

Zombies, Deviance, and the Right to Posthuman Life

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Introduction

Zombies have become increasingly prolific in popular culture. Films from *Dawn of the Dead*¹ to *Shaun of the Dead*,² books such as the Mira Grant *Newsflesh* series,³ zombie games including *Dying Light*,⁴ are all excellent examples of affective zombie mediations. There are some fantastic zombie podcasts, including *We're Alive*,⁵ and the audiobook of *After the Cure*,⁶ by Deirdre Gould, creates a wonderfully creepy atmosphere that should appeal to any horror fan. But what *is it* with zombies? Societies and cultures are overcome (or overrun) with morbid fascination, but why? As Sarah Lauro asks, '[w]hence does our cultural fascination with zombies come?'⁷ The answer is both obvious and not so obvious. Post-apocalyptic type scenarios allow access to view a world that is both similar-yet-strange. Audiences get to watch/read/play out stories and journeys of survivors and victims and ask those self-reflexive questions – “what would I do, how long would I survive, where would I go?”, and this imaginative exploration allows the consideration of how humans would fare in this world, but not as it is presently known.

This chapter explores the cultural fascination with zombies through a posthuman lens. From this perspective, the zombie apocalypse represents the cultural imperative to break with aspects of contemporary society that constrain people to conformity. Bound by the neoliberal, capitalist expectations on society, there is a belief that everyone should always be producing, competing, innovating, and consuming. The underlying expectation says that contributing members of society should embody “the good citizen”; active members of society,

¹ *Dawn of the Dead*, dir. George A. Romero, Laurel Group Inc., 1978.

² *Shaun of the Dead*, dir. Edgar Wright, WT2, 2004.

³ Mira Grant, *Newsflesh* (Orbit 2010-2012).

⁴ *Dying Light*, Techland, Warner, Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2015.

⁵ *We're Alive*, Wayland Productions, 2009-2014.

⁶ Deirdre Gould, *After the Cure*, narrated by Miles Taber (Audible, 2016).

⁷ Sarah Lauro, *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (U of Minneapolis P, 2017), ix.

demonstrating personal responsibility, and embodying the entrepreneurial self. However, against a backdrop of dystopian realities, there is a burgeoning scepticism within these societal expectations; the beginning of an understanding that the enterprising self and the good citizen are in fact capitalist traps, designed to keep people “in check” and their behaviours managed. This realisation allows for wider understandings of society as a biased construction, with its own agendas and powers in place. By disrupting these normative tropes (which the zombie apocalypse forces), alternative possibilities emerge. Within the fascination with zombie narratives, then, there is evident a desire to escape the current capitalist, neoliberal lifestyles; to deviate from the trend, and to therefore embody posthuman values — rejecting the attributes ascribed by of the liberal human subject. A zombie outbreak becomes almost romantically representative of a desire to “return to our roots”, to test one’s mettle against nature, and to embrace our most animalistic sides.

Ultimately, in the zombie apocalypse scenario, the age old stand-off of human versus nature comes to the fore. Would contemporary Westernised humans be capable of killing monsters; foraging and hunting for food; basic survival techniques like lighting fires, and finding water? How would they fare if removed from the daily comforts they know so well in the Western world?⁸ Somehow this return to a world without contemporary luxuries is both intriguing and *appealing*. The argument posed in this chapter, therefore, is twofold. Firstly, that it is possible to consider the current fascination with zombies as a rejection of the ultimately humanistic contemporary society. Zombies and zombie stories have often been considered metaphors for consumerism amongst other things, an argument made particular valid with the aforementioned *Dawn of the Dead*,⁹ set in a shopping mall. Secondly, this chapter argues that it is actually the zombies who have been most successful in breaking free of the capitalist venture. From this perspective the zombie is not a virus, or a stand-in for the negatively “othered” in society, but an exploration of alternative ways of living and life that might sit outside societal norms, in ways that could be considered subversive and even progressive. This extends the current debates within the field of zombie studies, and allows access to the zombie figure as something, arguably, more revolutionary, rather than regressive.

⁸ This chapter focusses on the Western world and contemporary Western media portrayals of the zombie outbreak. The zombie figure has a long and international history, which several of the other contributors of this book explore in fascinating detail.

⁹ *Dawn of the Dead*, dir. George A. Romero, Laurel Group Inc., 1978.

In its most basic form, posthumanism can arise from the desire to critically investigate and redefine what exactly is meant by “human” and what attributes it embodies. As such, the “posthuman” signals ‘the end of a certain conception of the human’¹⁰ — the liberal human subject, a rational and reasonable being. Taking this into account, the zombified breakdown of civilisation as we know it signals an enforced “posthuman” turn. However, this chapter will demonstrate the ways humanism, neoliberalism, and capitalism are deeply entrenched social values that do not take long to rise from the dead themselves — even whilst surrounded by reanimated corpses.

