

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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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still ‘living’ ideas and practices of neoliberalism while Beck makes use of the term ‘zombie categories’ to describe out-of-date sociological concepts such as “‘living dead’ categories which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu” (Slater and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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