it again and again” (Lemke 2009, p. 292). Lemke argues that we traverse these new kinds of texts in far-reaching flows, rather than as individual instances. Finally, these pervasive and persistent transversals with multiple flows of transmedia produce contradictions and incongruities, which offer opportunities for critique and remaking during children's play (Medina and Wohlwend 2014).

For example, Monster High transmedia connect to other blockbuster horror franchises marketed to adolescent girls such as *Twilight* (Meyer 2005) that include young adult literature, full-length films, video games, blogs, wikis, fanfiction, and other digital media. Monster High's indirect connection to trendy adolescent film and social media further adds to the cachet of the dolls for tweens. Social media and digital media for Monster High are extensive:

- Video games<sup>1</sup>: *Thirteen Wishes*, *Skulltimate Rollermaze*, and *Ghoul Spirit* (Nintendo)
- Mobile apps: *Sweet 1600*, *Finders Kreepers* (Mattel) with cross-product promotions through codes packaged with dolls that unlock additional app features
- Webisodes: 200+ two-three minute webisodes
- Music Video: We are Monster High commercial video plus montage version of fan videos
- Website [www.monsterhigh.com](http://www.monsterhigh.com) where registered viewers can:
  - Create a student profile
  - Design, shop for, and dress an avatar at the “Maul”
  - Play web games
  - Post a “scream” [120 character text message] as a Monster High character
  - Compose a memory page with an uploaded photo for the “fearbook”

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<sup>1</sup>Analysis is based on the 2014 Mattel Monster High website. The young adult literature on Monster High is not addressed here as the characters and storylines in the book series by Harrison (2010) differ markedly from the Mattel franchise and are written for a teenage rather than a tween audience.

- Feature-length films: *Frights, Camera, Action!*; *13 Wishes*; *Scaris, City of Frights*; and *New Ghoul @ School*
- Social media sites (Mattel accounts):
  - YouTube channel with 351,125 subscribers (<http://www.youtube.com/user/MonsterHigh>)
  - Facebook account with 2 million likes (<https://www.facebook.com/MonsterHigh>)
  - Tumblr site for the MH newspaper, The Gory Gazette (<http://gorygazette.tumblr.com/>)
  - @MonsterHigh Twitter account with 37,600 followers “Freaky just got fabulous. Welcome to the official Monster High Twitter! Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster.” (<https://twitter.com/MonsterHigh>)

In addition to this sample of commercially-produced licensed goods and media, fans have created innumerable wikis, blogs, and image- and video-sharing sites for their own child-produced videos, photos, and other digital texts.

## Dolls and Identity Texts

The meanings in all the franchise’s media narratives and products cluster in the Monster High dolls as *semiotic aggregates* (Scollon and Scollon 2003). The notion of transmedia as aggregated texts recognizes that material objects can be read as layered assemblages of meanings, modes, practices, histories, and discourses, drawing from Rowsell and Pahl’s (2007) theorization of sedimented identities, in which objects concretize their prior meanings, identities, and uses. Furthermore, dolls are identity texts that invite users to project pretend identities on to the dolls as proxies or enact pretend identities in relation to dolls. Toys – and particularly dolls – are designed to exaggerate their expected uses and anticipated identities (Wohlwend 2009) so that the meanings of the toy are clear and easy for children to recognize and play (Brougère 2006). This exaggeration is accomplished through material designs and associated discourse that can be analyzed and traced to histories of artifact meanings and uses.

Dolls carry anticipated identities, the ideal users and target demographics projected by marketers, are sedimented into the dolls’ designs and advertising messages through manufacturers’ production practices and distribution processes. The anticipated identities of sexy girl, trendsetter, and avid shopper are communicated through explicit directives in tag lines (e.g. “Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster.”) but also through product designs. The dolls are differentiated by skin color, hair color, and costume motif but all dolls have an ultra-thin and leggy body clothed in a skimpy outfit, long flowing hair coiffed in ever-changing configurations, and a face with overly-large eyes, full lips, and protruding cheekbones. The projected uses of

franchise products (e.g., cosmetics, shampoo, trendy fashions like leg and arm warmers) align with prevailing societal expectations related to gender, beauty ideals (Whitney 2013), and consumption (e.g., girls are passionate about shopping). Carrington (2003) analyzed Diva Starz dolls (also by Mattel) as identity kits, looking at the dolls' placement against a global "textual landscape" of commercial messages, film narratives, television, music, videogames, and digital websites. Her deconstruction of the dolls' aggregate texts found ideological content in the designs of facial and body features, clothing, and pre-recorded snippets of speech (e.g. "Do you like shopping? What's your favorite store? That's a good one. Let's go to the mall with our friends and buy something we can wear to school" (Carrington 2003, p. 89). Identity texts in commercial transmedia promote further consumption of products in the franchise through incentives to collect more dolls or to stay in-style by keeping up with the latest fashions or doll versions.

The texts of consumer culture provide displays of available identities and lives. These texts are built around displays of style and taste, and children are being trained in particular patterns and knowledges around consumption. These texts are what they reflect – they are unashamedly commodities to be purchased and consumed, linked to the assumption of particular consumer identities. (Carrington 2003, p. 94)

These studies suggest the need to look beyond transmedia film storylines and products to consider a doll's meanings that are:

- conveyed through character traits in film as well as film scripts and song lyrics
- normalized in idealized consumer attributes in advertising images and commercials
- gendered through consumer affiliation with brand names
- anticipated for player uses with toys, consumer goods, and video games
- designed to emphasize modal meanings in material designs of toys (e.g., colors, fabrics)
- materialized through use and histories of social practices (Rowell and Pahl 2007)
- shared among children: knowledge of characters, film scripts, play roles, and local peer culture values
- circulated through global transmedia flows (Lemke 2009)
- situated in commercial processes of production and marketing
- branded as markers of wide consumer acceptance

These messages, verbal and material, must be read as intertexts, to understand how they play against and with one another to make particular ways of "doing girl" seem natural and expected.

## **Doll Play, Media, and Cultural Imaginaries**

When children play with dolls, they access the multiple potential meanings to perform the expected identities and roles in these semiotic aggregates. This makes doll play a key site where children take up and reproduce stereotypical ways of doing

*girl* but also where they can use imagination as a social practice to remake and expand ways of participating in childhood cultures. Through play, children easily access, negotiate, and combine the dense meaning potentials in a doll's multiple identity texts for (1) characters in literary and media narratives, (2) consumer expectations in brand identity marketing, (3) social trajectories in peer culture, and (4) shared expectations in children's collective cultural imaginaries (Wohlwend 2012). In this view, play is a productive literacy with reconstructive potential, both semiotically and socially.

Semiotically, children at play detach the taken-for-granted meanings of ordinary objects and attach a pretend meaning to create props, toys, and dolls, or whatever is needed for the immediate play scenario. For example, a child at play can remake a cardboard gift box designed for a dress shirt and remake it into a pretend laptop computer by flipping open its unhinged side and tapping away on an imaginary keyboard. In the same way, a producer's design for a fashion doll embedded in its smiling plastic features, sleek hair, and silken gown can be easily replayed and shifted from glamorous princess to powerful superhero by a player's reimagining that swoops the doll through the air (Wohlwend 2009). For young children, these improvisations lead to re-negotiations of who-is-playing-what when roles are contested or confusing and players need to stop to question, clarify, or revise the meaning of a particular prop or action. Playful literacies enable children to draw upon their rich cultural repertoires (Gutiérrez and Rogoff 2003), build upon familiar ways of making meaning with ordinary artifacts (Rowell and Pahl 2007) and imagine together to mediate global media flows.

...the mass media construct the *social imaginary*, the place where kids situate themselves in their emotional life, where the future appears as a narration of possibilities as well as limits. (Aronwitz 1992, p. 195, emphasis in the original)

Socially, children at play are purposive cultural participants and producers who are capable of not only remaking the meanings of identity texts of dolls and toys but also wielding these texts to access and participate in social groups and peer cultures. Young children's peer cultures are powered by desires to belong, which often involves popular transmedia valued by children as markers of social status, tokens of shared affinities and friendships (Pugh 2009), and the material stuff that creates scarcity economies in classrooms (Fernie et al. 2011). One of the forces that binds peer cultures together is children's desire to keep adults out (Kyratzis 2004); in this sense the gross and the gruesome (e.g., garbage pail kids) provide valuable boundary markers to repel adults and enforce a child-only space (James 1998).

Further, girlhood studies show that doll play is pedagogical, teaching girls about possible futures though not necessarily in desirable ways (Wertheimer 2006). For example, fashion dolls point to gendered futures for girls as fashion-forward shoppers who keep up with the latest trends and relentlessly consume.

In this way, tweens' play with dolls can be understood as cultural production in which their pretense as Monster High characters is shared through digital media in participatory cultures such as affinity groups on fan websites. Understanding tween's Monster High doll play as digital participation and cultural production means locating the sites where children come together (i.e., moving from class-

rooms to online spaces), where they can reimagine the worlds they know and play the worlds they imagine, such as media, fashion, and adolescence in a future high school. For tweens, Monster High doll play merges digital literacies, fashion design, doll collecting, and media production as play moves out of school into after-school programs, YouTube media sharing sites, and fan wikis for digital affinity groups.

The meanings and uses of Monster High products shift across the multiple cultural contexts that children travel every day. For example, in the course of the day, a tween might dress in Monster High clothing, go to school, play with friends in an after-school program, shop at the mall, all the while texting, updating friends on social media, and uploading a selfie to the Monster High website. In the span of one day, children engage transmedia across social spheres of home, school, consumer, digital and peer cultures. In this perspective, the multiple identity texts in the semiotic aggregates of Monster High dolls enable pivots in and out of converging imaginaries.

Nexus analysis, a form of mediated discourse analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 2004), is useful for tracking how Monster High doll play fits into the imagined trajectories for girls that cycle in and out of a moment of digital media. Nexus analysis is action-oriented. This orientation situates the handling of dolls, making of digital video, and posting to social media in cultural spheres of accepted and expected social practices with valued artifacts that are used in particular ways to pull off particular identities. It also tracks global trajectories by following the echoes and emanations of consumption and production practices with transmedia, with an eye toward identifying small points of rupture as opportunities for transformation (Wohlwend 2014). Elsewhere, my colleague Carmen Medina and I have argued that the ways children play media represent their understandings and remakings of cultural imaginaries; that is, the way they use media toys both replay stereotypical identities but also transform identity texts to better represent their realities and purposes (Medina and Wohlwend 2014). In the next sections, I examine four imaginaries – imagined futures for girls anticipated by Mattel – that converge around the dolls and future girlhoods: fashion, adolescent sexuality, diversity, and schooling.

## **Girlhood Imaginaries: Anticipated Futures in Monster High**

### ***Anticipating Fashion Consumption: Monsteristas and Makeovers***

Monster High is all about fashion, circulating a well-worn post-feminist trope: fashionistas (e.g., *Clueless*, 1995) who want to stay current by buying the latest trends with a crossover subtext that staying in style is the key to popularity in high school. Like Bratz, Monster High dolls are fashion dolls that “emphasize girls’ future roles as consumers of the various products and services required to produce normative femininity: hairstyle, makeup, clothes, and accessories – ranging from jewelry to

flashy cars – are critically important” (Hains 2012, p. 123). In addition to postfeminist discourse about gendered futures, the desire to own the latest fashion (dolls as well as articles in the tweens’ clothing line) circulates consumerist discourse through a neo-liberal imperative to continuously consume (McRobbie 2004). This need to keep up also promotes identities as collectors as fans seek to purchase not only the extensive range of doll characters but also to keep up by purchasing the most recent version of each doll.

Monster High transmedia invites girls to produce and to imagine themselves as fashion designers, re-semiotized via the horror theme as mad scientists in Create-A-Monster kits in which children design a customized doll by combining body parts, clothing, and accessories.

Monster High creator Garrett Sander and designer Rebecca “Robecca” Shipman share their in-the-coffin tips and tricks for creating your own scary-cool student bodies with Monster High™ Create-A-Monster™ Design Lab. Mix and match heads, arms legs, ears, wings, fashions, wigs and shoes to customize your very own monster creation. You’ll be sparking new life in no time. (from the Monster High website: <http://www.monsterhigh.com/en-us/freaky-fab/bring-your-monster-to-life.html>)

The Create-a-Monster kit and similar jewelry and headband accessory-making kits connect to histories of girls’ crafting and doll making. Similarly, the website encourages children to create avatars and play dress-up games.

### ***Anticipating Adolescent Bodies: “Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster”***

Monster High characters are designed to be teenagers, slightly older than the target tween demographic. The adolescent future depicted for tween girls is one of exaggerated sexualization, commonplace in tween doll digital media. For example, in analyzing Mattel’s *barbiegirls.com* virtual world, Black et al. (2013) found girls’ avatars had

a highly sexualized appearance (form-fitting and revealing clothing) ... The “identity kit” available for the avatars also sends the message that physical appearance, particularly markers of feminine beauty that conform to traditional Western standards such as long hair, makeup and enhanced features, is most valued in this space. (p. 10)

Beyond promoting a homogenizing and impossible beauty ideal to young girls, the hypersexuality of teen fashion dolls resonates with a tween’s desire for more power and independence.

This sexuality, or sartorial gestures toward it, encodes a sense of autonomy and personhood and has been sought after and welcomed by girls even as it is promoted by certain corners of the industry and decried by social commentators. An aspirational social identity, the tween, by definition, seeks to move out of ‘tweenhood’ and thus up the age prestige ladder. (Cook and Kaiser 2004, p. 206).

With Monster High’s body ideal comes anticipation of imperfection as girls aspire and fail to look like the impossibly thin fashion dolls. The material bodies of



the dolls impose a desire for anorexic bodies as the narrative imposes a demand for a normative self-gaze in which girls' bodies are constructed as flawed. Girls are encouraged to "celebrate your own freaky flaws" in an overarching discourse of acceptance of selves and others, timely in Mattel's view "especially as bullying has become such a hot topic" (Mosbergen 2013).

"Celebrate Your Imperfections

Hey ghoulfriends! Do you feel freaky fabulous when you look in the mirror? Monster High and WeStopHate are helping ghouls rewrite how they see themselves – from the inside out – with a ferociously fierce vocabulary! Those who are happy with themselves are less likely to put others down, so click below to resurrect your clawsome self-reflection." From Freaky Fab 13 tab > Behind the Screams on [www.monsterhigh.com](http://www.monsterhigh.com)

However, the discourse of acceptance and diversity in Monster High is strategic, differentiating dolls and creating product recognition through iconic identifiers (Wohlwend 2009) through each character's signature skin and hair colors in ways that convey no cultural identity, that is, difference that connotes no difference (McAllister 2007; Orr 2009). Like the manufactured racial ambiguity in Bratz and Lalaloopsy doll franchises (Wohlwend and Hall 2016), the impossible skin colors of green, blue, brown, merge with white, tan, brown, and black colors to convey difference in Monster High's fantasy racial identities and a marker of an exoticized sexuality. "The stereotypes of the overly-sexualized woman of color are well-established. In the case of the Bratz dolls, their colour stands as one more signifier for sexy" (Orr 2009, p. 24). A quick reading of the characters' bios on the website further troubles the function of this faux-diversity, revealing boundary work that upholds separateness of monster racial categories through the pairings in which monsters only date the same kinds of monsters: vampires date vampires, werewolves date werewolves, zombies date zombies, and so on.