Capitalism, Neoliberalism, Humanism

The face of capitalism has changed through mechanical capital, to industrial, to the current informational age of capitalism. However, within all of these models the same basic tenets arise; produce, compete, innovate, and consume. Whilst capitalism promotes the privatisation of property and wealth, it also promotes a continuous spiral of innovation and productivity. Neoliberalism takes these same values and transfers them to the self. Rather than only businesses producing, competing, innovating, and consuming, personal value becomes inextricably linked to the material goods owned by individuals. Once again value is measured through what has been achieved, through material wealth — the money in the bank, the affordable holidays, the houses owned (or that are strived for), the latest smartphone, consumer gadgets, cars and ‘[c]onsumption thus becomes a vehicle for authenticating the self and/as product in a cyclical process that, once constructed, is used to validate its own manifestations’.¹¹ However, the neoliberal imperative is also evident through the ways in which individuals work on themselves, not just their possessions. The self is an enterprise — an entrepreneurial self — a project to be worked again. Nikolas Rose explains that

[t]he enterprising self will make an enterprise of its life, seek to maximize its own human capital, project itself a future, and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be.¹²

¹⁰ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (U of Chicago P, 1999), 286.

¹¹ Stephanie Genz, ‘My Job is Me’, in *Feminist Media Studies* 15:4(2015): 548.

¹² Nikolas Rose, *Inventing our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge UP, 1998). 154.

Self-worth is built through qualifications, and self-branding helps craft a careful image of success and intelligence. As Ilana Gershon states ‘how one manages one’s self is a consistent, reflexive engagement [...] Now that you are a business, there is no break from being a business.’¹³

Society has moved away from industrial capitalism to cognitive capitalism, ‘which is founded on the accumulation of immaterial capital, the dissemination of knowledge and the driving role of the knowledge economy’.¹⁴ This move aims to capture value from things other than traditional forms of labour. Here, labour is about connectivity, responsiveness, autonomy, inventiveness. Citizens are motivated by the desire to know and a passion for learning but also, crucially, to share and air that knowledge. Aesthetic labour becomes incorporated into daily routines to ensure the portrayal of the appropriate aesthetic as well as the right financial capital. There is a focus on being seen as presentable, making a statement, whether being in fashion or constructing an alternative statement; well-groomed or creating a deliberate commentary on aesthetic (e.g. hipsters). Aesthetic labour is unavoidably linked to health and fitness, where ‘the responsibility for “global health” fall eventually on the individual’s shoulders in neoliberal logics of self-help’.¹⁵ Social lives form the basis of social capital, wherein personal connections are resources to be mined for support, information, and guidance. Thus social capital is not just about forging social connections, but forming relationships with people from whom something valuable can be gleaned. As Dong Liu, Sarah Ainsworth, and Roy Baumesiter argue, this attitude means ‘[p]eople are therefore motivated to form, strengthen, and maintain connections with other people who can provide emotional support, information, and material help, and perhaps other benefits — and also motivated to sustain the other people’s willingness to provide those benefits’.¹⁶ As such, individuals are conditioned to consider “how many friends do we have, how often do we see them, how do they contribute to our lives, where am I seen with them?” because personal capital (of the self as capital) needs to be flagrantly showcased to the world.

¹³ Ilana Gershon, “‘I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man’”: Typing the neoliberal self into a branded existence’, in *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6:3(2016): 234, 243.

¹⁴ Yann Moulier Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Polity Press, 2011), 50.

¹⁵ Katariina Kyrölä, *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media* (Routledge, 2014), 47.

¹⁶ Dong Liu, Sarah Ainsworth, and Roy Baumeister, ‘A meta-analysis of social networking online and social capital’, in *Review of General Psychology* 20:4 (2016): 370.

This form of social conditioning creates a belief that one must keep accruing all of these different forms of capital, yet neoliberalism operates on the basis that all of these forms of labour, from finance to cognitive to social are seen to be within individual control. This is not based on an acknowledgement of the implications of the governing and surrounding societal structures, nor the many ways in which these impact on an ability to succeed. Instead, humans have traditionally been addressed and represented as a particular type that is:

suffused with an individualized subjectivity, motivated by anxieties and aspirations concerning their self-fulfilment, committed to finding their true identities and maximizing their authentic expression in their life-styles. The images of freedom and autonomy that inspire our political thinking equally operate in terms of an image of each human being as the unified psychological focus of his or her biography, as the locus of legitimate rights and demands, as an actor seeking to “enterprise” his or her life and self through acts of choice.¹⁷

This standardised “norm” that is so often taken for granted actually assumes a great deal — individuality, motivation, commitment, maximisation, free, autonomous, unified and in control. Yet, as this chapter will explore, this norm is actually highly presumptuous, and works to serve those in power in a variety of ways. For example, this individual, who is self-responsible, is the epitome of the “good citizen”. Citizenship itself is considered as, for example, ‘a set of norms of what people think they should do as good citizens’,¹⁸ or as Michael Schudson suggests as ‘the political expectations and aspirations people inherit and internalize’.¹⁹ The good citizen therefore may be one who displays the ‘desired modes of participation’ (though, as Neta Kligler-Vilenchik notes,²⁰ these modes are actually in flux, rather than fixed understandings). This model is again altogether a subjectivity that is collectively defined and designed; someone who behaves correctly, gives back to society, is

¹⁷ Rose, *Inventing our Selves*, 170.

