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Why Zombies Matter: The Undead as Critical Posthumanist

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KEY WORDS:

Zombie, posthuman, technological singularity, humanism, antihumanism.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

Zombie, posthumánní, technologická singularita, humanismus, antihumanismus.

ABSTRACT:

This paper poses two questions: why have we brought back the living dead so many times in so many different forms, and what is the cultural significance of its most recent resuscitation?

With respect to the latter query, I propose three ideas: first, that the zombie has become the biotechnological equivalent of the science-fictional cyborg, as they both express the same anxieties and thus fulfill a similar cultural function. Second, as humans converted into another species, they are posthuman, and their genocidal war on humanity is homologous to the science-fictional Terminators and apocalyptic cyborgs and artificial intelligences. In the same way, the heralded “zombie apocalypse” is a fictional historical evolutionary turning point homologous to John Von Neumann’s and Vernor Vinge’s “technological singularity.” Third, the change in rationalization of zombification from the supernatural to the scientific in the 1960s signified a reaction against instrumental reason, technoscience, modernity, and the values of Humanism. This is evident in recent iterations in which the zombie is the result of a plague cause by genetic experimentation. I conclude that this millennial zombie is the poster child for an antihumanist, critical posthumanism.

Finally, in response to the first query, I will propose seven theses explaining this monster’s durability and mutability based on these observations.

ABSTRAKT:

Proč zrovna zombie: nemrtví jako kritičtí poshumanisté

Studie si klade dvě otázky: proč jsme přivedli živé mrtvé zpět v tolika různých zpodobněních a jaký je kulturní význam jejich posledního vzkříšení? Co se druhé otázky týče, navrhuji tři

odpovědi: za prvé, zombie se staly biotechnologickým ekvivalentem science fiction kyborgů, protože vyjadřují stejné obavy, a plní tak obdobnou kulturní funkci. Za druhé, jako lidé přetvoření v jiný druh jsou posthumánní a jejich vyhlazovací válka s lidstvem je analogická snahám terminátorů, kyborgů a umělých inteligencí ze science fiction. Stejně tak je ohlašovaná „zombie apokalypsa“ fikčně historickým evolučním zlomem příbuzným „technologické singularitě“ Johna von Neumana a Vernora Vinge. Za třetí, posun ve vysvětlování zombifikace od nadpřirozeného k vědeckému v 60. letech minulého století představuje reakci na instrumentální myšlení, technovědu, modernitu a hodnoty humanizmu. To je zřejmé ze současných příkladů, v nichž je zombie výsledkem epidemie zapříčiněné genetickými experimenty. Tvrdím, že zombie tohoto tisíciletí je pozdním potomkem antihumanizmu a kritického posthumanizmu. A konečně, jako odpověď na první otázku předkládám sedm tezí založených na zkoumání fenoménu zombií a vysvětlujících přetrvávající životnost a proměnlivost tohoto monstra.

“Monsters,” as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes, “ask us why we created them” (COHEN 1990: 20). And anyone who has not spent the last ten years on a mountain top, in a cave, or buried in a grave, will have noted the omnipresence of the revenant we call a zombie. I say “omnipresence” because this monster has transcended the borders between media as no other ever has, shambling and lurching from cinema to video games (and vice versa) to literature, graphic novel, and even popular music.¹ Nor is its popularity limited to the U.S. or Anglophone realms: one could mention for example the works of the Italian filmmaker Lucio Fulci, or the Spaniard Amando de Ossorio to offer just two examples; in fact, according to Peter Dendle, in the first decade of this century, zombie films were produced in thirty countries.² Moreover, the zombie has crossed over from fiction to reality, as witnessed by the popularity of zombie walks in which people walk the streets made up to simulate the living dead.³ In the United States, stu-