### ***Anticipating High School Cliques: "Ghoulfriends", Boyfriends, and Social Dramas***

The Monster High website, through elements that mimic Facebook and Twitter pages, focuses on a group of girls and their social relationships. For example, each character's friendships and social status are marked by pins on the website profile. Ghoulia Yelp's pins include Cleo De Nile, Frankie Stein, and Clawdeen Wolf; Cleo's reciprocal pin on Ghoulia's page marks their (queen bee/slave) friendship. Following familiar clique and "mean girls" tropes that permeate girls' popular media, belonging is of paramount importance so that a dominant theme in webisodes is making and keeping friends, with sub-texts about maintaining in-group status and sufficient popularity. This fashion troupe of friends are sexualized school-girls whose focus is on dating, parties, and concerts with popularity as the ultimate goal. However similar to Ken's long-standing irrelevance in the venerable Barbie franchise, boyfriends are mostly beside the point and serve as accessories, useful as points of tension and competition among girls.

Monster High engages cultural imaginaries of future girlhoods, including anticipated worlds of fashion-forward consumption, adolescent sexuality, and popularity at school. These imaginaries are filled by post-feminist discourses that promote continual fashioning of bodies, clothing, profiles, and relationships to achieve ideals of the self-pleasing modern girl-woman circulated by lifestyle experts or celebrities (McRobbie 2004; Tasker and Negra 2007). Convergences among cultural imaginaries can produce amplifications when their associated identity texts (e.g., daughter, student, shopper, tweeter, and friend) resonate or distill into a unified theme. However, cultural convergences also produce slippages and contradictions that can rupture or transgress identity expectations for that social space (e.g., a texting student at school). Slippages among transmedia intertexts make their identity texts visible and available for remaking during children's improvisation during play or media production. Tween girls' engagements with transmedia and their production of zombie texts enact their shared understandings of expectations for participation in media imaginaries of adolescent girlhoods, schooling, and fashion. However, these engagements of cultural imaginaries of popular media can clash with dominant imaginaries of childhood as a space of innocence (e.g., when children's media worlds are viewed as too sexual, violent, or vulgar and banned from early childhood education as corrupting influences). Monster dolls like Ghoulia violate these visions, rupturing dreams of children as innocents and so on.

## **Tweens and Zombies: Ambiguous Identity Texts with Rupturing Potential**

In conceptualizing tween girls' relation to media, Cook and Kaiser (2004)

recognize the complex negotiation that occurs between capital interests and girls' agency in their articulations of gender and sexuality. Girls may have little control over media representations, but they do exercise agency in the representations they create in the daily process of contemplating and dressing their bodies. Ultimately, this agency cannot be separated from the marketplace and the cultural spaces it generates – strategically, ambiguously. (Cook and Kaiser 2004, p. 206)

In this cultural space of ambiguity lies the rupturing potential of the tween and the zombie. In the next section, I examine websites and YouTube videos to see how girls actually take up the imaginaries in their digital play and online text-making with the zombie doll, Ghoulia Yelps.

Zombies are essentially a paradox – the living dead – and the Ghoulia Yelp character is no exception. Ghoulia is a brainy brain-eater, a fashionista with a zombie's hunched posture and an occasional fly buzzing around her face, the “smartest girl in school” who can only mumble and grunt, “Uhh ughh (Translation: I think fast but move in slow motion)”, an outsider yet part of the in-group ([www.monsterhigh.com](http://www.monsterhigh.com)). She is a chic zombie whose skimpy outfits cling to broken body, a decaying beauty, reminiscent of Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005). She is other to the rest of

the monster girls' group with marginalized status as slave to the queen bee. The zombie character's intellect and love of reading is signaled by her cat's eye glasses and adds to her abject positioning by indexing the undesirability of a girl geek. As a zombie, she is sub-human with super-human strength.

But are girls making use of these paradoxes as opportunities for rupturing and remaking pre-conceived commercially-driven girlhoods? As girls move through childhood, princesses, fairy tales, and playrooms are left behind for these edgier fashionistas, social media, and girls' cultures in high school. Against this landscape of monstrosity, children play in and out of the convergences of horror, fashion, adolescence, and schooling to share their own imaginaries, depicted in their digital texts on social media.

## **Wielding Zombies and Horrifying Imaginaries**

### ***Dressing Up as Zombies, Sharing Ghoulia Collections, and Recruiting Digital Friends***

She has light blue hair with dark blue highlights, fishnet arm warmers, and sneakers are lace-up boots. Omigosh, they're so beautiful. I absolutely love them. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DQySrNEiQA>)

Playing dress-up as zombies is a common theme in YouTube videos by tweens who collect Monster High dolls. Girls describe Ghoulia's costume in detail in these character reviews and often share their doll collections. In one video with 36,069 views, 6-year-old Jade is dressed as the zombie doll and describes her own costume and each of seven Ghoulia dolls, "She has a brain headband and she has green glasses, a brain skirt, and germs on her um, some [bodice]. Her skirt can come off. And she has bloody high heels. And she comes with a drink, a postcard, and a brush." A key purpose of tweens' video posts is to recruit other Monster High fans to subscribe to a girl's YouTube channel and to like the review or leave comments, apparent in the description that introduces the video (posted by Jade's parent):

Hi Everyone! This time we wanted to show you Jade's Ghoulia Collection. (We forgot Gloom Beach Ghoulia, Sorry!) Jade dressed up like Ghoulia to do the video. We are still new at the makeup... We will do similar videos on the other Ghoulis! Please leave sweet comments. Jade is only 7 years old. Please Subscribe and Thumbs up! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWt758eANs4> [168151 views, 243 likes, 93 dislikes, 6603 subscriptions]

The horror here is tame, made innocent by stylization that turns brains into pink fabric dotted with red squiggles that ever-so-slightly resemble brain tissue. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the focus is on being pretty – as edgier and older versions of themselves. Tweens in these videos are clearly enjoying playing with makeup and carefully employing teen cosmetics: blending gray foundation, brushing on black eyeliner and mascara. But not all child-made videos align so neatly with corporate

visions of the dolls' uses as markers of post-feminist taste, neo-liberal consumption, and digital popularity.

### ***Zombie Attacks at School: Rupturing Imaginaries Through Death and Destruction***

A search of YouTube reveals a range of Monster High dramas filmed by tween fans using dolls in various scenarios that go far beyond the bland storylines depicted in the webisodes. Dolls are smashed together in plastic embraces or physical fights over love triangles and dismembered (removable forearms and feet make this possible) and slaughtered in zombie attacks. For example, in one video series, various Monster High dolls are thrown into tall grass, buried in mud, or launched off a deck into the pond below and fished out of slimy water (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIcn73oHoAY>).

One common theme is the sleepover that goes awry when Ghoulia goes on a brain-eating rampage and spreads the contagion by turning other dolls into zombies. In one video, five Monster High dolls discuss their options during a zombie siege. Girl players narrate off camera:

“We’ve got a bathroom and water, that’s all we need...until we die of starvation. DIE.”  
 “Nobody said anything about dying in my contract.”  
 “Orrrrr we could just eat each other.”  
 “Oh, that’s –”  
 “Why would you say that??”  
 “Eeewww.” [chorused]  
 “Girrrrl.”

In the next scene, Ghoulia doll zombies attack the Monster High boy dolls, with much groaning and munching, while Cleo and another doll watch from their perch on the dollhouse wall, “Oh, no. The men are gone. I’m not sacrificing myself to try to help them.”

Finally, one of the besieged dolls reveals that she is in fact a zombie and turns on the survivors. “And now I’ll kill all of you next because *I* am not who you think I am. *I* am different. I’m [voice drops to sinister whisper] a zombie!” The Cleo doll shakes violently creating a blurred image and the Ghoulia doll [also missing forearms] quickly appears in her place onscreen. The zombie continues attacking the other dolls, continuing the massacre. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mErgdGzB21o>

Tweens’ doll dramas – and countless other Monster High fan videos – are very different than the insipid school-based crises on the franchise’s commercially-produced webisodes. Children are improvising dire perils and near-escapes to add suspense to their videos, creating gruesome (and giggly) dramas that are fueled by their knowledge of horror films and their awareness of peer viewers’ preferences. The closing tag lines on videos urge viewers to subscribe, revealing the critical importance of recruiting other fans as digital friends, markers of cultural participa-

tion common on social media. Digital doll play is cultural production, connecting with other fans via the popular dolls and using their familiar characters to attract viewers and anchor cohesive stories. When girls collaborate to produce videos as in the zombie attack video, their filmed doll play captures moments of improvisation as they work within an emerging text and negotiate conflicting perspectives in-character, “Why would you say that?”

These tween videos rupture visions of children as zombie consumers in market worlds, passively eating hyper-feminine fashion identity texts in a stupefying progression from innocent princesses to mean girls. Instead, children play what they know, drawing on their understandings of the world around them, pulling in zombie media and cannibalistic themes in horror genres to stage their own versions of destruction in a high school overrun by zombies.

These films also trouble visions of children as zombie literacy users in need of a mind-numbing and dumbed-down pre-programmed curriculum. Instead, tweens demonstrate their literacy expertise and media savvy, inventing and sharing their stories with digital tools, manipulating cameras and screens as well as social media to create the biggest impact. The complexities in tweens’ digital doll play invite critical comparisons of children’s vibrant popular media narratives with the zombie-fied writing that happen in school to see how we might bring schooling back to life by allowing children to play what they know, to negotiate, collaborate and represent realities with selves and with dolls, and to share their texts onscreen and online.

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# Chapter 10

## Zombies, Boys, and Videogames: Problems and Possibilities in an Assessment Culture

Sandra Schamroth Abrams

### Introduction

Zombies. Flesh-eating, grunting and moaning zombies. In the AMC (American Movie Classics) original series, which is based on Robert Kirkman's correspondingly titled comics, *The Walking Dead*, zombies are the undead—humans who have died and come back to life in the form of decaying, yet 'living' bodies that feed on live flesh. They are responsive to basic stimuli—sound, smell, light—but their movement is limited to walking and running (e.g., they cannot jump and rarely can they climb). These zombies add an air of fear and hysteria to the television show, but the zombies are not the focal point; rather, the post-apocalyptic behavior of remaining mankind raises questions about the relationship between the survival of individuals and that of larger society. Changed by the new reality, humans are often more dangerous than the predictable zombies; humanity and kindness are tentative and often are in abeyance, especially when contexts shift quickly. Further, some television critics believe that “what has struck the biggest chord is its raising of theological questions and how it engages in a continuous discussion about human dignity, our fears of death and desecration, our need, or not, for some sort of transcendent reality, and the importance of community” (Blundell 2013, para. 11). Continuing the ethics-questioning theme, Telltale's videogame version, *The Walking Dead*, confronts players with decisions that require one to contemplate personal safety versus the good of the community.

In the Microsoft/Mojang videogame, *Minecraft*, zombies are also a threatening component, as they can sneak up on a player and cause his/her short-lived demise; once attacked, the player then re-spawns and appears in another, often unfamiliar

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part of the *Minecraft* world, and the player—often frustrated—needs to find his/her way back to familiar ground. As in *The Walking Dead*, the *Minecraft* zombies are fairly uncomplicated and predictable, and players can work together to defeat them. Though *Minecraft* is an ‘open world’ game, or one that provides players relative freedom to shape the space and play as they desire, the zombies are imposed by the computer program (e.g., the player cannot change that option) in specific game modes and levels. Though players are not faced with the same complex ethical decisions presented in *The Walking Dead*, *Minecraft* gameplay calls attention to the interjection of obstacles that often complicate, stymie, and/or derail game play. Looking across these two examples of zombies, one can see how they present a challenge to game players—gamers must remain hyper-vigilant of their presence and must work to eliminate the zombies as a means to maintain order and continue onward as planned. Ultimately, if players are attacked by a zombie, their ‘life’ in the game is re-routed, and, in the show, this transformation results in people becoming soulless creatures.

In many ways, the zombie seems to be a suitable trope for the challenges students, teachers, and parents may face as they confront and respond to imposed standards and curricula. More specifically, this chapter extends the zombie metaphor to examine the challenges two adolescent male learners and their mother faced as their New York public middle and high schools adopted national standards and imposed curricular modifications. Through the perspective of the stakeholders (the two students and their mother), assessment-driven changes ironically challenged good pedagogy and generated hysteria. In light of the qualitative data, this chapter suggests that videogames can provide a model for productive, collaborative and creative change that promises to be relevant and meaningful to educators and students.

## An Assessment Culture

PISA,<sup>1</sup> TIMMS,<sup>2</sup> and NAEP,<sup>3</sup> may vary in scope and content, but they are part of the alphabet soup of assessment surveys that help countries determine their global ranking and (re)consider educational standards. Across international waters and continents, national curricula may have different forms and implementation plans, but they all use similar language that points to meeting the needs of students and creating more enriched educational experiences. Nonetheless, national curricula impact content delivery, and, like learning, curricular reform is a process. In what follows is a brief overview of the national curricular standards in England, Australia, and the United States. What is evident across the three is that education is not without its challenges; like a world pervaded by zombies, explicit and implicit

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<sup>1</sup>Programme for International Student Assessment.

<sup>2</sup>Trends in Mathematics and Science Study.

<sup>3</sup>National Assessment of Educational Progress.



requirements and benchmarks effect a change. In some cases, requisite content and pedagogical delivery may feed a culture of assessment, but that does not have to create an educational dystopia.

According to England's Department for Education's website, the new national curriculum and assessment reform will offer teachers and students greater flexibility: "the programmes of study within the new National Curriculum (NC) set out expectations at the end of each key stage, and all maintained schools will be free to develop a curriculum relevant to their pupils that teaches this content" (National Curriculum 2014, p. 2). However, there remain "statutory programmes of study and attainment targets," and the new curriculum indicates what subjects need to be taught and what will be assessed. In addition to summarizing some of the changes, including the chronological discussion of history and an increase in Shakespeare literature, a BBC report indicated that some experts have expressed concern that recent changes to the national curriculum "will require children to cover subjects, particularly in maths and science, up to two years earlier than their peers in top-performing nations" (How is the national curriculum changing? 2014, para. 11).

In Australia, a national curriculum "sets consistent national standards to improve learning outcomes for all young Australians. It sets out, through content descriptions and achievement standards, what students should be taught and achieve, as they progress through school" (Australian Curriculum n.d.). This includes, but is not limited to, specific skills and understandings students should demonstrate at the end of a particular unit. According to the Australian government's website, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for developing, implementing, and assessing the curriculum and resulting student performance, and the website dedicated to the national curriculum features a digital tool, Scootle, that provides teachers resources that are directly aligned with the curriculum. The 2014 Australian Government's *Review of the Australian Curriculum*, included, but was not limited to, recognizing the overcrowded curriculum and recommending curricular restructuring, which would remove and/or make some content optional. Though these changes would be made in the name of the contemporary needs of students, Goldsmith (2014) argued that some changes, such as the removal of media arts as a compulsory subject, are "wrongheaded." He advocated for students to learn how to create, participate, and navigate in a digital culture, suggesting that "rather than being downsized and made an optional extra, media arts should be at the very core of the 21st century Australian Curriculum" (para. 22).

Finally, in the United States, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are part of an effort to raise the educational prowess of the country: "The standards are internationally benchmarked and backed by evidence showing that students' mastery of them leads to preparedness for higher education and the workforce" (Sloan 2010). In 2009, 47 states (Texas, South Carolina, and Alaska abstained) agreed to adopt national standards for teaching K-12 students, as the standards promised to support academic achievement and success (Forty-Nine States and Territories 2009). However, the introduction and integration of the Common Core Standards has faced mercurial and inconsistent responses from educators, parents, students and critics.