¹⁸ Russell Dalton, ‘Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation’, in *Political Studies*, 2008, 56 (2008) 76-98; 78.

¹⁹ Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (Harvard UP, 1998), 6.

²⁰ Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, ‘Alternative citizenship models: Contextualizing new media and the new “good citizen”’, in *New Media & Society* 19:11 (2017): 1887-1903. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817713742>

the archetype of the correct way to be, to behave, and to strive. Moreover, the veneer of standardised citizenship silences differences in race, gender, sexuality, class etc. The message that is sent is that everyone is equal; differences are levelled. However, of course, this is not the case.

These ever expanding forms of labour upon the self have been noted previously. In their work from over a decade ago, Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt suggest that there has been a transformation in the consideration of workers' subjectivities that moves the world of work outside of the confines of the workplace to instead encompass all aspects of life.²¹ Gill and Pratt indicate that 'creative labour, network labour, cognitive labour, affective labour and immaterial labour' are examples that 'point to the significance of contemporary transformations, and signals — at the very least — that “something” is going on.'²² This “something” seems nothing less than the strengthening of the neoliberal death grip, reducing human worth to the sum of its labour, and expanding those labour forms to encompass all aspects of life. Ultimately this makes the subject-as-citizen more manageable, predictable, and controllable, as the monitoring of this citizenship is evident through neoliberal governmentality; that is, rather than a central governing force being required to monitor everyone, citizens operate in a way wherein they each guide their own behaviours in line with a certain understanding of what is deemed “appropriate”. Michel Foucault used the example of the panopticon — subjects are all looking at each other, monitoring each other's behaviour, and measuring their own in comparison.²³ Thus, subjects intrinsically embody and internalise the notion of some behaviours being “correct” and “desirable” while others are not. Citizens police themselves and others through comparison and critique. Once again this takes responsibility back on to the self — the central aim, and it could be argued success, of neoliberalism is precisely that: that once again by targeting fully autonomous citizens, individuals are charged with their own responsibilities, and held accountable for their own actions.

Social media could be argued to exacerbate all of this, in a variety of ways. Not only does social capital extend to an online domain through a variety of platforms; it is also exemplified through accumulating 'likes' and friends and followers from further afield, and

²¹ Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, 'In the social factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work', *Theory, Culture & Society* 25:7-8 (2008): 1-30.

²² Gill and Pratt, 'In the social factory?', 3.

²³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Penguin, 1991).

thus digital brands grows and digital capital amasses. There is a constant imperative to update, check in, feedback, respond, upload, and so forth and thus the entrepreneurial self takes on another form, embarking upon self-commodification. Tobias Raun highlights the ways in which intimacy and authenticity are utilised and wielded online, again as resources to be plumbed, thus further, affective layers of labour are integrated.²⁴ Through social media and internet access the metaphorical panopticon also grows; we have more people to monitor, and to monitor ourselves against, and to be monitored by, the more content that we put out (that the self-commodifier *must* put out) the more there is to refine in order to withstand scrutiny.

The neoliberal basis that implies that humans are each individually responsible for their successes and achievements is internalised in such a way that the neoliberal citizen believes that they are responsible for their own success and happiness, they ‘strive(s) for personal fulfilment [...] to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice’.²⁵ This reintroduces the figure that the liberal human subject embodies — one that is autonomous, responsible, self-determined and individually governed (see Tzvetan Todorov²⁶). However, what the rational subject of humanism does not acknowledge is the much more porous, dispersed, intra-connected aspects of “being” that influence our daily existence. Humans are constantly entwined with others — human and non-human — around them, and this recognition has led to a renewed understanding of how and what they are affected by and how they are moved; the fact that embodiment extends beyond the confines of skin shows that the supposed boundaries that separate “us” from the rest of the world are flawed when taking into perspective “our” distributed awareness and permeability.

Much of the basic premise of a human being individual, autonomous and fully in control of their own thoughts and actions has, in more recent years, come into question. This idea of the “rational” being can be linked to the ‘fiction of autonomous selfhood’.²⁷ As Lisa Blackman explains, ‘[t]his fiction is one that assumes that the human subject is ideally bounded, responsible for their actions, self-enclosed and able to develop or enact the capacity

²⁴ Tobias Raun, ‘Capitalizing intimacy: New subcultural forms of microcelebrity strategies and affective labour on YouTube’, in *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24:1 (2018): 99–113.