- 1) One could note, for example, the *Resident Evil* film series (2002–12, with another in the works for 2015) based on the eponymous video game; the television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–), from the series of graphic novels written by Robert Kirkman and illustrated by Tony Moore (2003–2013); or the movie *World War Z* (2013), based on the 2006 Max Brooks novel that in turn followed his enormously successful 2003 *A Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*. On the relationship between video games and the zombie genre, see the essays by Tanya Krzywinska, Ron Scott, Gareth Schott, y Matthew J. Weise (2011). Graham St. John has noted and explained the rave subculture’s identification with this monster. With respect to music, the song «Zombie» by The Cranberries achieved number one status on the pop music charts in Australia, Belgium, Denmark, and Germany, fourteen in the UK, and eighteen in the U.S. See also Annelise Sklar’s article concerning the music genre known as «psychobilly», in which such themes are common. To quickly get a sense of the enormity of the phenomenon, I recommend <http://www.allthingszombie.com/>, which offers links to movies, books, games, toys, and on-line communities.
- 2) The best histories of the zombie genre include the studies by Kay Glenn, Peter Dendle (2001, 2010), and Jaime Russell, as well as Shawn McIntosh’s article (2008a). On Italian zombie cinema, consult Jay Slater, Stephen Thrower, Brad O’Brien, Stephen Zani and Kevin Meaux, David Pagano, and Patricia MacCormack (2008), as well as Dendle (2001), who also discusses the genre in Spain. Both Glenn and Dendle discuss zombies in numerous other nations as well.
- 3) Regarding this interpenetration between life and art, see Sarah Juliet Lauro’s excellent piece “Playing Dead: Zombies Invade Performance Art . . . and Your Neighborhood”. Concerning zombie walks, the web pages <http://www>.

dents play zombie vs. human, a game in which the latter attempt to “kill” the former by shooting them with foam rubber projectiles.⁴ And as if that were not enough, this apparently frivolous pop-culture phenomenon has attracted the attention of the ivory tower, where it is being taken seriously – dead serious, one might say: renowned philosophers discuss the possibility of a zombie subjectivity while preeminent neurobiologists publish articles in prestigious journals concerning hypothetical zombie consciousness.⁵

For what reason and to what end do we continue to resuscitate this monster in different forms at distinct moments? And what reasons lurk behind its current return from the dead? I propose four ideas: first, that the zombie is the biological, or biotechnological, equivalent of the cyborg and artificial intelligence, because they all express similar anxieties and fulfill the same cultural function. Second, as human beings converted into another species, they are posthuman. Third, since they strive to exterminate humanity and replace them, this revenant constitutes the biological homologue to and symbolic equivalent of the Terminator- and Matrix-type cyborg and artificial intelligence or “AI” scenarios. Consequently, the fêted “zombie apocalypse” fulfills the same function in the collective imagination as the technological singularity, that hypothetical moment, popularized by Vernor Vinge at a 1993 NASA symposium, at which artificial intelligence will surpass that of its human creators. Fourth, I suggest that, beginning in the 1960s, the zombie manifests a reaction against technoscience, against modernity, and against humanism. This phenomenon is most clearly present in the predominant postmillennial strain of this ravenous revenant in which it is the result of genetic engineering. I hope to demonstrate that this zombie is the posterchild for a posthuman antihumanism. Finally, I will offer seven theses to explain why the figure’s appeal has endured so, as well as its extraordinary mutability.

As Cohen notes, the etymological origin of the noun “monster” is in the Latin *monstrum*, meaning “portent” or “warning,” which is in turn related to *monere*, to show (COHEN 1996: 4). These roots suggest both the monster’s symbolic

crawlofthedead.com/crawls/worldwide, <http://www.zombiewalk.com/> and <http://deathbyzombie.com/> are useful. This last page alone lists zombie walks in ten different countries in 2014. It is also pertinent to note that Dendle (2011) has documented how new technologies during the last fifteen years have radically altered the way these movies are filmed, copied, and disseminated; that is, how they are both produced and consumed. He reports that, since 2000, hundreds of zombie movies, short and full-length, have been filmed, most of them artisanal. Thus, the lines between producer and consumer, between writer, actor, and spectator, have become blurred.

4) The web site <http://humansvszombies.org/> offers a wealth of resources concerning this game.