In the United States, many have felt that students are being overly tested, something comedian Louis C.K. addressed when he attacked the test preparation related to the Common Core and the emotional distress children experience (Mead 2014). However, like any debatable topic, the effectiveness and implementation of the Common Core also is met by other perspectives. *Newsweek* reporter Alexander Nazaryan (2014), who wrote in response to Louis C.K.'s comments, believed that the Common Core initiative, still in its nascent stages, cannot aptly be assessed at this point. Though Diane Ravitch agreed that it is too soon to assess the Common Core's efficacy, in her May 2, 2014 blog, *My response to Alexander Nazaryan*, she also called attention to misinformation in the *Newsweek* article—from the inaccurate discussion of teacher evaluation to the incorrect assumption that the unions did not back the initiative. Ravitch, however, did acknowledge that, as Nazaryan noted, the Common Core Initiative has capitalistic benefits, referring to Joanne Weiss's (2011) comment in the *Harvard Business Review* blog that “the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.”

The purpose in this chapter is not to debate the efficacy of national curricula, like the Common Core, nor is it to expose a nasty truth about national curriculum initiatives. Rather, it is to call attention to the ways the *transition* to a national curriculum, such as the Common Core, and the resultant shifts in classroom culture can have serious residual impact on teachers, students, and parents. Though not generalizable, this case study provides insight into how the implementation of national standards has affected two adolescent male students who attend public school in New York State.

## **Background Information: Boys, School, and the Common Core**

For over 40 years, gender has continued to be a defining marker in literacy achievement in the United States. The National Assessment of Educational Progress's Long-Term Trend Assessment report indicates that for 17- and 13-year-olds, “the score gap between male and female students in 2012 was not significantly different from the score gap in 1971” (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] 2013). The disparate reading performances of male and female students have been a prevailing concern among researchers and have been the source of reform discussions (Carnegie Corporation of New York's Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy 2010). Further, research (Conrad-Curry 2011; Stillwell 2010) considers how the gender gap also is reflected in graduation rates, noting “in every American state, boys leave school before graduation at a higher rate than do girls” (Conrad-Curry 2011, p. 3). In many ways, like the zombie behavior, adolescent male reading rates are predictable and problematic for society.

Despite the national efficacy of the Common Core, there are local considerations that need to be explored and addressed. After all, students are facing new forms of

evaluation; according to the Common Core's website ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)), "the new standards also provide a way for teachers to measure student progress throughout the school year and ensure that students are on the pathway to success in their academic careers" (What parents should know 2014, para 3). How students perceive this evaluation and the changes they are subjected to can have unintentional impact on their learning experiences. Those who struggle with the transition may impose predictable obstacles for teachers, especially when teachers' assumptions about academic achievement and placement impact students' feelings about school and success.

This chapter features the schooling experiences of two adolescent males—Kyle, age 15, and Sage, age 12 (all names and identifiers are pseudonyms)—who have been public school students for their entire schooling experience. I attended the same high school as Kyle and Sage's mother, Sloane, and I have been privy to their academic progress since their elementary years. More recently, I offered free tutoring to Kyle and Sage in their home (with their mother present) during the 2013–2014 school year, and I also observed the boys before and after two tutoring sessions. Likewise, their mother, Sloane, who spoke openly about the boys' academic experiences, agreed to a formal interview. With Sloane's permission and Kyle and Sage's assent, I formally interviewed them as well. Finally, the maintenance of field journal jottings (Emerson 1995) and reflective memos (Creswell 2013), have helped to provide robust qualitative descriptions. Though the inclusion of teacher interviews would have helped to clarify, challenge, and/or confirm the overarching considerations noted in this chapter, I was unable to approach the involved teachers without potentially exposing the participants' identities, something that was of particular concern to Sloane and to me. Though they may live in a well-populated suburb (approximately 20,000 people) within 20 miles from New York City, Sloane noted that their town operates "like a small rural town—especially in school, everyone knows everyone and sports are of utmost importance, like in the 80s movie, *All the Right Moves*." And as Sloane described the school culture, a vision of soulless zombies entered the pedagogical picture.

### **“The System Has Absolutely Failed These Kids!” (Sloane)**

Since we began speaking about the Common Core, Sloane emphatically explained that her older son, Kyle, has been subjected to the changing curricular tides and has suffered the consequences of a school system grappling with Common Core implementation. Sloane explained

My son, who's in ninth grade, came into the school and the teacher herself was extremely stressed out about it. The kids just learned about it [The Common Core] in September...At the beginning, it made a very big difference with the teaching. The teacher pretty much told us at Back to School Night that they [the teachers] have no idea what they're doing [because of the curricular changes] and our children probably will not do well.

According to Sloane, because of the class's continued poor performance, Kyle's math teacher abandoned the changes she had made to address the Common Core and started to teach "mostly regular math." Sloane added that, with a tutor, Kyle improved in math, but she is "not really sure what [work] will be for Common Core and will not be for Common Core because the teachers do not make the parents privy to it."

Sloane has repeatedly noted how uninformed or misinformed she has been, and she has a distinct mistrust in the school system because of teachers' empty promises and irresponsible language. Further, Sloane explained how uncertainty has permeated the school culture: "The kids are completely ignored, and they walk around clueless because there's no guidance. The teachers are so busy themselves trying to figure out their own stuff because the state has mandated now how they're going to learn, what they're going to do, what needs to be done... But no kid learns the same way." Though the Common Core acknowledges the need for differentiation, Sloane perceived the educators' responses as attacks upon her son's learning. Further, she sensed that strategic moves were necessary for survival in a culture that was in a state of transition, seemingly creating (Common Core) zombies.

### *Meet Kyle*

Kyle is a 5'10" tall, athletic, and social 15-year-old. When I visited his home, often I would find him playing videogames that ranged from first person shooters, such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops* to the open world game, *Minecraft*. When I asked Kyle to tell me about school, excluding his social life, he said he "does not like school... I would say that it's boring. Without like friends or anything? No fun at all." According to Sloane, Kyle "is not a strong reader," and Kyle often explained that reading "is boring; school is boring."

When I tutored Kyle in writing, I found that he had a good recollection of the text he was reading and about which he needed to write an essay. He was able to form an outline and roughly organize his ideas, but, when it came to writing a formal piece, Kyle struggled to elaborate on his critical analyses; rather, he often referred to the events in the book at face value instead of considering symbolic meaning and/or multiple interpretations. However, Kyle was a capable reader who, like all students, would benefit from reading more.

When Kyle was in sixth grade (2010–2011 school year), he was enrolled in a special reading class, one that the guidance counselor wanted to keep him in for seventh grade, which would be in place of a foreign language. Sloane explained that she spoke with the guidance counselor and the reading teacher who "promised that under no circumstances would [Kyle] be forced to take a foreign language until he gets to high school." In other words, if Sloane followed the teacher's and the counselor's expert advice, then Kyle would receive additional support in reading without having to be concerned with the foreign language component in middle school.

However, within months, there were curricular shifts, and the agreement the school had made with Sloane no longer was viable:

It was seventh grade, the week going into Memorial Day [the last week in May]...that I got a call from the guidance counselor...telling me that the laws have now changed, and [Kyle] cannot graduate eighth grade without a foreign language, and he has to now go into seventh grade [Spanish] rather than eighth grade [Spanish].

Distraught, Sloane explained that she felt betrayed especially since the reading teacher, “who gave me her word...[said] oh well, I don’t even think [Kyle] should be taking a language, period, because he can’t really read. He will never do well in a foreign language.” When Sloane spoke about this event, her eyes welled with tears. Not only did she feel as though the school “abandoned” her child, but also she discerned the lack of confidence the teachers had in Kyle. In the face of unexpected curricular mandates and administrative panic, Kyle had been blindly subjected to a new protocol by an educator who seemingly sacrificed a student to feed the accountability frenzy. Sloane explained that “when you think of the message they sent him, they sent him and myself as a parent, if it wasn’t for me being fortunate enough to have a mother and a friend in the school system to know enough about it to help me and understand the rules and the words, then I would have had nothing.” Like most survivors in *The Walking Dead*, Sloane needed the support of others to help her navigate the rather challenging and often terrifying terrain.

With guidance from her mother, Sloane approached the administration and she “begged” the interim principal to help her: “I made a deal with her...I would get a private tutor in the school district ...They told me that I had to pay the entire summer out of pocket for [the tutor] and that only then would they allow [Kyle] to take Spanish in the eighth grade. So that way he’d be caught up. I had to pay her. She pretty much came once a week. For the entire summer, my son was completely committed to it.” In the end, Kyle completed the necessary requirements and he was able to mask the ephemeral deficiency. In fact, because of the tutoring, Kyle is now enrolled in Honors Spanish. However, Kyle was soon to face yet another obstacle when he transitioned to ninth grade.

### ***Additional Issues with Placement***

In seventh grade, Kyle scored a 298 on the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) exam, a score that is two points below passing. Though Sloane wanted to ‘opt him out’ of the ELA exams in eighth grade, she learned from Kyle’s teachers and guidance counselor that Kyle’s high school schedule would be contingent upon his ELA scores. As if attacked by a zombie in *Minecraft*, Kyle’s standardized test scores would have caused him to ‘re-spawn’ in a different space, a class that was not necessarily academically appropriate for him. Though it is supposed to be an extra support, the high school ELA class seemed to be more of a punishment. According to Sloane, “It starts at 7:15 in the morning or it’s the last period class. I know kids

who have lost their electives because they were stuck in that class because they got a 298.”

Even though Kyle took the ELA exams again in eighth grade and passed with a score well over 300, he continued to be judged by his seventh grade score, something Sloane said she actively fought to counter:

The school comes in with a failing attitude. [Kyle] struck out before he even had a chance to bat. They told me that if I opted him out of the ELA in eighth grade, they would go by the score of 298. I said ‘I’m going to have him take the ELA in eighth grade so he can waive his score’ because the state would mandate him to take this [remedial] ELA class in ninth grade [in lieu of an elective] even though they don’t have to take the ELA exams in high school. So when he was taking his ELA [exam] in eighth grade, the guidance counselor called me up and told me that they’re making the high school schedule, and they’re still going to go by his seventh grade score, but if he does well enough, then they will pull him from the [remedial] class in ninth grade. And I fought the school and I said absolutely not. If he does not do well on the eighth grade score, then he could go into the class. If he does well on it, I am not going to take away his elective. He is to be given the two electives to begin with. And I only knew this because I am friendly with the guidance counselor. I got lucky. Most of the other parents did not have a choice, and their children had to go straight into the remedial class.

As in *The Walking Dead*, the context seemed to constantly change, and moving forward was precarious and difficult without the help others. What’s more, there were so many unknowns and inconsistencies related to the curricular transition, and information was a major commodity. However, by the time Kyle’s brother, Sage, entered middle school, the district’s transition to the new curriculum had been well under way.

## *Meet Sage*

Sage is a 5’2” tall 12-year-old middle school student who, unlike his brother, tends to enjoy school. Sage is quiet and reserved and he has a small circle of friends. When I visited his home, I found Sage playing videogames with his older brother. Of the two boys, Sage is a more avid gamer than Kyle, mostly because Kyle is on a number of school-based sports teams.

Sage did not have the same experience as Kyle in terms of placement. Sloane explained that much of this was due to her developed knowledge of the Common Core, placement protocols, and her rights as a stakeholder. In other words, she had survived the system: “I learned from my older son what my rights were. That I also would not crumble and die like they told me I would.” Sloane also acknowledged that Sage’s general academic trajectory was different; the teachers seemed more organized and less hesitant about the standards and exams. According to Sloane, Sage’s biggest challenge was his quiet demeanor: “He is quiet...[so the teachers] do not see him because of that. I find that they pay the most attention to the most noise.”

When I spoke with Sage about school, he indicated that much of his work was based on drill-and-skill methods: “Often we just look at the slide show and look at

the slides and copy things down.” When I asked Sage what his teacher was doing while he was copying the information, he indicated that “she’s in the front...she’s controlling the slides.” As Sage continued to tell me about his schooling, there were two resounding words—worksheets and copying. Even when Sage spoke of digital technology and collaborative situations, the objective was to find and copy information. Sage explained, “Well we used iPads and copied like notes down because we’re about to read this book so I guess we’re copying notes down about the book... just finding a website and copying it down from there.”

## Zombies in the Classroom

The boys’ stories of school may be different, but they both suggest that policy-related hysteria can create a dystopian-like setting; the uncertainty and ambiguity related to integrating new curricular standards can wear away educators’ humanity. Kyle’s teachers were busy trying to negotiate standards and student success, and, based on Kyle and Sloane’s testimony, the teachers’ and administrators’ compassion seemed to be masked by the stress of imminent and unsettling change. Given that, for Kyle’s situation, the teachers were first reorganizing and responding to new state and federal mandates, there was a sense of chaos, confusion, and resentment. As noted earlier, according to Sloane, even Kyle’s math teacher admitted to feeling uninformed and uncertain about the curricular changes, which resonated in her hostile proclamation that the children would not succeed. In a similar vein, according to Kyle and Sloane, there was an air of intolerance and unjust aggression in Kyle’s history class.

Kyle’s history class was an inclusion class, and, thus, there were three teachers present in the room: the teacher of record, the inclusion teacher, and an aide. According to Kyle, in his History class when he was talking with neighboring students (something he admitted to being inappropriate behavior), the teacher would penalize him and not others:

I can be talking, and [the teachers will] send me out in the hall. Somebody else will be talking and nothing will happen. Like they [the teachers] were yelling at our class and ... I got into class and they said, ‘[Kyle], go to the back.’ I said, ‘Why am I going to the back?’ ‘Because,’ they said, ‘you have to go to the back. We know that you’re going to be talking.’

Kyle also reported that one of his friends criticized the teachers without penalty: “And then one of my other friends, they were yelling in our class saying, ‘Everything takes a long time’ and then he said, ‘Well maybe if you guys didn’t take so long to do everything then it wouldn’t,’ and nothing happened to him.” Kyle felt as though there were an injustice, and his teachers’ insensitivity made him feel as though he were a nuisance that could easily be disregarded with appropriate maneuvering.

Whereas Kyle’s teachers seemed to have lost some of their humanity, Sage’s teachers seemed to be timid and prudent, presenting required, but uninspired lessons. Even in English class, where discussion and interpretation typically have been

welcome, Sage explained that he “has a worksheet [to complete] most of the time,” and other times his class will “look at a slide show or something like that.” When I asked about history class, Sage said, “She gives us this worksheet...and we copy down notes.” When I pressed further and asked Sage if he had been able to express an opinion in class, he noted that teachers “sometimes” asked his opinion, “like, do you think this person was a good person or something like that.”

## Looking to Videogames to Understand Change and Engagement

At the heart of the discussion of Kyle, Sage, and Sloane’s journey is the concept of change and transformation. In the schools, state and federal mandates shifted curricular requirements, and, even though the Common Core had been announced as early as 2009, the teachers, students, and parents seemed unaware of the pending change until they were faced with its implementation. By looking to videogames as an exemplar of structured change, perhaps the educational community can consider various roads to adaptation that honor creativity, sensitivity, and educational soul.