²⁵ Rose, *Inventing our Selves*, 151.

²⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism* (Princeton UP, 2002), 33.

²⁷ Lisa Blackman, “‘Loving The Alien’: A Post-Post-Human Manifesto”, in *Subjectivity* 10:1 (2017): 23

for change and transformation through their own agency’,²⁸ and as such has ‘become part and parcel of how we are governed and managed as citizens and populations’.²⁹ The rational, autonomous being is therefore a particular construction designed to suit a particular style of governmentality; by making the subject accountable they are also made controllable. The liberal human subject has traditionally applied to a white, male, heterosexual, Western, fully abled, educated human (educated being key here, when considering who education has historically been denied to) where other parts of society have been excluded even the most basic rights. These ideas of liberal humanism operate within hierarchical understandings of what, or who matters, and fools people into the belief that meritocracy is evident.

In this hellish merry-go-round of producing, buying, grooming, branding, being “good”, responsible, clean, authentic, and uploading, commenting, connecting, is it really so surprising that people yearn for and fantasise about gore, monsters, the dissolution of fashion, shops, Netflix, Instagram, and the “work, work, work” and “money, money, money” necessary for the ride? Others have argued that the consistent parade of capitalism creates consumerist zombies: mindless, mass-driven, staggering in the footsteps of those who trod the same path before.

As if this zombification did not suffice, the current political climate appears to be a dystopian reality, where Presidents and Prime Ministers insist on building walls and suspending parliaments. Accordingly, ideas of equality and democracy are being given more scrutiny, and met with greater scepticism. As the hierarchies within society are more and more evident and the divide between those who are able to achieve the higher status in society and those who are not becomes more and more apparent:

bearers of *social* risk are expected to continue to get by on their own. At all costs, though, they must keep shopping. Exploiting crisis conditions, we must remember, has been a hallmark of neoliberal governance.³⁰

By noticing these conditions, “the enterprising self” and “the good citizen” are becoming understood as capitalist, neoliberal traps, designed to keep people “in check”. As such, when

²⁸ Blackman, “Loving The Alien”, 23.

²⁹ Lisa Blackman, *The Body* (Berg, 2008), 113.

³⁰ Jamie Peck, ‘Zombie neoliberalism and the ambidextrous state’, in *Theoretical Criminology* 14:1(2010): 109.

faced with this exhaustion and the dawning realisation that all this work is based on a foundational lie, a zombie outbreak becomes almost romantically representative of a desire to shirk the problematic, societal expectations of the contemporary age. The zombie apocalypse allows dreams and fantasies of overthrowing these humanist, capitalist, and neoliberal constructions to thrive. In these narratives, therefore, the fascination with the zombie apocalypse is an embodiment of a posthuman way of living.

Posthuman Perspectives

Posthumanism not only about technology, as many interpretations of it may suggest. Rather, as Elaine Graham³¹ states, ‘technologies call into question the ontological purity according to which Western society has defined what is normatively human’, and this “questioning” that the influx of technologies has provoked has spread throughout the interrogation of the ontology of the human in other areas, aside from digital augmentation. As Rosi Braidotti states, ‘the posthuman is not so much a dystopian vision of the future, but a defining trait of our historical context’.³² Here then, ‘talk about representations of the post/human is an occasion for acknowledging what has always been the case – that “human nature” is as much a piece of human artifice as all the other things human beings have invented’.³³ Accordingly, “human nature” should be understood as culturally and historically contingent — the human subject as a “rational” being privileged those in power – the educated, white, male (see also Kurt Danziger³⁴; Rose³⁵). Much of feminist posthuman theory is based on a critique of humanism; ‘deconstruct[ing] humanism from within, tracing its internal tensions and conceptual discrepancies’.³⁶ The rejection of the “liberal human subject” therefore stems from the acknowledgement that what actually counts as “human” is already flawed considering that, historically, only a particular kind of human has had full access to rights. Thus it is possible to start from a point of critique wherein the sheer title of human is not so all-encompassing as one might expect. Margrit Shildrick makes a strong argument for this in her consideration of how otherness and sameness are articulated — being differentially

³¹ Elaine Graham, *Representations of the Posthuman* (Manchester UP, 2002), 5.

³² Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Polity Press, 2019), 1-2.

³³ Graham, *Representations of the Posthuman*, 37.

³⁴ Kurt Danziger, *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found Its Language* (Sage, 1997), 40.

³⁵ Rose, *Inventing our Selves*, 9.

³⁶ David Roden, *Posthuman Life*, (Routledge, 2015), 9.

bodied was mitigated by being seen as intellectually the same.³⁷ Difference in one regard was mitigated through sameness in another. However, that other becomes the basis, the starting point — the liberal human subject is always based on a “norm” that actually excludes most of the population of the world.