5) See for example the studies by Selmer Bringsjord, Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad, Robert Kirk, Antti Revonsuo, Robert Pepperell, and Paul Skokowski.

significance and its cultural function: the monster is a liminal being that guards the border between the acceptable and the forbidden or the Other. It is, in Cohen's words, "difference made flesh" (IBID.: 7). In the same way that its physical appearance violates morphological categories, seen diachronically, the monster is called forth at times and in places in which such categories (be they ethnic, economic, social, ontological, etc.) enter into a state of crisis. The popularity of each monster waxes and wanes according to the culture's needs and, when it reappears, it does so having evolved to adopt itself to the collective psychological demands of that particular time and place (IBID.: 5). Monsters represent beings and practices that threaten the social and symbolic orders, and their defeat serves to validate and vindicate them (IBID.: 14). In other cases, they may represent the order itself at times when it threatens the liberties, well-being, or even the existence of human beings. They inspire an ambivalence in us in which fear, awe, and repulsion coexist with fascination and envy of their powers or their freedom from restraints (IBID.: 17). They are at once expressions of our most profound anxieties and fears, and of the desires and fantasies we dare not speak.

The zombie, as a monster, manifests all these characteristics; however, its particular history lends it certain unique symbolic possibilities. The revenant has its origin in colonialism: when the French imported African slaves, they came with religious beliefs that were then adopted to their new circumstances.⁶ According to legend, priests or shamans called "bokors" possessed the power to resuscitate the dead so that, deprived of free will, they could work night and day for their masters without food, drink, or rest.⁷ This caused Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to affirm that, from the owners perspective, "[t]he myth of the zombie, of the living dead, is a work myth" (DELEUZE – GUATTARI 1987: 425–426). Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry have observed that, when the Haitian slaves rebelled at the end of the eighteenth century, this legend was transformed into a monstrous revolutionary narrative, as the white slaveholders described the rebels, both physically and in their behavior, as zombie-like (LAURO – EMBRY 2008: 87). Thus, in Haiti itself the zombie came to incarnate

6) According to McIntosh, the word most likely originated either in Gabon, from the Mitshogo word *ndzumbi*, or in the Congo from the eponymous tribe's word *nzambi* (2008a: 2). In addition to the works cited in n. 2, consult the articles by Chera Kee, Kevin Boon (2007, 2011), Kyle Bishop (2006 y 2010a), and Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (2011a) on the origins of this figures.

7) Nonetheless, ethnobotanist Wade Davis affirms in his book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) that there is a scientific basis for the legend: toxins from a species of pufferfish can produce a paralysis similar to death, and the brain damage suffered by the victims due to anoxia may explain their diminished intellectual capacities upon awakening. See Bishop (2006).

mutually opposing values, slavery and revolution. The U.S. occupation of the country from 1915 to 1934 made possible the legend's exportation to Northern climes.⁸

Scholars tend to divide the history of zombie narratives into three eras, and one notices that the first two consist mostly of film works since, as Kyle Bishop has noted, the zombie lacks any literary tradition (BISHOP 2006: 196) and, due to its lack of interiority, is a mostly visual figure (IBID.: 197). The first or folkloric stage dates from the premier of the Victor Halperin film *White Zombie* in 1932 until George A. Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* (henceforth *NLD*). Whereas the folkloric zombie was raised by the bokor from the dead by magic, and was a mindless slave to the priest's desires, Romero's movie inaugurated the second stage or what Dendle has called the "Golden Age" of the zombie (2001:9), characterized by the well-known slow-moving, witless anthropophage. The genre's third stage was launched in 2002 by the release of a cinematic version of the video game *Resident Evil* and the premier of Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*. The attributes of this more heterogeneous generation will be addressed shortly.

Critics have interpreted movies such as *White Zombie*, *Ouanga* (1936), *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and *Voodoo Man* (1944) as manifesting a postcolonial paranoia toward the first and only American nation governed by blacks at the time.⁹ It is curious that, during the first years of zombie cinema, black characters served mostly as background or as comic relief, as early films generally portrayed a white slave owner wielding the magical power to zombify a white woman into submission and possess her sexually (KEE 2011: 14). The thinly veiled subtext was, as Chera Kee points out, a racist fear of miscegenation on the part of white U.S. American males (IBID.: 14), and anxiety over blacks' emigration from Southern States into Northern ones (IBID.: 18). During the 1930s these revenants were also seen as an expression of the frustration and impotence felt toward capitalism by millions of unemployed during the Great Depression.¹⁰

The most important characteristic of the second stage is the protagonism of the classic undead figure: a lumbering resuscitated cadaver lacking will or consciousness who, despite the fact that it needs not feed in order to survive, is compelled to ingest human flesh.¹¹ The monster "procreates" by biting and thus

8) This importation was due primarily to William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929).