In an Edutopia interview, game designer and educator, Katie Salen noted that, when students (and teachers) begin to think as game designers, there is a specific focus on purpose and audience:

Who’s their audience? Who are they designing for? And, for me, that’s a very, very powerful idea in the 21st Century is that your first question is: who is on the other end of this thing that I am making? And I find that an incredible thing to see young kids, in particular, sort of considering. And, in terms of problem-solving, one thing games in particular we find do really, really well is that they throw a player into a kind of complex problem space that’s scaffolded in really particular ways. There’s a tension between challenge – like, how hard is this? – with the tools that are always there for you to use, that are going to allow you to figure the thing out (Big Thinkers 2009).

If Sage’s teachers, who seemed to assign worksheets and privilege regurgitation over imagination, had considered the question, “Who is on the other side of this thing I am making?” perhaps the focus would have shifted from the product (e.g., the worksheet) to the process (e.g., how the students are acquiring the information). Especially with curricular change that requires teachers to align their practice with fulfilled standards, there is a risk that educators and administrators will perceive and/or regard such alignment as a “checkbox-style approach to learning rather than parameters for inspiring creativity and innovation” (Abrams 2015, p. 31).

In the spirit of supporting creative thinking in the face of change, the *Institute of Play* has created Gamekits (see <http://beta.gamek.it>) that help guide teachers and students to think about the transformation of play and meaning making when rules are modified. The purpose of one gamekit, Mod a Board Game, is to “get designers picking apart a game rebuilding it around new rules. Writing and modding rules can be tricky and it’s often a good idea to start small and then expand.” When it comes to curricular change and the introduction of new standards, perhaps the educational



community needs to start small and move slowly, something Diane Ravitch (2014) noted that she had suggested when asked about the Common Core. Further, similar to the gamekit exercise, educators and students (and parents) need to be involved in the curricular change, not just be subjected to it. This means beginning with a shift in one rule or standard and evaluating what changes as a result. Through such an iterative process, educators, students, and parents can become actively involved in one aspect of the process; it would be naïve to think that national standards—and the big business associated with new assessments and standards—would be fueled solely by grassroots movements or a bottom-up approach. However, if educators and administrators look to curricular resources as *a* model—not *the* model—then there can be room for interpretation and reform.

Rigid responses to imposed mandates can perpetuate an educational dystopia. If new curricula and assessments create predictable, seemingly soulless obstacles, then we can expect to see a system increasingly plagued by contrived work and mechanistic behavior. However, if educators and other stakeholders (e.g., students, parents) are resourceful, looking to each other for assistance and working as a community to find a solution, then perhaps the focus will continuously shift to authentic achievement and meaningful learning.

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## Part IV



### **The Zombie's Face**

The zombie's face looked like a revolting blood fountain.  
Maggots were in his ears and his face and blood was squirting out his mouth.  
It had no lips, they'd been ripped off.  
Guts were in the zombie's teeth and one eye was hanging on his cheek.  
He had gunge coming out the top of his head  
and oozing down his body.  
(By Sam)

# Chapter 11

## Students as Zombies: How Can We Awaken the Undead?

Rebecca Westrup

### Introduction

*Every year I welcome another cohort of students into the University. At the beginning of each year these freshly-faced young people start of a new journey studying for a degree in the Social Sciences. There's often an odd smell of excitement and anxiety in the air as everyone settles in the lecture theatre eager to begin the course. I look around and experience the things I have come to expect at the beginning of a new course; bright-eyed students nervously chatting with the person next to them, introducing themselves by usually talking about what they are looking forward to on the course. There's another sign that a new term is commencing; the rustle of bags as students hurriedly take out their new shiny pens, notebooks, laptops, and increasingly iPads and Smartphones. One year, after welcoming everyone and as I was starting to address the class and to tell them about the course, no sooner had I told them the title and 'bam!' I was asked the question "So Miss, what are the assessments?" There it was, I had barely been talking for a couple of minutes and already the question had been asked. Before I could respond the smell in the air changed. It was no longer balanced between excitement and anxiety, there was an unpleasant odour as the fresh-faced students started to decay right in front of my eyes. They were no longer interested in the content of the course and the weekly topics we were going to explore. Nor the different and creative pedagogies we were going to use. Instead they were only interesting in sniffing out the information about the assessment. These students are zombies, I thought to myself.*

This short reflective piece, describing an encounter with first year students at the beginning of every new academic year is characteristic of my experiences of

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teaching students. During nearly the last ten years I have been teaching students in a variety of different roles; Postgraduate Seminar Tutor, Writing Specialist, Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellow and more recently a Lecturer and while this experience was not surprising because it is well-known that students are assessed at university, I was surprised by the timing and the tone of the question and I was equally surprised by the reaction of the other students in the group. Suddenly the air was silent as they had stopped scribbling notes or tapping on their technology. Drawing on a recent book by Sambell et al. (2013) about assessment practices in Higher Education (HE), it is essential that students ask questions about assessment, but it is important that the students also understand why they are being assessed rather than just focusing on what the assessments are. This is particularly important because as Sommerville and Creme (2005) have previously argued, success in HE is inextricably entwined with learning and knowledge construction demonstrated in academic writing (Sommerville and Creme 2005) as summative assessments usually contain a written element (Lea 1998). Students need to know and understand the process of assessment rather than only thinking about the product, the essay, the exam or the presentation and ultimately, only the grade. Research conducted by Lillis and Scott (2007: 9) highlights students' confusions with assessment and that this can be exacerbated by tensions between writing being considered as a 'high stakes' activity and the notion that students cannot write at a university standard because they are insufficiently prepared for such demands in their previous education (Lowe and Cook 2003). At a time when young people are facing an ever-increasing global competitiveness (Brown 2013), academics and practitioners working in HE have also focused their attention to assessment practices to ensure that students have the knowledge and essential skills and attributes required to compete within this increasingly individualised society (Beck 1992). However, it is questionable whether universities should take sole responsibility for this or whether we should rethink the assessment systems in compulsory education in addition to higher education interventions to support the learning and transitional periods of assessment for children and young people. Such an idea is not a new one, assessment systems, practices and methods and how they influence learners and educators have been the focus of much research and debate. In the mid-1990s Hanson (1994) argued that individuals in America were defined and dominated by testing. He described how the 'examined life' was inventing and controlling people as testing gave 'the testers' – schools and employers, for example – a god-like status, and an increasing amount of knowledge than had been available to them before. In more recent years the debates about how we assess children and young people in the United Kingdom and internationally have continued amongst educators, academics and Governments (Alexander 2010). For example, researchers such as Reay and Wiliam (1999), Filer and Pollard (2000), Alexander (2010), Green et al. (2001), Hall et al. (2004) and more recently Carless and Lam (2014) have highlighted the damaging nature assessment can have on children in primary schools. As the experiences of many academics and my own experiences illustrate, over-assessed young people share characteristics similar to zombies and the dead are still walking (Bishop 2009) into universities. Drawing on my reflections as a lecturer, the findings of a small-scale study which explored students'

and lecturers' experiences and perceptions of an intervention designed to support first year students' developing participation with, and understanding of assessment and feedback processes, assessment literature and using the metaphor of the zombie as an analytical tool, this chapter will consider the role of assessment in compulsory education and how it is creating a living dead culture within children and young people's educational careers.

Following my experiences of witnessing first-hand the 'zombification' of students and the apparent link to assessment during the last ten years I undertook a piece of small-scale research during 2013–2014 to explore this further. The project entitled 'Dialogue+' aimed to support first year students' developing participation with, and understanding of assessment and feedback processes and the research explored students' and lecturers' experiences of using it. During the first stage of the research project I interviewed 35 first year undergraduate students in small focus groups. They were studying within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at a university in the south-east of England. Extending the earlier research of Bloxham and Campbell (2010), the second phase of the project was to introduce to the students an interactive coversheet (ICS) which promoted and enabled dialogue between themselves and their lecturers who were marking their assignments. The students were given the opportunity to ask the lecturers who were marking their work any questions that they felt would be useful to enable them to use the comments and 'feedforward' into future assignments. For example, the students were asked to comment on what they thought was good about their argument and they could also ask their lecturers for advice on how they could improve this further. The ICS was designed to empower students by giving them a voice to ask questions that they perhaps did not feel able to ask face-to-face in conversation. The introduction of peer mentoring was also crucial to this stage in the project. Previously, in their study Bloxham and Campbell (2010) reported that although the ICS did encourage students to think about their work, many found the questioning aspect of the process problematic as they did not have a clear enough understanding of the standards and requirements of the assessment, writing an essay, to engage in meaningful discussion. For the majority of the students this was exacerbated by feeling too embarrassed or intimidated to ask their tutors for help. Previous research suggests that this may be a result of a perceived power imbalance between students and their tutors (Boud 1995). The peer mentors were second and third year students who were studying in the same degree courses as the first year students. Recently, peer mentoring has been the focus of much research with lecturers and educational developers highlighting the potential of different programmes which can engage students within HE (see for example Andrews and Clark 2011). Drawing on the work of the WriteNow CETL and peer academic writing mentors (O'Neil 2008), it is clear that peer mentoring may provide a less embarrassing or intimidating opportunity for students to develop a meaningful understanding of the standards and requirements of assessment and writing that will then enable them to ask questions on the ICS. As Andrews et al. (2012: 72) state, peer mentoring can also enhance learning opportunities for other students as it provides 'unique methods of engaging second- and final-year students'. In the final stage of the data collection the first year students,

and the lecturers and mentors who had been involved with the project were interviewed about their experiences of the interactive coversheet and the peer mentoring. In particular the discussions focused on whether or not they thought the intervention had supported students' understanding of assessment and feedback processes and whether it had enabled them to engage in dialogue with their lecturers. In this chapter I will highlight the students' perspectives.

## **'The Death of the Author' (Barthes 1967)?**

Analysis of the focus group data revealed that the first year students did not see themselves as 'authors' and many of them described their struggles with learning how to write in the style required for university. This supports the work of Ballinger (2003) and Smith (2004) who have both reported similar findings. While the media may lead us to believe this may be because the standards of students' literacy is falling and needs to be tightened (Clark 2010), the majority of the students were not concerned with surface features of their writing such as spelling, punctuation and grammar. Instead, when the students were asked 'what is the purpose of writing at university?' their responses included; 'to test knowledge and understanding', [to] 'check academic level', 'to test our skills', 'to get a mark' and 'to monitor development and understanding'. Only four of the students included 'feedback' and 'help' and 'support' in their responses. Unfortunately the unequal balance of responses found in this study and students not seeing the 'bigger picture' are not unique. Sambell et al. (2013: 1) noted lecturers' frustrations highlighting notions that 'students are very dependent' and often adopt a surface learning approach to their studies and assignments 'because they seem willing to only spend time and effort on things that carry marks' (Sambell et al. 2013: 33).

Similarly to the students Sambell et al. (2013) mention, I have also realised shortly after the beginning of the new academic years that increasingly the majority of the students are only interested in working on tasks and assignments that contributed to their final overall grade. For example, they seem to constantly refer to the learning outcomes and marking criteria, continually asking me what marks they were as this extract illustrates:

The class are like the walking dead, zombies wandering in, sitting lifelessly, staring into blank spaces or frantically writing or typing when they think something will prove useful for their assignments and exams. They're only active when there's a smell of learning outcomes and grade indicators. When did the university become a mortuary? It's as though the students cannot think for themselves, their creativity is paralysed by pressure to perform. Today a student came to see me and wanted some advice about her assignment because she was worried about getting it wrong. I gave her some advice and asked her what she thought about it. She replied that it didn't matter what she thought because I'm the one marking it. When did assessment become so soul destroying?

In addition to being concerned about the marks and level they were working at, students tend to also want to be spoon-fed information, especially that which was related to their assessments (Smith 2008). Gil (2014) highlights how some students

following their transitions into university find it difficult to adjust to the need to be independent and the lack of spoon-feeding compared to the sixth-form centres and colleges. Authors such as Kantanis (2000) suggest that this is because there is a gap between the guidance university students receive to complete a task and the close scrutiny of work, positive feedback on numerous drafts and high grades students receive at secondary school. There is a danger that by focusing on assessment and in particular learning outcomes, students will become learning outcasts, where 'only the basic instinct of looking for whatever they yearn for most remains' (Horning 2014: 18). The creativity, knowledge and attributes that education should nurture and develop are decaying in young people as a result of the assessment systems in compulsory education. The students are so concerned about using their ideas and doing it wrong that they often perceive it is not worth the risk. As Horning (2014: 19) states, 'we have created a nation of student zombies, who have been led to believe that the knowledge most worth having is how to choose the correct answers on standardised tests'. It seems this was the case recently when during the summer students were 'penalised for good answers' in language exams (Hopkins 2014). The media reported that basic responses to questions in language GCSEs this summer were awarded higher marks than less formulaic answers to extended- answer questions. Arguably, such experiences and processes are a product of the 'zombification of education' (Horning 2014: 18).

## **Assessment and Compulsory Schooling: The 'Zombification of Education'?**

An important question to ask is why in my experience (and in the experiences of others) are some students lifeless yet anxious, aimlessly wandering from lecture hall to seminar room and only interested in sucking the life out of lecturers when they hear the words 'learning outcomes', they have a test to sit or an assignment to write and they want a 'good' grade? In the following sections it is suggested that the zombification of a students' educational career begins when they enter primary school and continues throughout secondary school, especially with the mandatory examinations they are required to undertake, for example Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) or Cognitive Abilities Tests (CATs), GCSEs and A-Levels. In 1988 a group formed to discuss the role of assessment in the National Curriculum, how it would be effectively implemented and to design an assessment framework. The Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT 1988: 4) proposed:

The assessment process itself should not determine what is to be taught and learned. It should be the servant, not the master, of the curriculum. Yet it should not simply be a bolt-on addition at the end. Rather, it should be an integral part of the education process, continually providing both 'feedback' and 'feedforward'. It therefore needs to be incorporated systematically into teaching strategies and practice at all levels. Since the results of assessment can serve a number of different purposes, these purposes have to be kept in mind when the arrangements for assessment are designed.

This statement is often presented in assessment literature and documents focusing on assessment and the role(s) it can play in education. However, it is arguable



that in recent years the importance and meaning of these words has increasingly disappeared. As Governments change and new Education Secretaries come into power, assessment agendas change and educationalists, teachers and academics are often concerned by this and in particular the notion of 'feedforward'. Arguably, in order to 'feedforward' learners need to be active agents in their education careers and it is questionable whether the high volume of high-stakes testing gives teachers the space and enables learners the opportunity to achieve this.

As Alexander (2010: 311) points out, 'children in England, as is well known, are among the most tested in the world' and they frequently encounter a variety of assessments, some with a formative purpose and others with a formal and summative purpose. Referred to within the literature as Assessment for Learning, the purpose of formative assessment as outlined by the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) (2002) is to seek and interpret 'evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there' (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008). Within the primary school, this type of assessment to help learning has been highlighted as an aspect of effective teaching. Research studies such as those carried out by Professors Paul Black and Dylan William (1998) and later Wiliam et al. (2004) illustrate that through a cyclical process where teachers look at children's work, observe them, ask them questions and gather their views on their work and learning before then setting next-step learning goals pupils can make almost twice as much progress in a year (Wiliam 2011: 37). Crucially, this type of assessment also values the perspective and participation of the learners and children and they are more than just a level (Alexander 2010). In addition to their teachers, children are required to know what their learning goals are so that they can participate in their own learning, and the assessment of this (Black et al. 2003).