Posthumanism also challenges the binaries that are historically evident, such as self/other, male/female, culture/nature, mind/matter, human/machine/animal. These binaries have always created hierarchies, wherein one end of the spectrum is seen as the norm (self, male, culture, mind, human), and the opposite end as “other”. Rejecting these binaries, then, ultimately leads to a rejection of hierarchies, by acknowledging the bias implicit within them. However, more than that, by understanding the ways in which meanings have been constructed through oppositions, this forces an acknowledgement of how much different subject positions are explicitly intra-dependent on the “others” around them. Karen Barad utilises “intra-action” rather than “interaction” to demonstrate that, where interaction suggests two separate entities coming together, intra-action embodies a philosophy of emergence, where one position is entirely reliant and dependent on another in order for its specific process of becoming to arise.³⁸ As such, the self as static, stable, responsible and individual then begins to disintegrate by considering how each “self” is entangled with “other” entities, both human and non-human. Accordingly, ‘the posthuman, however, is not just a critique of Humanism. It also takes on the even more complex challenge of anthropocentrism’.³⁹ As soon as the disruption of these binaries occurs, and the self is no longer static but occurs in mutual construction with a variety of “others” and possibilities, the human as the most important, or dominant, species or even “thing” becomes undermined. Thus, a posthuman philosophy embodies a disruption of hierarchies in favour of a more rhizomatic understanding of relations, and a consideration of the self as distributed, wherein agency is dispersed.

Initially, in some ways, the way in which the zombie apocalypse is utilised by media producers and consumers “works” in disrupting the humanistic model — often, within these narratives, there is a better understanding of self as entangled — reliant on others,

³⁷ Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism And (Bio)ethics* (Routledge, 1997).

³⁸ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke UP, 2007).

³⁹ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 8.

environments, materials, technologies. The survivors can no longer consider themselves as entirely autonomous — their survival depends not just on themselves but the environments and tools they have at their disposal. Survivors are therefore in a less hierarchical relationship with the world around them. This post-hierarchical state also leads to a (potentially) more post-anthropocentric understanding of the world. Survivors are no longer “top of the food chain” and cannot, should not, see the world as revolving around them anymore.

Moreover, there is a rebalance of the significance lent to embodiment — whereas liberal humanism privileged the mind (with the infamous words of Rene Descartes: ‘I think therefore I am’⁴⁰) and “reason” over the body, this was an obviously gendered position which allowed women, people of colour, disabled people, and the lower classes to be effectively discarded from historical philosophy. The zombie apocalypse brings bodies (leaky ones at that), and flesh right back into the forefront. As David McNally explains, drawing on Bakhtin: ‘contrary to the defined and enclosed heroic body of the bourgeois/aristocratic male, then, the grotesque body “is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world” [...] with respect to the zombie genre [...] the cut, the sore, the dangling limb’.⁴¹ McNally further suggests that zombies represent a ‘grotesque corporeality’ and are an example of ‘hyperembodiment’⁴² moreover, leaving aside the mind and reason, ‘[z]ombies also reveal what bodies are capable of, and what they can endure’.⁴³

Yet, society always reverts to conformity — the 2.4 family and the heroic father figure often emerges,⁴⁴ for example in *World War Z*,⁴⁵ *I am Legend*,⁴⁶ even *Cargo*.⁴⁷ There is the celebration of enforced heterosexuality “for survival”, and as Shaka McGlotten and Steve Jones explain ‘many zombie narratives reproduce or even celebrate norms tied to romance,

⁴⁰ Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, Cosimo Classics, 1924 [1637], 31.

⁴¹ David McNally, ‘Ugly Beauty: Monstrous Dreams of Utopia’. *Zombie Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro. University of Minneapolis Press, 2017, 125.

⁴² McNally, ‘Ugly Beauty’, 128.

⁴³ Shaka McGlotten and Steve Jones, *Zombies and Sexuality: Essays on Desire and the Living Dead*. McFarland and Company, 2014, 3.

⁴⁴ Rain Shuen Chan, ‘The Family Trouble in Post-Millennial Zombie Cinema: The Father-Hero in *I Am Legend* (2007) and *World War Z* (2013)’, *Theorizing Zombiism Conference*, University College Dublin, 2019.

⁴⁵ *World War Z*, dir. Marc Foster, Skydance Productions, 2013.

⁴⁶ *I am Legend*, dir. Francis Lawrence, Village Roadshow Pictures, 2007.

⁴⁷ *Cargo*, dir. Ben Howling and Yolanda Ramke, Umbrella Entertainment, 2017.

gender, ability, and heterosexuality’⁴⁸ (see also Cathy Hannabach⁴⁹). The links between zombie narratives and contemporary “keep fit” regimes are also rife, with *Zombieland*⁵⁰ stressing the importance of cardio, whilst Conor Heffernan has demonstrated the utilisation of the zombie as a threat/motivation in fitness magazines.⁵¹ Of course, this focus on fitness assumes and accepts that, in the zombie apocalypse, the physically disabled will be some of the first to die. Alternatively, in certain narratives their disability is exploited as inspiration porn, or as another trope that is utilised to demonstrate what the human can “overcome”. Moreover, the desire to kill or overcome the zombie becomes indicative of the desire to defeat death itself — the ultimate goal in asserting that the human is agentic, and in control.

Throughout these narratives then, as the male hero saves the day, heterosexuality signifies “hope”, ableism is lauded and disability utilised, this is where the posthuman dream crumbles. How is it possible to imagine society outside of what is known? Hierarchies, belonging, measuring worth, individualistic attitudes always emerge. Imaginations fail. And, of course, humanistic, anthropocentric ways of thinking resurface. Distinctions between self and other continue to occur, perhaps not as much through environment, but through zombie-as-other. In these scenarios then, is it in fact the zombies who have truly escaped, and succeeded? Is becoming a zombie, then, becoming posthuman? As Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry suggest, ‘the zombii, a consciousnessless being that is a swarm organism, and the only imaginable specter that could really be posthuman’.⁵² This swarm becomes almost a vision of an alternative society, wherein networked affect (often seen as operating through, for example, mob mentality) is evident and embraced as, despite zombies being out for their own survival, they operate also as a conjoined body (think, for example, of the iconic swarm scene in *World War Z*,⁵³ where zombies pile upon one another in order to build a ramp up and over

⁴⁸ McGlotten and Jones, *Zombies and Sexuality*, 6.

⁴⁹ Cathy Hannabach, ‘Queering and Crippling the End of the World: Disability, Sex, and Race in The Walking Dead’, in Shaka McGlotten and Steve Jones, eds., *Zombies and Sexuality: Essays on Desire and the Living Dead* (MacFarland, 2014), 106-122.

⁵⁰ *Zombieland*, dir. Richard Fleischer, Columbia Pictures, 2009.

⁵¹ Conor Heffernan, ‘The Apocalypse Workout: Health, Identity and Zombies’, *Theorizing Zombiism Conference*, University College Dublin, 2019.

⁵² Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, ‘A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism’, in *boundary 2* 35:1 (2008): 88.

⁵³ *World War Z*, dir. Marc Foster, Skydance Productions, 2013.

a walled city — echoed in the behaviour of the White Walkers in *Game of Thrones*,⁵⁴ who lay themselves across a burning border, in order for the others behind them to cross.

Zombie as Posthuman

There is reasoning behind this argument from a variety of perspectives. As McGlotten and Jones state, ‘[t]he levelling of social difference, and of society itself, is paradoxically facilitated by the zombie’s lack of subjective agency [...] the zombie’s revolution is not only social: it also represents day zero for human identity, and the imbricated experiences of individuality and interdependence on which sociality is founded’.⁵⁵ Therefore, the zombies embodies a collapse of all previous understandings of “human identity” thereby allowing a whole new reconsideration of those taken-for-granted norms — thus enabling at least one parameter of posthumanism. Due to the ways in which ‘[z]ombies are freed of any obligations, other than to their own hunger’⁵⁶ they are accordingly freed of the expectations, and hierarchies apparent within liberal humanism, whilst simultaneously pointed to its lie: ‘zombies are evacuated of self, but they also reveal that for the living, autonomous will is empty’.⁵⁷ Indeed, Romero famously said that in the event of a zombie apocalypse his strategy would be to go out and get bitten quickly.⁵⁸

The zombie is “othered” in the same way that those who fell outside of the scope of the liberal human subject were: people of colour, women, disabled people and members of the LGBTQIA+ have all been feared, scorned, locked out, and elicited disgust. Amy Bride highlights the ways zombies are seen as “less than human”.⁵⁹ Furthermore, in the Haitian legend the zombie is seen as that which lacks the rational and reasonable mental behaviour ‘the body is resurrected and retained: only consciousness is permanently lost’.⁶⁰ They are conceived as ““dead men working”, unthinking body-machines, lacking identity, memory and

⁵⁴ *Game of Thrones*, dir. David Benioff and Daniel Brett Weiss, HBO, 2011-2019.

⁵⁵ McGlotten and Jones, *Zombies and Sexuality*, 6.

⁵⁶ McGlotten and Jones, *Zombies and Sexuality*, 6.

⁵⁷ McGlotten and Jones, *Zombies and Sexuality*, 7.

⁵⁸ Lauro and Embry, ‘A Zombie Manifesto’, 88.

⁵⁹ Amy Bride, ‘Mindless Consumers: Zombies, Subprime Borrowers, and the 2008 Financial Crash’, *Theorizing Zombiism Conference*, University College Dublin, 2019.