Although assessment by teachers as part of teaching and to support learning is encouraged within the early years of a child's schooling as a part of this (DCSF 2008) there is also a more formal purpose for a facet of assessment, testing where tests are also used to report on what has been learned (Alexander 2010). Despite the fact that educationalists researching assessment at the end of the 1990s argued that National Curriculum tests, such as the SATs 'constitute very simplistic judgements purged of any subtlety and complexity about the sort of learners pupils are judged to be' (Reay and Wiliam 1999: 349), the 2008 enquiry into testing and assessment by the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee in 2008 stated that testing is required to 'ascertain and recognise levels of pupil achievement on a standardised basis; hold schools and teachers to account [and] assess the quality of education available to children across the country' (House of Commons, 2008 cited in Alexander 2010: 312). Fifteen years later after Reay and Wiliam (1999) carried out their study, in 2014 educationalists, teachers and researchers are still questioning the purpose of tests, what these test scores actually illustrate and whether they do provide a good measure of the quality of education. Drummond (2012) makes this point in their case study of what we can learn from pupils who have undertaken tests in primary school. Referring to the case study 'Learning from Jason', Drummond (2012: 1) argues that testing is an inadequate way of assessing individual children's

learning and as a result of the standards and performances discourses operating within primary education, children learn how to complete tests rather than new subject knowledge during the first few terms of attending school:

But first, what has Jason learned during his eight terms in school? He has learned how to take a test. His answers are written neatly, with the sharpest of pencils. When he reverses a digit and sees his mistake, he crosses it out tidily. He places his answers on the line or in the box as instructed, though he often adds some more digits in other empty spaces, as if he interpreted a space as an invitation to write...He has learned to copy numbers and letters neatly and accurately, even though this is not what is being asked of him.

In addition to Drummond, educationalists such as Clare Green and her colleagues (Green et al. 2001) and Kathy Hall and her colleagues (Hall et al. 2004) working on research exploring pupils' experiences in the primary school classroom have argued that one problem with tests is that they do not promote knowledge and understanding of subject material. Green et al. (2001) asked children about their experiences of National Tests and found that some children found the Literacy tests disengaging because they were boring and Drummond reported that some children can find it difficult to understand the purpose, meaning and context of the content they are being assessed on. Similarly, drawing on ethnographic research in Primary Schools, Hall et al. (2004: 815) highlight the ways in which the Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) are exclusionary for some teachers and children as there is a push for pedagogy which focuses on 'ability grouping, testing and competition'.

As a consequence of the performance discourses associated with education in a neo-liberal society, test scores from SATs are used to record school positions on league tables and to market the schools. Research suggests that the high profile of test results has put a huge pressure on teachers, children and parents. Reay and Wiliam (1999) reported that the SATs have an impact on children who are 'simultaneously active in the assessment process and profoundly affected by it' (p. 345) as it affects their self-esteem and identity as learners. From their study in 1999 which explored the perceptions of children who were sitting Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests and how these contributed to their understandings of themselves not just as learners, but also as people Reay and Wiliam (1999: 349) argue that 'there are strong currents of fear and anxiety permeating children's relationships to the SATs processes'. More recently in 2007, in addition to affecting children Alexander and Hargreaves (2007) have highlighted that the use of test results in this way constrained the curriculum, turned the final year of primary schooling into one which was about cramming and testing and disadvantaged children whose parents could not afford to pay for private SATs tuition (cited in Alexander 2010: 316–317). Hall et al. (2004: 814) describe this process as 'SATuration' and show how it is decaying teachers' and children's identities. Carless and Lam (2014) make a similar point about assessment in Hong Kong. In their study which illuminates the perspectives of learners in lower primary school Carless and Lam reinforce how learners are controlled by their assessments. As Horning (2014: 20) points out, standardised assessments are standardising students 'robbing all teachers and students of their exceptionality and individuality, thereby killing their brains'.

The zombification of learners' educational careers continue, and possibly strengthen as pupils progress through the school years and different Key Stages into Secondary School before the rot finally takes hold in the form of GCSE examinations at the age of 15 and 16 and possibly beyond if they continue their studies at A-Level. Similarly to assessment at primary school level, assessment in secondary schools can also be divided into assessment for learning, with formative tasks and assessment of learning where the learners are summatively assessed. At this level too, despite the increasing focus on formative assessments (Fautley and Savage 2008; Wiliam 2011) assessment is often synonymous to testing. It is well documented within the literature and professional textbooks about helping Postgraduate students to achieve Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) that trainee and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) should promote a range of formative assessment tasks and value the pupil role in assessment to help support and encourage secondary school pupils' learning. However, this is increasingly challenged by the high stakes nature of end-of-year tests, standardised tests and public examinations. Whilst it is recognised within the literature that testing and examinations are useful because they provide a public record of achievement in a subject (White 2014) they are also considered as problematic for some learners and the schools providing the education. The Tomlinson report (2004) on education provision for the 14–19 curriculum in England and Wales described assessment as 'overburdening' some learners and highlights this as learners are expected to sit over one hundred exams and this is unequally distributed as approximately 40 of these are in the last three years of compulsory secondary education. As White (2014) writing more recently argues, all of the formative on-going and day-to-day assessments that teachers use to help support young people's learning is undone by 'the distress they [examinations] cause, their perversion of the curriculum and of teaching methods, their epistemological shortcomings, their encouragement of an instrumental attitude towards learning' (White 2014: 50). We can see assessment discourses zombifying the education system as academics such as White (2014: 10) describe; 'the uncertain years of adolescence are currently brought into line through the discipline of public examinations. Energies and enthusiasms that might have been deployed elsewhere are funnelled into hard work for GCSE and A-Level success. For many that is: others become disaffected'. It is also questionable in what ways these end of year and public examinations support young people's learning as the increasing 'teaching-to-the-test' discourses within school are taking up a significant amount of A-Level study time (Daly et al. 2012). In a recent study Jones et al. (2014) tested 594 Bio-Science students at the University of Birmingham, the University of Bristol, Cardiff University, the University of Leicester and the University of East Anglia on their knowledge of cells, genetics, biochemistry and physiology. Although most of the students had achieved an A grade at A-Level, the researchers found that the 'students had forgotten about 60 % of everything they had learned for their A-Levels' (Sellgren 2014). As a result of such studies it is clear fifteen years after assessment in schools started to receive an increased interest of attention from academics, teachers and educationists that the purpose of education and the ways it can influence learners, the construction and shaping of their identities, the ways in which they are taught and the

knowledge that they learn (and retain) is still interesting today. It is also somewhat ironic that assessment practices and examination systems are engendering a population of zombies amongst children and young people in education today when society and media often position the youth as zombies, threatening groups of young people wearing hoodies aimlessly walking around and sniffing out trouble. According to journalists such as Baker (2012) writing for the MailOnline, young people are spending too much time playing computer games and they are ‘in danger of losing empathy and the compassion of ‘genuine relationships’’. Arguably, policy-makers should consider the ways in which a constant focus on Learning Outcomes is resulting in learning outliers within the classroom. It is also important to recognise the role of the assessment systems and consequently schooling practices and the shaping of zombified identities within today’s culture and society as much as the young people themselves.

### **Is There an Antidote?**

Similarly to zombies, assessments and particularly the national standardised tests are mindless and just keep coming and coming. The sheer number of assessments that children and young people encounter in their compulsory education means that they are more threatening to learners as this can also have an impact on their experiences of assessment at university. As I highlighted earlier in the chapter, students at university are neither fully alive nor dead. They often appear fresh-faced at the beginning of the new academic year but behind this exterior is the ‘undead’. The experiences of over-assessment, sometimes answering questions without any real critical thought (Horning 2014) and giving formulaic responses has resulted in students’ creativity decaying away and them wandering aimlessly in search of the next test or assignment. As educators, we need to ensure this does not continue to happen and we need to reconnect with the dead-eyed, slack jawed creatures all drifting about with no purpose in the wonders of education and learning. Nelsen (2012) reminds us that we need to ensure our zombie students can belong. It’s important to give learners the tools to be able to understand learning and assessment processes, to ask questions and importantly to gain a response so that they too have some feeling of belonging (Nelsen 2012).

Reflecting upon my experiences and an analysis of the data, Dialogue+ is one example that could provide some of the antidote to support students with their transition from the ‘walking dead’. Giving the students opportunity to engage in dialogue with their lecturers and to ask questions about their assignments gave them a sense of ownership of the assessment. In particular, the students commented on how they valued the opportunity for dialogue, to get specific feedback about their concerns and to then use this formative feedback in future work as one student commented:

I think it's helpful generally, just helping you to kind of understand and thinking about what you are doing in your assignments...I think I understand the marks as well...kind of sometimes when you get a mark back, it's just a number of a piece of paper, you what, what does it actually mean? But it actually really helps to have that dialogue there, with the marker, so that you can kind of understand, and voice your concerns with it, and then get feedback on it.

The interactive coversheet also enabled the students to learn about assessment at university and the ways in which it is different to assessment in compulsory education:

I have learnt about the process of submitting work, and sort of got to know my lecturers a bit more, I've started to use it less really...I'm just a bit more familiar with things I was uncertain with at the beginning, like I now know how to.

Similarly to Nelsen (2012: 241) the Dialogue+ project gave the students a space to 'experience connection [and] reflection...in order to inspire them to imagine the new and just in the face of the old and oppressive'.

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter has suggested that assessment systems and discourses regarding performativity in compulsory education are having a detrimental impact on the educational careers of children and young people. Although there are differences between assessment of learning and assessment for learning, research suggests that assessment is often synonymous with testing (Hall et al. 2004). Testing, and therefore as I have suggested in this chapter, teaching and learning cannot be blamed on the teachers, given the amount of pressure they are experiencing to perform and succeed within the prescribed standards-driven education system that is influencing the decisions made in schools throughout the United Kingdom (Syal 2013). From the viewpoint of a university lecturer and utilising the metaphorical figure of the zombie, I have described the 'walking dead' students who wander aimlessly into my lecture theatre and seminar room. As a result of what seems like continual assessment, particularly tests such as the SATs, CATs, GCSEs and A-Levels, students are haunted by the performance pressures that they bring. Neither dead nor alive, students hunt out assignment cues and constantly sniff out information for their next assignment whilst their brains and creative thinking decay and rot away. Within universities assessment has received an increasing amount of attention from researchers and lecturers focusing on Assessment for Learning (AfL) in Higher Education (Sambell et al. 2013; Price et al. 2012) and initiatives such as Dialogue+ are helping to support students to understand assessment processes and to give them some ownership of the assessments they are undertaking. This chapter does not offer detailed solutions, nor does it pretend to know all of the answers and while AfL is also a successful feature of compulsory schooling, more needs to be done to tackle assessment policy and the ways in which current pressures on both teachers and learners contribute to the zombification of education.

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# Chapter 12

## Zombies, Monsters and Education: The Creation of the Young Citizen

Rosalyn Black, Emily M. Gray, and Deana Leahy

### Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)<sup>1</sup>

*Something is rotten in Denmark.... and in the UK, America, and in Australia. The rot is spreading, enveloping us all with its cold, clammy touch. Get bitten and you too could turn into a slack-jawed, vacant eyed ravenous monster; blindly consuming everything and everyone in your path...Altogether now, brains....BRAINS....*

In contemporary times, education policy is awash with the tenets of neo-liberalism. These tenets and their subsequent strategies position the individual citizen as the building block of a democratic society, purporting to enable even the most marginalised individuals to take control over their own lives, to contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of their communities and to reduce their dependence on government provision. This is what Rose has called the “capitalization of citizenship” (1999a, p. 481): the translation of the individual – including the young individual – into a unit of human and social capital that can be bound together with other units in a common entrepreneurial project designed to deliver economic productivity, social cohesiveness and individual benefit. This kind of citizenship for some commentators has the malodourous stench of zombies (Beck 2001).

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Such citizens are in contrast with what Rose has described, mildly enough, as the “non-citizens, failed citizens, anti-citizens” (Rose 1999b, p. 259): that is, those young people who occupy what Kelly has called “the ‘wild zones’ in modernity’s imagination” (2000, p. 303), who are seen to be undemocratic, ungoverned/ungovernable, uneducated/uneducable, unemployed/ unemployable, or unhealthy. We want to go further than this by suggesting that such ‘non citizens’ are also understood to be evil and alien (Giroux 1996) or even monstrous (Hoerl 2002). They are the citizens whom education policy, and policy more broadly, is vehemently trying to expunge, and if that fails, whom it demonises. This moral panic, and fear of monstrous citizens, we suggest is a key driving force in the formulation of educational policy, and the subsequent shaping of the purposes of schooling and its practices. Thus in attempting to grasp contemporary educational policy and its effects, we need to draw on a range of analytical devices to help us reveal the various zombies and monsters that haunt contemporary educational assemblages.

Zombies have become very fashionable recently, filling the programming schedule on our TVs and the bookshelves in our academic libraries. Zombie citizens, and the notion of preparing young people to enter a zombified workforce, provided the original starting place for this chapter. As a metaphor, it immediately appealed to us. We all agreed that our experiences in education, and more recently teacher education, at times feel like we were working in a morgue. We lecture in empty, cold and lifeless lecture theatres, to students who stare blankly between us and their iPhone/iPad/Mac Book screens and who seemingly only spring to life when assignments are due to search for knowledge, to pick at our brains and to leave us drained of life. We, ourselves too, feel like we are the walking dead in the hallways of higher education where ever increasing compliance measures suck the life from us, emptying us of ideas until competitive grants and publication outputs are the only things we think of. We shall return to discuss this in more depth later in the chapter. But for now we simply want to illustrate the multiple ways in which the zombie metaphor spoke to us, and to our experiences. We thus found that it was a generative analytical device to begin to rethink the tenets of neo-liberalism and its effects. However, as we spent more time discussing educational policy and considering its rationalities and techniques, we became aware that there are other monsters lurking within contemporary educational assemblages. This meant that we would need to draw on a broader range of metaphorical monsters to explore the tenets, hopes and effects of neo-liberalism in education.

In this chapter, we deploy the metaphors of the zombies and monsters as a means through which to unpack contemporary educational policy within the Australian context. In the first section of the chapter we introduce what we mean when we talk about zombies and monsters and how these metaphors can be used to discuss contemporary policy and the citizens they aim to (re)produce – the zombie citizen. We then bring this analysis to bear upon the policy itself as zombified. Finally, we argue that contemporary classrooms deploy the zombie and the monstrous in order to encourage young people to become ideal neo-liberal citizens.

## They're Coming to Get You (Barbra)<sup>2</sup>

The zombie is a widely used metaphor within contemporary cultural outputs of both the popular and academic kind. Originally a Haitian voodoo legend of soulless beings enslaved to a zombie master, the figure of the zombie has been harnessed to represent Cold War politics and racism in America (George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*), the terror of consumer culture (Romero's 1979 *Dawn of the Dead*), and post 9/11 fears of domestic terrorism (Francis Lawrence's movie adaptation of Richard Matheson's novel *I am Legend*). Within social and cultural theory the zombie has also been raised from the dead to represent increasing economic rationalism and the politics of death and punishment (Giroux 2010), 'living dead' categories that dominate our thinking (Beck 2001) and as an allegory for teacher education students in need of inspiration (Nelsen 2012).

Social science then uses the zombie as horror writers do – as an allegorical figure that represents something rotten and decaying yet still living, something that spreads its infection indiscriminately, causing human misery in epic proportions. For Giroux (2010), the rot is to be found in a type of 'voodoo economics' that drives a 'zombie politics' of resisting significant social change in favour of funding conflict. For Giroux, such zombification is equal to symbolic violence as

An army of zombie economic advisors, lobbyists and legislators, all of whom revel in spreading the culture of the undead while feasting on the spread of war, human suffering, violence, and catastrophe across the United States and the larger globe (Giroux 2010, p. 2).