⁶⁰ Lauro and Embry, ‘A Zombie Manifesto’, 89.

consciousness — possessing only the physical capacity for labour⁶¹ whilst still being left with their reanimated body. The zombie is othered precisely because it foregrounds bodily capacity over mental capacity⁶² — again linking back to women, POC, disabled people and all of those historically denied an education, and who have dubiously been seen to be more “bodily” beings than “brain beings”, (Hannabach also states that ‘in popular culture zombies and people with disabilities are constructed in problematically similar ways’).⁶³

For the most part, it is the zombie who manages to live in a truly posthuman state regarding the rejection of humanism, and so perhaps they are where hope should lie. They symbolise a ‘rupture in the fabric of the normal’,⁶⁴ and thus seem to embody the posthuman requirement for a reconsideration of taken-for-granted norms. Lauro and Embry⁶⁵ state that the zombie is a ‘threat to stable subject and object positions’. If one concurs with Shildrick that the dominant Western view of subjectivity is ‘the concept of a free and rational sovereign individual, aware of himself as a self, and claiming some kind of authority, whether sanctioned transcendentally or materially, over those “others” who are disqualified’,⁶⁶ this is precisely what posthumanism, too, troubles, in order to move away from an anthropocentric worldview and acknowledge the ways in which “objects” explicitly impact subjectivities and make other ways of being possible. These are important ways in which alignments can be seen between posthuman theory and the zombie category. As McGlotten and Jones indicate, ‘[a]s monsters that straddle the gulf between life and death, zombies disturb established ontological and epistemological categories, as well as hegemonic norms’,⁶⁷ and it is this disruption of these binary categories that allows alternative conceptions of being to enter the philosophical debate. Avoiding binary oppositions, ‘the zombie is uncontrollable ambiguity’,⁶⁸ and, as such, it embodies the breaking of boundaries and binaries necessarily for a posthuman reimagining. This ambiguity is evident through the boundaries and binaries that the zombie eradicates, such as male/female: Patricia MacCormack states with regards to

⁶¹ McNally, ‘Ugly Beauty’, 124.

⁶² This is, of course a problematic dichotomy to draw in the first place, given that the mind and mental capacity is, evidently, embodied.

⁶³ Hannabach, ‘Queering and Crippling the End of the World’, 106.

⁶⁴ McNally, ‘Ugly Beauty’, 124.

⁶⁵ Lauro and Embry, ‘A Zombie Manifesto’, 88.

⁶⁶ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*, 147.

⁶⁷ McGlotten and Jones, *Zombies and Sexuality*, 6.

⁶⁸ Lars Bang Larsen, ‘Zombies of Immaterial Labor The Modern Monster & The Death of Death’, in Sarah Juliet Lauro, ed., *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, (U of Minneapolis P, 2017). 157.

certain films that ‘their zombie state ablates gender, which thus ablates definable sexuality through object choice’.⁶⁹ The sanctity of selfhood is further disrupted through the zombie as it is constructed in and as an assemblage – the individual is lost in favour of the masses, ‘the zombie horde is a swarm where no trace of the individual remains’.⁷⁰ Lauro and Embry argue that the zombie is a figure that ‘crashes borders’ and this includes the border between life and death, which has long been a subject of fear and loathing in itself.⁷¹ From this perspective it could be argued that the Westernised “taboo” of death is also evidence of engrained, humanistic value structures, and, as per Braidotti ‘[w]e need to re-think death, the ultimate subtraction, as another phase in a generative process’,⁷² if people are to fully engage with posthuman alternatives.

The All-too-human(ist)-zombie

However, even in *The Girl With All the Gifts*,⁷³ an example of the “zombie” as inheritor of the world, humanistic tendencies pervade in the final scene, when it is the sole, human survivor who teaches the new “Biters” generation, schooling them from within the safety of her hermeneutically sealed chamber. In *Santa Clarita Diet*⁷⁴ although Sheila embraces and enjoys her zombie-embodiment in ways that might refute a humanistic hierarchy, again in other ways she plays into normative tropes — as Lorna Jowett notes she has ‘i-zombie responsibilities’ of selfhood;⁷⁵ her job, her position as wife, and mother; and her requirements to maintain appearances, and not let her neighbours become aware of zombie-ness. In *Warm Bodies*⁷⁶ this humanisation of the zombie is taken even further, through the complete reversion of the zombie. Sasha Cocarla explains that even though “R”, the main zombie protagonist, ‘is a literal monster himself (and thereby queered in relation to the human norm), he clings to the dominant notion of normalcy and the neoliberal mantra of achievement (“if you work hard enough, you will be successful”), implying that he has more in common with

⁶⁹ Patricia MacCormack, ‘Zombies without Organs: Gender, Flesh and Fissure’, in Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette, eds., *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead* (The Scarecrow Press, 2008), 97.

⁷⁰ Lauro and Embry, ‘A Zombie Manifesto’, 89.

⁷¹ Lauro and Embry, ‘A Zombie Manifesto’, 91.

⁷² Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 121.

⁷³ *The Girl With All the Gifts*, dir. Colm McCarty, BFI, 2016.