The zombie, for Giroux, has taken over the upper echelons of government and is spreading its agenda from the top down. Beck (2001), on the other hand, uses the zombie as an allegory for 'living dead' ways of thinking about the social world. For Beck, sociology needs to come up with new ways of thinking about the social world as traditional notions of social structures such as 'the household', no longer hold within our ever shifting contemporary times (ibid.).

The zombie is then deployed to mean different things across contexts, disciplines and cultural outputs. However what ties the differing allegorical uses of the zombie together is that it is always something monstrous and something that is resistant to change, a figure that protects a corrupted status quo from change (Horning 2014). As a monstrous figure the zombie provokes a particular response in our collective psyche, it is never taken at face value; it is never a simplistic monster. Rather the figure of the zombie, as with other monstrous figures, represents our fears both internal and external. This is the function that monsters serve within our collective cultures, as Botting argues

Monsters [...] are constructions indicating how cultures need to invent or imagine others in order to maintain limits. They are pushed in disgust to the other side of the imaginary force that keeps norm and deviance apart. It requires a repeated effort of constructing and casting out figures of fear and anxiety (Botting 2014, p. 6).

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<sup>2</sup>Romero (1968).

The zombie never speaks, it cannot – therefore it is always spoken about or for (Nelsen 2012) and as such becomes a way to articulate our fears. In many ways, the zombie represents the ‘others’, those we look through and not at, those that ‘must be kept at arm’s length’ (Canavan 2010). For us, the authors of this chapter, the zombified others are young people, and perhaps even ourselves at times. Legislated for and spoken about, young people represent our fears about the fate of our society. For us, those fears are multiple and encompass the loss of intellectual curiosity within students, the neo-liberalisation of education and the increasing pressures upon academics that come with the audit-driven academy within which we toil (Sparkes 2007). The massification of higher education has arguably led to increasing levels of standardisation and measures of compliance that has rendered the academic a lifeless slave to the audit culture (Sparkes 2007) and the educational institution of the university with an identity crisis (Collini 2012). Within contemporary educational spaces the notion of the undead, soulessness and the zombie become metaphors for educators, institutions and students. As zombie subjects we understand students as believing that the only knowledges worth having are those that will enable them to pass tests or succeed at assignments (Horning 2014; Sparkes 2007). During the week preceding assignment due dates, students become ravenous, frenziedly bombarding their teachers with questions, showing up to our offices wishing to suck our brains for the tips and tricks that they need to pass.

However we acknowledge that we are all trapped within this system – the university, the academic, the teacher and the student – and that we as educators are becoming increasingly enslaved to the pervasive audit culture that dominates our workplaces. The figure of the zombie and the notion of zombification provide us with a way to articulate our experiences; that we teach students who appear half dead with slack jaws and glazed eyes. At the same time, though, we know that those same students are fully alive and present in other aspects of their lives (Nelsen 2012). Is it education that is eating away at their brains (Horning 2014) as they simultaneously eat away at ours? Also, how do we account for the chinks of light, the moments when together we are all fully alive? We will answer these questions, but first we ask how the zombie citizen came to be.

### **We’re Sitting Here...Like Sitting Ducks<sup>3</sup>: The Zombie Citizen in Policy**

The past two decades has seen a global resurgence of what is, in fact, a very old policy concern about young people: a concern about the nature of the citizens that young people will ‘become’. This concern reflects the notion that young people are legislated on behalf of; that they are zombies without the capacity for speech – they are ‘sitting ducks’ for policymakers. We draw attention here to the long-standing

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<sup>3</sup>Lyon (2012).

construction of schooling as a site for young people's socialisation for citizenship that continues to have a strong hold within social policy: in one analysis of politicians' maiden speeches to the Australian House of Representatives, for example, the second most frequent reference to education was in association with democracy (the most common reference linked education and the economy) (Pitman 2012).

Increasingly, this construction centres around the expectation that young people should be educated to be, and to act as, rational and responsible neo-liberal citizens with the reflexive capacity to purposively choose their own actions, direct their own lives and 'make a difference' within the society in which they live. It also centres around the use of schooling as a strategy to govern and direct young people's conduct "from a 'social' point of view" (Rose 2000b, p. 323), creating zombie citizens who are bound into "shared moral norms and values" and whose actions are motivated by the "self-steering forces of honour and shame, of propriety, obligation, trust, fidelity, and commitment to others" (Rose 2000b, p. 324).

Such citizens are expected, and constructed, to demonstrate a specific, prescribed set of behaviours. They are expected to be the "active, competent, self-reflective, self-expressing, self-sufficient, communicative, social, constructive, independent, self-reliant, actively participating, problem-solving, planning experts of their own lives" (Masschelein and Quaghebeur 2005, p. 61), citizens who are "intelligent, wise, happy, virtuous, healthy, productive, docile, enterprising, fulfilled, self-esteeming, (and) empowered" (Rose 1998, p. 12). They are also expected to demonstrate the behaviours of the good social being: "civility, social solidarity, and social responsibility" (Rose 2000a, p. 1399).

This expectation dominates the education policy of most advanced democracies. The idea of active citizenship is alive and well within United Kingdom education policy (Birdwell et al. 2013), for example, where key policy statements such as the Crick Report construct schooling as a means of ensuring young people's "community participation; political literacy; and social and moral responsibility" (Jerome 2012, p. 61). It informs Swedish education policy, which is characterised by what one group of researchers has termed the "neo-liberal colouring of active citizenship" (Aldenmyr et al. 2012, p. 256). It has also been promoted as an educational strategy, although with differing definitions, policies, practices and outcomes across France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA and Canada (Nelson and Kerr 2006). There is a shared expectation amongst policymakers across European nations that education help young people to "acquire the skills required for active participation in the public arena as responsible and critical citizens as well as organised citizens" (Birzea et al. 2004, p. 22).

The policy discussion about the nature and purposes of active citizenship, and how it can most effectively be fostered through schooling, has also been led by international bodies such as the European Commission, the OECD and UNESCO (Birzea et al. 2005). The Council of Europe's current Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training, for example, identifies the promotion of active citizenship through school education as one of its main objectives (Eurydice 2005).

Reflecting this international trend, recent Australian education policy charges schools with fostering active – or even activist – citizens who have the will and capacity to improve the democratic fabric and drive needed social change in new and creative ways. This prescription is a central theme within the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which represents the current blueprint for Australian schooling, and which declares the commitment of all current Australian government jurisdictions to foster citizens who are “committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia’s civic life” and who “work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments” (MCEETYA 2008, p. 9). It is extended and amplified by the new Australian Curriculum, which describes the role of schools in enabling young people to be “active and empowered citizens” who “apply democratic principles, practise behaviours and [...] actively engage in practical citizenship activities within schools, in the community and online” (ACARA 2012, p. 5).

It also describes the expectation that young people enact their citizenship at other levels: the “state, national, regional and increasingly the global level” (ACARA 2012, p. 5) and it is echoed in the policy texts of the authorities responsible for administering the Australian Curriculum at the state level. The Victorian Government’s guidelines for the implementation of the new Civics and Citizenship curriculum make it clear young people’s citizenship is something that must be enacted. School students are expected, through the curriculum, to demonstrate “responsibility, decision making, planning, problem solving, cooperation with others, social skills and leadership” for such purposes as “community service, environmental programs in the local community, enterprise learning and involvement in local responses to national and international issues” (VCAA 2013).

Young people are, then, expected to become not only citizens but particular *types* of citizens (Black 2011b). Ideally, education should assist in the creation of such citizens. Why is it, then, that if young people are to be ushered into a citizenship that is independent yet cooperative; engaged with local, national and global contexts; and active as well as empowered, that we experience our classrooms to be such ghostly places? More importantly, though, is the question of what happens to those young people who cannot or will not participate in active citizenship and how the metaphor of the zombie can help us to examine the policy context for young people across the globe.

## **Educating the Zombie Citizen: Scene One**

Such policy prescriptions place a strong emphasis on the enactment or performance of young people’s citizenship, but it is in their translation into practice that these newer discourses and constructions of youth citizenship encounter the older discourses of education, the zombie discourses that are dead but still walking (Beck and Willms 2004). At the same time that it promotes an active citizenship, citizenship education as a project also perpetuates more normatively justified education

goals and practices that subject young people to very familiar forms of governance and intervention. As Black (2011a) has previously pointed out, these goals are embedded in an individualised education discourse that distinguishes not only between desirable and undesirable – or monstrous – youth behaviours but between desirable and undesirable youth identities.

The persistence of such undead discourses emerges from a recent study of two Australian schools, both located in low socioeconomic, rural or urban-fringe communities and both struggling to meet systemic measures and benchmarks of educational achievement, especially amongst their middle years students. Both schools have introduced programs of active citizenship for that cohort of students. Both programs derive their inspiration from the *ruMAD?* (are you Making A Difference?) framework developed by Australian academic David Zyngier (2009) and are imbued with its critical pedagogical values, positioning middle years students as powerful actors capable of exerting influence for social change through what are frequently ambitious youth-led projects. These range from initiatives that seek to redress significant social and environmental injustices such as homelessness, poverty and deforestation at the national or even global level to initiatives designed to achieve change within the local community.

The circumstances and life chances of young people in such communities have been widely documented. They are the “flawed consumers and unwanted workers” of whom Giroux writes, who are “exiled into various dead zones in which they become ... invisible” (2010, p. 1), who are “confronted with either vastly diminishing opportunities or are fed into an ever-expanding system of disciplinary control that dehumanises, medicalises, and criminalises their behaviour in multiple sites, extending from the home and school to the criminal justice system” (pp. 2–3). They are also the “collateral casualties of inequality” whom Bauman has described, young people living on the edges – literally and metaphorically – of the social and economic centres where opportunity is created and distributed (Bauman 2011).

Giroux argues that one of the “cruellest of ironies” of what he terms “zombie politics and culture” is that they “invoke life as they promote death and human suffering” (2010, p. 3). While such dramatic claims may be too much of a stretch while discussing the policy and practice of young people’s education for active citizenship, the ironies and ambiguities that attend the zombie, who is “neither fully alive nor dead” (Nelsen 2012, p. 236), have some resonance here.

On the one hand, the experience of these young people runs counter to the experience that Horning evokes when she refers to the creation of “a nation of student zombies, who have been led to believe that the knowledge most worth having is how to choose the correct answers on standardized texts” (p. 19). Within the context of these two active citizenship programs, students are constructed as important social actors, a construction that has been readily adopted by the students themselves. Echoing the programmatic discourse, the students at each school refer freely and confidently to their ability to “make a difference”, to “change the world”, to redress “all the diversity and the poverty in this world, and the homelessness” and to “make everyone be treated equally”. While the premise that any group of young people possesses such influence would seem immediately vulnerable to critical or even

common sense challenge, the students as a collective appear to have accepted it with little question: references to choice, desire, purpose, intention and will pepper their statements. They also frequently describe the deep sense of satisfaction and achievement that has attended their efforts for social change:

It just makes you feel more nicer because you know that you've done something. You know that you've made one less thing, like a bird or something die, one less this, one less person who's homeless, another person who's educated. It feels good to know that one more thing has changed because of us.

At the same time, the promise that their active citizenship will enable them to effect such change is accompanied by an even more seductive promise: that it will enable them to change themselves. Within each program, the discourse of *making a difference* is constantly interwoven with the reflexive discourse of *becoming someone different*. It is this discourse that most encapsulates the zombie nature of education policy and practice and their employment, not only to animate young people, but to animate them in very specific ways and for very specific purposes.

Both programs are educational interventions designed to foster the values of active citizenship amongst young people who are otherwise seen to lack such values. The consensus of the educators at both schools is that such interventions are needed because, in the words of one teacher, “there’s a lot of apathy and teenagers can be very blasé about things that aren’t about themselves”. The motivation behind the introduction of each program goes deeper than this, however. In the words of a second teacher, “(the program) can engage students, it can put more colourful students – put them in a place where they can use their powers for good instead of evil”.

Such statements reflect the moral panic to which such young people are habitually subject (Cohen 2002) and which constructs them not only as potential “‘feral jobs’ who require regulation and control” (Williamson 2007, p. 25) but as “deviant, barbaric and unclean” (Malone 2000, p. 136). This monstrous status is attributed only in part to their youth, however. It is also viewed as a product of their family background and socioeconomic status, as this statement from one school leader suggests:

One of the main things that we’re trying to do here is actually get them to be able to interact nicely with each other, and not do stupid things before they think, and in the end become well informed citizens who’ve got a job that they’re happy with. [...] So long as they’re not out on the streets doing some of things that some of their parents might have done, which you don’t want to know. [...] I’m always thinking about where the kids will end up. Like all schools we’ll have kids that fall through the gaps, and schools are full of kids that end up in jail. There’s always a kid in every school that’s going to end up in jail somewhere, but we want to minimise that. We want to minimise kids that do harm to themselves or each other.

To this degree, each program can be understood as an attempt to inoculate young people against what are seen as monstrous youth attitudes and behaviours. At the risk of mixing our medical metaphors, each is also designed to serve as a kind of educational virus that promotes not only a desirable citizenship but a desirable, socially and economically productive youth identity as well. In so doing, each renders these young people subjects of a governmental educational intervention that is



designed to minimise the risks associated both with their youth and with their socio-economic circumstances.

The following section uses health education as a lens through which to examine what happens to those young people who cannot or will not participate in desirable practices of citizenship or social and economic productivity. We argue, like Giroux and others, that 'these' young people are positioned as unclean, undesirable and monstrous. And it is these monsters that circulate powerfully through contemporary governmental health education assemblages, looming large as real possibilities.

## **Educating the Zombie Citizen: Scene Two**

School based health education has long been a site that is heavily invested in governing and (re)producing healthy citizens. In order to achieve this goal, health education, from policy, curriculum and the subsequent classroom spaces deploy a range of techniques designed to alert young people to the risks of inactive citizenship and improper consumption (see for example Leahy and Harrison 2004). In many health education classrooms, the message is clear: If you do not minimise risks to your health through eating well, exercising, not smoking or taking illegal drugs, and not drinking too much, you are putting yourself at risk and failing to perform what Greco (1993) refers to your 'duty to be well'. The duty to be well is a moral imperative that is inextricably tied to contemporary forms of neo-liberal governmentality discussed in the sections above. Failing in one's moral duty to be well is positioned as an act that relegates one to the status of the failed citizen (Rose 1999b).

However, we want to suggest that there is more at play than simply understanding wellness as a successful or failed citizenship venture. Popular media representations of the obese, the junkie and the mad person are not simply interpreted and understood intellectually by consumers of texts as failed citizens. Such representations within popular media are linked to Rose's notion of the anti-citizen, a figure often portrayed as having monstrous desires, appetites, bodies and behaviours that are excessive, frightening, uncivilised and distasteful. It is here that the zombie metaphor becomes more complex because although the zombie is a monstrous figure with an appetite to match, anti-citizens are not a homogenous group like zombies, the dangers posed by anti-citizens is in their unpredictability. In contrast, and borrowing from our earlier discussion of neo-liberal politics and the zombification of citizens in contemporary times, it might be that the idealized healthy citizen is in fact the zombie citizen with an insatiable appetite for health and wellness. Take for example the daily rituals of eating five vegetables and two pieces of fruit on an appropriately sized plate, exercising for an hour and/or completing the specified amount of steps for the day, sticking to recommended alcohol consumption standards, ensuring that one never ingests more than the recommended daily intake of salt, sugar, meat, fat and zinc. Might this not be potentially re-read as a healthy dose of zombification?

Because of the complexity inherent to the notion of the anti-citizen, we suggest that it is important to be on the look out for other monstrous citizens that accompany zombies in various education assemblages. In the field of health education several authors have written about the 'horrific' images that get used in health education resources to teach students about the perils of various choices (see for example Burrows and Wright 2007; Leahy 2014). What is interesting to note in the various resources and pedagogical strategies is the use of contemporary popular culture and media. For example in previous work, Leahy and Gray (2014) highlighted that health educators (and educators more broadly) draw on popular culture in order to illustrate the various risks that threaten students' health. For example, Morgan Spurlock's 2004 film *Supersize Me* in which Spurlock eats nothing but McDonald's for a month, provide ample fodder for the health educator wanting to highlight the evils of fast food consumption (Leahy and Pike 2015). Popular culture is powerful for a number of reasons including the potential it offers for teachers to engage their students and more importantly, following Ellsworth (2004) it enables pedagogy to 'get right in' to produce a visceral effect in young people in classrooms. Watching Spurlock consume saturated and trans-fats in supersized portions demonstrates the effects of monstrous appetites in vivid colour, his body becoming upsized and ill as his journey through the McDonald's menu progresses. Health teachers see the pedagogical potential of popular culture and are quick to put it to work in the name of health in their classrooms. Given this, it is imperative that we consider what kinds of representations of health and citizenship might be available to teachers as they assemble their lesson plans in the hope of (re) forming healthy citizens.

There are of course too many examples to discuss in any depth in this chapter. For our purposes though we have elected to discuss a short piece of animation from the *Jamie's School Dinners* website that highlights the risks to young people of consuming unhealthy food through science and animation. In many ways it exemplifies the case we are making.

In 2005, the British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver started a campaign to improve school meals in the UK. Starting with a four-part TV series, *Jamie's School Dinners* continued in various guises, including a website. One of the features of the website is a short piece of animation entitled *Food Most Fowl*. The animation tells the story of a mad professor of the Dr. Frankenstein, Jekyll and Hyde variety. He lives in a Dracula-esque castle and creates cheap, unethical and unhealthy food designed to maximise profit and minimise health benefit and as a subject he is following the path of good, neo-liberal citizenship inasmuch as he is entrepreneurial, market driven, consumerist. The animation shows the professor grinding up chickens and enhancing various food items by injecting them with fat to make them bigger. At the end of the video the professor himself becomes addicted to the junk food he has created and transforms from a thin, elderly male into something more terrible...THE MONSTER ANTI-CITIZEN. An overweight, acne ridden, Burberry cap wearing chav whose pallor is tinged with green, a zombie slave to fast food (see *Food Most Fowl*, <http://vimeo.com/68365675> – accessed 04/06/2014).

We chose to discuss *Food Most Fowl* for several reasons. Firstly, it brings together the horror genre with contemporary social and governmental interventions into the

health and wellbeing of citizens. The mad professor literally becomes the monstrous other – a zombified young, overweight and working class male. The earring he sports along with the Burberry cap gives his ‘chav’ status away. The chav, a ‘grotesque and comic figure’ (Tyler 2008) is very much like the figure of the zombie, deviant, barbaric and unclean, unable to think or make decisions beyond a primal need to consume. *Food Most Fowl* shows us that if we don’t buy the risk discourse we are doomed to become a slack jawed, vacant eyed chav zombie citizen – a horror of horrors.

The video then exemplifies the revolting monstrous and reveals the undesirable young person as a malodorous zombie anti-citizen, the kind of citizen Giroux, Rose and others speak of. Horror and disgust serve here as a pedagogical pivot point to ‘get right in’ and actually show young people the horrors of over consumption (Ellsworth 2004; Leahy 2014), the hope being that young people will be enticed to make the healthy choice and fulfil their duty to be well.

## Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that active citizenship in education policy and practice serves to perpetuate, or to animate, undead zombie discourses of youth agency and social change that belie the structural forces at work in many young people’s lives as well as the more governmental discourses that so often accompany their experience of schooling. They purport to enable, and do at times enable, young people to see themselves as powerful actors, yet they also reinforce education policy purposes that seek to change or govern their behaviours and identities, particularly in relation to the health of young people, where other monsters are called in to play in the construction of the anti-citizen.

There are various programs that purport to redress widespread social injustices through young people’s actions or improve young people’s health. Yet those young people’s lives remain subject to chronic inequalities which they themselves are charged with overcoming through the medium of their participation and choosing. Such programs purport to extend young people’s influence across wide geographic spheres, even while the young people in question remain “tied to the ground” in localities of entrenched deprivation (Bauman 2001, p. 40). We have illustrated how the metaphorical figure of the zombie is deployed in a range of ways within contemporary popular culture, social science and classrooms. The zombie can be brought to bear upon undead policy, contemporary modes of governance and upon young people themselves who are often positioned as either neo-liberal zombies or a deviant, barbaric and unclean monster. Zombies and monsters continue to pervade our collective psyches because they represent that which is wrong, undesirable and problematic within our societies. From Haitian legend to animation, the zombie continues to haunt us.

Harris however has argued that “[e]ven well-intentioned efforts to enhance and defend young people’s entitlement to legitimately inhabit the category of citizen

ought to be interrogated as part of the circuitry of citizenship technology” (2012, pp. 143–144). This means that we must not capitulate to zombification and monstrous possibilities: we must not give up hope. By using the zombies and monsters as analytical tools through which to challenge the social, political and economic landscapes that young people will inherit, we are able to create a dialogic space within which to contribute to the critique of contemporary governance.

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# Chapter 13

## Killing Me Softly

Peter Hurd

Hello. (No wait...that's not academic...what about...) In this chapter I will Zzzzzzzz....Nope, can't do it. Sorry. You see, I'm not an academic and it would be oh so wrong of me to even attempt to imitate/style myself as one. I'm a primary school teacher, more specifically an 'infant/lower Key Stage 1 supply primary school teacher'. But that's a bit of a mouthful so I generally just say, "I'm a teacher." I've been a qualified teacher since 2001. Worked fulltime for a couple of years (wild horses wouldn't drag me back!) but prefer working as a supply teacher. I've had the odd part time temporary contract here and there but 'doing supply' is where I'm at!

Anyway, I was asked if I would write about the 'Zombification of Education'. You could just as easily call this story 'Blood at the Chalkface', 'Attack of the SAT's', 'OFSTED ate my baby', 'Dawn of the Head (teacher)', 'INSET Day of the Dead' or...or....

### Killing Me Softly: Part 1

Often, a school is your best bet – perhaps not for education but certainly for protection from an undead attack. (Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide*.)

Don't get me wrong I'm grateful for the work and I do love doing what I do, it's just that the longer I'm doing it the more I find it harder to keep myself looking (and feeling) human. I wasn't always part zombie after all. All of me was once living tissue; ate proper food, breathed regularly, had a functioning circulatory system... the works! So when did I start to decay? I guess the first signs of necrosis – for me – started sometime in the mid noughties. I didn't think anything of it at first. I mean,

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who did? A bit of flaky skin, lack of appetite...shit...I was losing weight, what's not to like, right? But when I began to lose the ability to form coherent sentences (whenever I was working) that's when I knew something was up. I tried doing something about it – contacted my Union, talked (well grunted) to colleagues – all to no avail. Hell, everyone I knew who worked in schools was afflicted, even the kids to some extent. It was as if my chosen vocation had been transformed into an episode of 'The Walking Dead' overnight. But it wasn't overnight, for me. That was/is kind of worrying.

Education in schools has changed and not for the best. It's like everything is now slower. I don't mean physically, although most educationalists are dragging their legs around more and more so, but intellectually and creatively. And, to my way of thinking, had become more...morally ambiguous.

I work as a supply teacher (primary) and am currently in **CENSORED** covering a Year 3 teacher who's off sick with stress...that and her dry weeping put the last strain on her ligaments holding her arms to her shoulders, ergo, they fell off. Apparently they'll reattach with time off from work. Anyway, I gave up trying to get work through my local Council a while ago. I was too expensive the schools said, so I joined up with one of these Teaching Agencies. I get my work through 'Necropolis Education Direction' now. They don't pay us on the same rate as our full and part time colleagues (and there's no pension provision!) which has always struck me as kinda wrong but if I want work then that's the way it is. I think that was when my face began to lose colour, slacken and droop...being treated as second class.

It's 8.15 am when I get to school – I've been up since 6 am (ish) – and the secretary lets me in. "Moorinnng Meessterrr Leeewwwiiss," she groans. I mumble a reply, sign in and make my way to the staff room. When I open the door I see Miss. Glossop, the NQT Year 4 teacher slumped on a chair by the window. She looks worse than I do; hell, at least I know that my stint will end in a couple of weeks and then I can have a proper break before looking for more work but she truly looks like shit. I've seen this before of course, ain't nothing new. An NQT at the end of their second term looking harried, stressed and just generally knackered, but now with this zombie shit affecting all those who are involved in education, well... she doesn't smell so good and her once beautiful strawberry blonde hair is now a thin and greasy mass. Poor kid. She looks up at me from a pile of papers that are on the table in front of her. All colour in her eyes has just about gone, replaced with the off milky white that so many teachers are getting these days.

"Lookkk aatt aaalll thiiiiiss cccrraaapp," she whines. I lurch over and peer at the papers. Levels, targets, 'optional SAT's along with a whole host of other stuff which if I'm honest, I haven't got a clue is for, stare back at me. I nod, grunt my commiserations at the mound of paperwork in front of her and go and make myself a coffee. Really, I don't want to get involved. It's partly because of stuff like that that I got out of fulltime teaching.

On the way to the classroom I bump into the Head, Mr. Jones. I say bump but after we'd both grumbled greetings at each other, we did the zombie shuffle dance around each other and then went on our respective ways. He's a good man Mr. Jones



from what I have gathered, that and the fact that his greyness is more acute than his members of staff have lead me to believe that he's not just a career climbing nob. I've met some Heads who still look relatively human. Grin like idiots and seem to ignore the decay all around them. But old Jonesy has been here for nearly 30 years; an 'old school' Head trying to keep his school going in a system that, increasingly, doesn't understand what he does and doesn't seem to care.

It's just after 8.30 am when I enter Mrs. Atherton's Year 3 classroom, my classroom for the last 4 weeks and the next two weeks, and begin mentally preparing myself for when the kids arrive.

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*According to a recent survey by the Department of Education (2014) teachers reported, on average, working over 50 hours a week – primary staff just shy of 60. A majority of teachers said that they spent some or most of their time on “unnecessary or bureaucratic” tasks. 45 % had said that this aspect of their work had increased. Schools are swamping their staff in data and targets, leaving little room or energy for teachers to put forward the core human values that were once at the centre of what teachers do.*

*The government's own figures admit that 40 % of new teachers quit within their first five years. According to the OECD, England has one of the youngest teacher workforces in the developed world, due (in part) because older, more experienced (and more expensive) teachers are squeezed out.*

***“People feel their professionalism's been taken away because it's all about getting kids to pass tests. Passing a test is not necessarily learning: it's a snapshot of one day.” English and Special needs teacher, 42, central London; founder of teacherroar.nlogspot.com***

*Due to the cutbacks placed on the public sector by the present government Councils in England and Wales have little recourse to keep a supply teaching register; not when there are private companies willing to place supply teachers into their schools for a lower charge than the agreed wages formulated by the teaching Unions. It is a loophole that has been/is exploited to the full, generating a two tier system within the profession. Supply teachers can see their wages cut by at least 25 %, quite often more. The choice given to them is 'take it or leave it' because there are always those who are desperate enough for the work, even at a fantastically reduced rate. Those that have been paying into the Teacher's pension scheme can no longer do so whilst working for these agencies, therefore seeing a further slash in their long term income.*

My own experiences of being a supply teacher with a corporate education company have left a few choice quotes embedded in my memory; such as “No one will employ you at your Union rate,” “Will you take less money?” and the all-time classic, “How much are you worth?” Being with the children and doing what you love can only help so much when you see your profession shedding chunks of flesh before your eyes.

## Killing Me Softly: Part 2

Between 9 am when the bell sounds and 9.05 they scurry in, most of them eager, some still looking a little tired. The tired looking ones are dropped off by the breakfast club. Their pallor and speech are pretty normal first thing in the morning but as the day goes by they all look a little grey, eyes dull and speech patterns a little more akin to cro-magnon man than a 21st century 7 year old from a “developed” country. Still, they’re here and for now they’re pretty with it.

Anyway, as I finish the register and the class line up for assembly, I’m reminded of why I like this job, for all its faults. George, one of the breakfast and afterschool club kids, gives me a picture that he’s drawn. It’s me yet not...if you know what I mean. I’m totally grey and slobbering at the mouth. At the top of the picture it reads ‘Mr. Lewis is ace!’ I smile and thank George, then lead them off to the hall; the sounds of shuffling and scuffing of feet resonate all around along with a lingering smell of decay, not too strong but there all the same.

Assembly was taken by Mr. Jones and was quick (as quick as one can be whose speech patterns are falling apart) and to the point. He’s one of those heads who realises that the teaching staff need as much time as possible to get everything in of the curriculum that they can. As the school’s C of E assisted and Easter’s approaching, he did the dead yet alive talk. Surprisingly it received quite a few nods from staff and kids alike. Now I’m not the most religious of people but I reckon we’re getting desperate when the kids are starting to sympathise with the whole ‘Lazarus’ thing.

Back in the classroom I set to with teaching Literacy. I was following the curriculum plans and all was going normally when one of the kids – Barbara – asks a question which comes from nowhere and kinda throws the direction of the lesson into unknown territory. There was silence for a while then the kids started to chat about Barbara’s idea, asking me questions like I knew what to do...I didn’t but it was invigorating dealing with it all. The chatter got faster, the flesh-tones of the children began to shine and their eyes sparkled. I looked at the back of my own hands...the colour of them...they looked healthy! “This is great!” I said...no slurring of words! “Well done Barbara!” her smile lit up the room. “Let’s split up into groups and...” An arm shot up from the back from one of the boys. “Yes Rick?”

“Whhaartss thhhe ooobbjjeeccttiivvveeee?” he moaned. And just like that the spark disappeared... “Maaayybbbee”...along with my speech. “Weeee sssshh-hooouullld sstttiiiiicckk ttoooooo tthhhee lllleeeesssssssoooooonnnn pppplllll-laaaaaaaannnnnn.” I swear I could feel one of my kidneys collapsing, Barbara’s left nostril caved in that’s for sure. I made a mental note to have a word with her parents at the end of the day and carried on with the lesson. Ah well, it was good to feel human while it lasted.

After break I taught Numeracy and kept to the plan. It was ok I guess, I was certainly flagging by the end of the session and some of the noises from the children’s empty stomachs were beginning to put me off as well. “Ffffoooooodddd.” I groaned. “Leeetttt uuuussss ppprrrraaayyy!” We all put our hands together – carefully so as not to break off any fingers that were showing signs of wear and tear – said grace

and sent them off to dinner. I flopped back in my chair, just for a second, before marking the work from the morning lessons. Normally I'm lucky if I get 20 minutes for my lunch because of marking the mornings work, going over the lesson plans for the afternoon, collecting up any equipment needed and I still have to eat something before the kids are back. However, today is my PPA day, a small 10 % window in the week when I can plan (a little bit), prepare (a little bit), mark (a little bit) and catch up with whatever needs 'catching up' with (...a little bit).