⁷⁴ *Santa Clarita Diet*, dir. Victor Fresco, Kapital Entertainment, 2017-2019.

⁷⁵ Lorna Jowett “‘I got a new kill poncho’: Santa Clarita Diet and the Pleasures of Zombie Embodiment”. *Theorizing Zombiism Conference*, University College Dublin, 2019.

⁷⁶ *Warm Bodies*, written by Isaac Marion, Atria Books, 2010.

living humans than he does with the Boneys',⁷⁷ and so internalised ideals of meritocratic neoliberalism are evident from his own aspiration. Moreover, denied the normal exit route of work (death) the zombie has potentially no choice but to focus on a meritocratic hope for his future. Cocarla explains that R also has 'desire for neoliberal values, including romance and heteronormative desire'⁷⁸ which become the driving aspect of the narrative. Whilst Cocarla's reading is of the *Warm Bodies* novel, where she suggests 'neoliberal success is tentative', in the 2013 film⁷⁹ the neoliberal success seems complete, as the complexities of the prose narrative are skimmed over, and a Hollywood-esque "happy ending" is desired.⁸⁰ Elsewhere, the reinstatement of the hierarchy of mind over matter is seen in, for example, *Day of the Dead: Bloodline*⁸¹, when the cure is derived specifically from a zombie who still retains some mental capacity, whose *brain* is still alive. Therefore, mind over matter, brain over body, has not died as a binary, and zombies are graded too by their mental capacities rather than physical ones. Regarding gender, sexuality, and individualised subjectivity, in the *I am Legend*⁸² film, part of the legend's "downfall" is that the female zombie-vampire's (male) partner is enraged by her capture and comes to retrieve her, thus these zombies are neither free from binary gender roles, nor queer in their sexuality, nor seen as mass rather than individual. This therefore extends the debate that zombies are a metaphor for humanity's contemporary mindless consumption to argue that even zombies are also victims of humanistic systems; they are not merely metaphor for contemporary human practice (which is, in itself a highly anthropocentric way of utilising the zombie-other purely as a contemporary referent for the category of human). Even in death the interminable production chain cannot be escaped.

⁷⁷ Sasha Cocarla, 'A Love Worth Un-Undying For: Neoliberalism and Queered Sexuality in Warm Bodies', in Shaka McGlotten and Steve Jones, eds., *Zombies and Sexuality: Essays on Desire and the Living Dead* eds., (MacFarland, 2014), 61-62.

⁷⁸ Cocarla, 'A Love Worth Un-Undying For', 62.

⁷⁹ *Warm Bodies*, dir. Jonathan Levine, Mandeville Films, 2013.

⁸⁰ Cocarla, 'A Love Worth Un-Undying For', 62.

⁸¹ *Day of the Dead: Bloodline*, dir. Hector Hernandez, Saban Capital Group, 2018.

⁸² Zani and Meaux (2011: 98) argue that although the *I am Legend* novel by Richard Matheson monsters are categorised as vampires, Romero's zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* was based loosely upon the book and therefore 'the blueprint for modern zombie cinema is Matheson's novel'. Whilst it may be tenuous to fully extend this hybridity into the *I am Legend* film, it serves as a useful example in this instance. Steven Zani and Kevin Meaux, 'Lucio Fulci and the Decaying Definition of Zombie Narratives', in Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, eds., *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-human* (Fordham UP, 2011), 98-115.

From this perspective then, whilst zombies in some ways embody posthuman stances, humanism, neoliberalism, and capitalism are deeply entrenched values, and their structures do not take long to rise from the dead themselves — even whilst surrounded by, or embodied through, reanimated corpses. Ultimately these values seem too ingrained to escape, even when undead. What does the attack upon the posthuman zombie then signify, but an attack on the very threat that fascinates and, potentially, appeals? There is a *dual* fascination then; firstly, a captivation of the crash that the zombie apocalypse can give. McNally expands by suggesting that ‘the attraction of such displays, and of much of the horror genre generally, resides, of course, in its capacity to gratify as much as to frighten’.⁸³ Viewers derive a deep pleasure from images of fantastic beings wreaking havoc upon polite citizens of well-ordered society’. Yet, audiences are then intent upon the attack on those who embody that crash. This echoes Lauro and Embry’s ascertain that the zombie both ‘terrifies and tantalizes’.⁸⁴ Ultimately it seems that (presumed) gratification comes, in the end, from seeing humanity “triumph”, whether through the survivors or through the zombie-turned-human reclaiming its place in society. Donna Haraway once wrote of ‘the promises of monsters’,⁸⁵ the possibility exist that humanistic society has thwarted even that. Not even zombies can save us now.

⁸³ McNally, ‘Ugly Beauty’, 124-125.

⁸⁴ Lauro and Embry, ‘A Zombie Manifesto’, 88.

⁸⁵ Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (Routledge, 2003), 63.

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