I had started to look over the work. Sod it, I thought, give yourself an hour for lunch for once, live wild. And with that I slumped off to the staffroom with my cheese sandwich wishing that I had something else to eat instead, something a little less veggie and a whole lot bloodier.

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*Research published by the ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers) in April 2014, illuminated a growing problem in primary schools in England and Wales. That children as young as four are spending 10 hours a day at school. The survey of more than 1300 teachers found a growing number of parents putting the need to work ahead of spending time with their children.*

***“There is an expectation to work before looking after your family. Living costs mean it is unaffordable for only one parent to work.” A Primary school teacher from Bexley, ATL Report.***

*Many examples from primary teachers included in the report tell of infants starting school at 8 am (breakfast club) and staying until 6 pm (after school club) day in and day out, wandering from playground to desk to after school care, perpetually tired, ashen and grey faced.*

*According to Melissa Benn writing in the Guardian 17/04/14;*

***“Educational reform now largely equals intensive schooling; early morning catch-up-classes, after school clubs, longer terms, shorter holidays, more testing, more homework.”***

*And that...*

***“Overtired children don't learn. And hungry over tired children fall asleep, or kick off.”***

Once I worked in a very deprived area in the North of England – there's a lot of em' – where the day with all the infant classes started not with the register but with toast because most of the kids didn't get breakfast at home. A sad inditement of 21st century Britain but hey! As long as it's not happening for the vast majority of kids let's just keep it on the down low shall we? That is of course until now when we're seeing a growth in another form of child abuse – the institutionalised infant. If we are all subject to the dominant ideology and the crucial formative years are 0–5 years old is it possible to make an educated guess at how society is going to function in say 20 years' time? Not just institutionalised (nothing new there!) but institution-alised as an individual. Conspiracy theorists go nuts!

*An agreement by a group of academics, teachers' unions, professional associations and children's authors with expertise in primary education, gave a joint statement response to the D of E's consultation on the draft primary national curriculum 16<sup>th</sup> April 2013. In the statement there are many common areas of concern with*

headings such as, ‘Learning and understanding’, ‘Age-appropriateness’ and ‘Breadth and Balance’ which states that it:

*“...should be at the heart of the primary curriculum. We were promised a slimmer curriculum, but the proposals remain over –prescriptive, leaving little room for teacher or school flexibility. The core subjects are over specified, including statutory spelling lists and details of arithmetic procedures, and art likely to constrain curriculum innovation in schools, with insufficient room for other valued areas of learning, including creative, and practical subjects.”*

*There is also one named ‘Trust’ concerning teachers’ use of professional judgement and experience. Trust...the cornerstone of any relationship.*

I personally have mixed feelings about the curriculum. As a Primary school teacher you are expected to be knowledgeable to GCE standard in 14 subjects. Yeah, right. Everyone has their favourites and the rest of the time you do your best. As a supply teacher if I’m only called in for the odd day I sometimes find that I can teach whatever I want (especially if no work has been left) which is great! Yet if I’ve had anything longer than a couple of days with the same class then I’ve had to stick to the curriculum which can be constricting and at times boring but also a handy get out when you are teaching a subject which is not one of your strongest.

If I had to teach it every day and found the time I need to make it my own, less and less possible, then I think I could get very low indeed. Teachers spend a lot of time at work, if they have very little control over what and how they teach then eventually they’ll either revolt or leave. Who wouldn’t?

### **Killing Me Softly: Part 3**

When I got to the staffroom Miss Glossop was hunched over one of the tables chewing slowly. She was masticating like a tortoise but it wasn’t leaves she was munching on. It looked like a piece of semi-raw meat, what kind I don’t know but the smell of iron all rich and bloody wafting across the room made my cheese and pickle sandwich rather unappetising. She glanced up from her gnawing, gulped down the last piece of gristly meat, wiped her mouth and stood up to go.

“Gggggooooottttt tttoooo ggeettt bbbacckk.” She moaned. “Iiiiiii” mmm bbbeee-iiinnngggg ooooooobbbssseeeerrrvveeeddd llllaaaatttteerrrr.” I grunted non-committedly. I gathered it was like this for her most days. 5–10 minutes for lunch then back to her classroom. I sat down and began eating my sandwich; it was just fuel...no enjoyment in eating it, just fuel. I couldn’t get the smell of the bloody meat out of my nostrils that Miss. Glossop had been eating. I’ve noticed that there are a lot of younger teachers succumbing to our physical debilitation a lot more than there used to be. Eating raw meat is usually the first signs of total human collapse. I manage to keep from going totally native by being a supply teacher...Christ, I thought, what a clusterfuck. Oh well, just two weeks to go.

It was half way through the dinner hour when my PPA cover wandered in.

Mrs. Grimes covered the PPA for most of the classes taking P.E., spelling and sometimes I.T. She wasn't a qualified teacher which kinda irked me, being a qualified teacher doing supply, after all, she was taking work away from people like me because she was a lot cheaper (even on my reduced rate) and because she gave a sense of continuity to kids cos' she was a fulltime TA in the school. Correction: was a TA now she was a HTLA (Higher teaching Level Assistant) or 'cover supervisor' or something like that. Anyway, the point being that she did what once upon a time only qualified teachers could do... what I spent four years of my life training for and accumulating a shit load of debt in the process.

She looked a little haggard but she always had a smile, the kids loved her and I have to admit she was good with them.

"Tiiiss ttthhhee lllleeeesssonnnnn pppplllllaaaannnnn iiiinnnn ttthhhee ccccllllaasssrroooooomm?" she asked. I nodded then she ambled off. I'd left everything she needed for the afternoon. "Seeee yyyooouuu llllaaaaaattteerrr." I'd be back at the end of the day to see the kids off and chat with any of the parents if they needed me.

Teachers and assistants shuffled in and out of the room. A quick bite, a grunt or two in way of polite conversation, then the dinner hour was over and with an empty staffroom all to myself I settled into two and a half hours PPA. No way near enough time and as there was a staff meeting at 4 pm it looked like I had a long night ahead of me. I spread a few sheets of paper around the table and picked up the weekly plan. I asked myself again how the hell was I going to get this stuff all in and do a good job of it all? The short answer was always 'you're not, so just do the best you can'. I glanced up at the wall in front of me and the Union noticeboard that hung there. Mr. Hannah the year 6 teacher and Union rep had put up a poster encouraging people to vote for strike action. I have to say that I agree with the sentiment but can't really see what one day's action will do? It's a tricky one for teachers – even necrotic ones – as they tend to like their jobs and feel guilty or under pressure to catch up when they're not in school. I shook my head to clear such thoughts. I must have done it a mite to quick as my left ear lobe fell off. Shit! That was the second time it has happened in recent days, I knew it would re-affix itself eventually – with a bit of time away from work – but...!? Come on! Sometimes I feel I'm just falling apart.

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*According to Richard Adams writing in the Guardian 11/04/14, "...official figures showed a sharp rise in the number of unqualified teachers employed by state-funded schools in England...The Department of education figures reveal that, after years of decline in the number of unqualified teachers, there was a sharp jump from 14,800 in 2012 to 17,100 in November last year."*

I know that the rise of unqualified teachers has risen with the present Education Secretary's 'pioneering ideas' of Free Schools and growth in Academies but I experienced this phenomenon during the last government's administration. I had been working quite a bit for a primary school doing PPA cover and the odd day for courses (remember them!) when all of a sudden the work from this school dried up considerably due to their use of HTLA's to cover PPA time. For me, this was the beginning of a slow end to a job I enjoy(ed).

*According to a survey carried out by the ATL more than half (55 %) of those questioned say work pressures are having a detrimental effect on their wellbeing. Four in the ten have noticed a rise in mental health problems among colleagues over the past two years.*

***“Education professionals do more unpaid overtime than any other group and are put under constant intense pressure to meet targets, with excessive observation, changes in the curriculum and Ofsted inspections...it’s as though nothing is done unless it’s written down.” Mary Bousted, General Secretary ATL.***

*The survey reports that many teachers are afraid to tell their schools that they are having problems because of the stigma attached to mental health problems. 68 % of teachers surveyed who reported having mental health problems said they decided to hide it from their employers.*

When I was fulltime I remember being physically ill and stressed a heck of a lot. Even as a supply teacher there have been times when the job has run me down physically and mentally. I don’t think it’s such a ‘job for life’ as it used to be, because you have no life while you’re doing it, potentially ruining your overall wellbeing and future health. But that’s just me talking...

*On the 25/03/14 the NUT held a one day national strike in protest over teacher’s pay and conditions and (at time of writing) is still an unresolved industrial dispute.*

I’ve been a Trade Unionist all my working life (TGWU, UNISON, NUT) and still believe the core foundations of what being a trade union member is all about. However, since the Thatcher years trades union rights have been diminished to such an extent (and its membership de-politicised) that I have to question our leaders actions...especially constrained as they are. The spirit to fight back for one’s occupation is not as strong as it used to from a membership point of view. The rhetoric is still there from our leaders but not the will to fight unjust laws and lead by example. Our forebears who fought and sacrificed so much must be turning in their graves.

## **Killing Me Softly: Part 4**

I’d barely started getting to grips with my planning when I realised it was nearly 3.30. Time to go and see the kids off. I shuffled back to my classroom, I was pretty weary and dragging my feet more than usual and the thought of a staff meeting didn’t fill me with any glee, but ‘hey ho’ that’s the way it is. By the time I’d got back the kids were in two lines; those to go home and those going on to after school club (dubbed ‘The little Rotters’ by the staff team...unofficially of course) on their way to complete their 10 hour day.

I had a word with Barbara’s mum about her nostril caving. Thankfully she’s pretty understanding of school life and told me it was ok, whilst Mrs. Grimes bundled ‘The little Rotters’ off to the hall. Ten minutes later the classroom was empty. I sat down at my desk and let out a groan which was echoed by all off my colleagues

throughout the school as each classroom emptied of their charges. I got up, grabbed my bag and started the end of day shuffle towards the staff room. All you could hear was the sound of scraping footsteps interspersed with little moans reverberating around the corridors as all of the teaching staff began to gather in the staff room and seat themselves down.

Jonesy was last in. He slowly closed the door. God he looked rough, I mean we all do at the end of the day – different levels of decomposition depending on what kind of a day we'd had n'all that – but he looked like his threadbare suit and tie were the only things holding him together. He flopped down and the moans, groans and drawn out breaths of conversation dissipated as we waited for him to begin.

(For the purposes of this meeting the following transcript will be written in 'normal human' speech. I mean, staff meetings are usually pretty tedious anyway without the zombification process drawing out the process...so...use your imagination.)

Jonesy: Well everyone...the news isn't good I'm afraid (sigh). We've a lot to get through and I'm sure you've all got other things to do be doing and that you'd like to get home sometime this evening. First up, due to further cutbacks and policy changes we're going to have to make some changes in the next school year. (Moans, groans and collective pulling of hair from the staff) Coupled with the fact that the parents and Governors are clamouring for us to become a 'free school/academy, (more moans and groans with the sickly sounds of various appendages breaking off and flopping onto the carpet) we have a rough ride ahead us.

Miss Glossop: Does this mean that my contract won't be renewed?

Jonesy: I'll talk about that with you later...in private.

Mr. Hannah: Look Jonesy, I know you're under pressure but as the Union rep I...

Jonesy: I know Geoff, I know, but just bear with me whilst I outline to you all what I know and what I think will happen.

And so the meeting went on until roughly 6 pm when we were allowed to leave. Christ, I don't know how they do it. I mean the job is hard enough as it is without all the shit that this present administration is bringing down on them. I decided to leave and do work at home, I was seriously flagging and the blood cravings were getting stronger. I thank my lucky stars that I am a supply teacher and that my end date for working in this school was coming up soon. As I left the building I noticed Miss. Glossop struggling with a stack of exercise books and papers trying to open the boot to her car. I shambled over to offer some assistance.

"Caaannn iiiiii hheeelllppp?"

She looked up and...her face...her face had lost all remnants of life...human life, replaced by nothing more than a cadaverous mask. "Mmmmooooooaaaaaaahhhhhhhh." Came her reply. I took her keys from her and opened the boot. She leaned over and deposited her cares and worries and looked me in the eyes. A despairing grey blankness faced me. She slowly nodded her thanks and I left to continue my way home.

As I ambled with my small backpack full of my own stresses and strains I passed the local butchers ('Gove's Establishment Butchers') just shutting up for the night.

I couldn't resist it any longer – that urge to chew on bloody raw flesh – so I turned back and entered just as the butcher was bringing in his sign.

“Teacher are you?” came a voice above a red splattered apron.

“Uuuuurrmmmm.” I replied.

“They all come to me in the end” said the man reaching behind the glass counter.

“Here you go.” He handed me a soft pink package, cool to the touch. I nodded my thanks. “See you soon,” he intoned as I left the shop and he closed the door behind me.

I didn't even have any tears to cry, my ducts had all dried up, so, clutching my evening repast, I dragged my feet onwards to home. How had this happened? I thought. Why has this happened? And what the hell do I do about it now? Is there anything I can do about it? Tired and hungry I moaned my torment into the ever darkening twilight.

**The (dead) End.**

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You know something? I have done a bit of research on this (not that I'm as well experienced as you who are reading this are – I'm not an academic!) and for this final section I had planned to put in a few quotes and a bit of analysis from people such as Tricia Kelleher, head of the Stephen Perse Foundation, Neill Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-School Learning Alliance, Ros McMullen, principal of the David Young Community Academy in Leeds and a host of others...but you know what, after winding up my little black comedy I feel really bereft and low and the only thing I can think of doing is writing from the heart. A teacher's heart, battered and bruised as it may be.

I am in full agreement with 'thenerdyteacher.com' in that he believes our current education system is more focused on creating not a well-rounded thinker but on a relentless series of tests which in turn creates not only a 'zombified' pupil, but also an increasingly 'undead' and unfeeling teacher. Zombies do not think. They do not problem solve. They are not creative. They wander. Zombies are inherently drawn to the living, they crave life yet to kill a zombie their brain must be destroyed. However, killing a zombie is never an easy thing and the changes that the state wishes to bring about to our education system will be just as tough and those at the 'chalkface' are suffering because of it.

For those of us who can survive this process life will be tougher than it has been for a long, long time. Survivors, children like Karl in Robert Kirkman's 'The Walking Dead', are being increasingly forced to grow up as soon as possible. No more to be nurtured and to grow in their own time, to fulfil their own potential as a fully rounded member of society, gently yet solidly pushing the goals for furthering humanity. It is becoming more of a savage lurch from one test to another forever caked in the gore of SATs and Targets, to be spewed out at the end of educational life.

And for those in the future, if this zombification of education is not checked? I refer to Alden Bell's novel 'The Reapers and the Angels' where a young teenage girl named Temple, lives in a post-zombie apocalypse environment. Knowing



nothing else than the survival of the fittest and expecting nothing more. For her this life has become normal. Is this what the future pupils and educationalists will think in a system that has been left to decay?

As for me? Well at the time of writing this piece (summer term 2014) I've experienced less supply teaching days this last school year than ever before. Mind you I no longer work for an agency – couldn't take the second class teacher thing along with the 'making a profit out of a child's education' anymore – and work solely through the local council. This year I really believe that my teaching days are over. Killed and left to rot and that is the way I will stay. No 'Rising' for me. The dead should stay dead. Sad really.

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