9) Cf. Kee, McIntosh (2008), Bishop (2010a) and Dendle (2001).

10) See Kee and Dendle (2001).

11) The following stand out among the numerous books and articles on the classic zombie: Bishop (2008, 2009, 2010b, 2011), Boon (2007, 2011), A. Loudermilk, R.H.W. Dillard, and Kendall Phillips. On Romero's work in particular,

infecting the living, causing them to die and return to life as zombies themselves. Vulnerable only to fire or the destruction of their brain, they are otherwise immortal, no matter what their state of decomposition.

As early as 1960, zombie-like creatures whose creation was credited to more-or-less rational or (pseudo)scientific reasons were appearing in films such as Phil Tucker's *Cape Canaveral Monsters* (1960), in which extraterrestrials take over human bodies, or Jerry Warren's *Teenage Zombies* in which a mad scientist discovers a means of mind-control.¹² While not revenants, the mind-controlled beings in these films evidence a transition toward the Romero-type zombie, and demonstrate that the link between science and the zombie was already present in the popular imagination. It is with *NLD* that science and the return of the dead from the folkloric tradition are conjoined, a key moment in the history of the genre: one scientist in the movie speculates that radiation emitted from a space probe returning from Venus may be responsible. While Romero himself has famously stated that he never meant for radiation to be a definitive explanation but wanted to keep the origin unknown (WILLIAMS 2011: 48), the fact that the public latched onto this explanation and gave it import and that scientific explanations would become increasingly common demonstrates that the conceit reflects some element of the *zeitgeist*. Nor can there be any doubt that it took the monster in an important new direction. By giving it a scientific origin story (absurd though it may be), *NLD* arguably helped the revenant shamble across the border from folkloric fantasy to science fiction.

However, even in works that present a scientific reason for zombiism, the classical zombie remains fantastic, as three of its defining traits defy the known laws of physics: the return from the dead of those long deceased, the fact that they do not need to eat to survive, and their immortality unless acted upon by external forces. The pure Romerian zombie is thus paradoxical: it is a fantastic figure explained scientifically. No one has ever accused the genre of making sense; nonetheless, that does not imply that it is not meaningful: this tension itself manifests a growing distrust toward, if not outright fear of, technology.

Some of the anxieties critics have seen in the genre during the classical period (1968–2002) are the Cold War, the Vietnam conflict, and the fight for civil rights

consult the monographs by Kim Paffenroth and Williams. It is important to note that, in his last two films, the monster begins to develop mental faculties: in *Day of the Dead* (1985), the scientist Dr. Logan trains the zombie Bub to do rudimentary manual tasks. It is a tendency that will accelerate during the third epoch of the zombie. On this topic, see Sara Sutler-Cohen.

12) Other examples are Del Tenney's *I Eat Your Skin* (1964), and *Blood of Ghastly Horror* by Al Adamson (1967).

for African-Americans in the U.S.¹³ Moreover, the period witnessed a growing preoccupation concerning the destruction of the environment resulting in what Lauro has baptized the “eco-zombie” (LAURO 2011b: 234).¹⁴ The appearance of the classic zombie on the scene during the second period is due to an anxiety concerning a group of factors (technoscience, the nuclear threat, human emancipation, environmental contamination) that can be summed up in one word: modernity. They are the effects of what Max Horkheimer called “instrumental reason,” a topic I’ll return to shortly.¹⁵

I am not the first to note the posthuman nature of the zombie: in 2008, Martin Rogers affirmed that the figure reflects “our shifting and anxious conceptions of human embodiment in the post-human age” (ROGERS 2008: 120). In 2011 a collection of critical essays titled *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* was published. Unfortunately, despite the promising title, only a few of the scholars address this monster as posthuman. Margot Collins and Elson Bond observe that one of the predominant tropes of recent zombies is that there is little difference between humans and the living dead, forcing us to consider what it means to be human (COLLINS – BOND 2011: 202). Lauro suggests that, as a liminal being that exists on the border between subject and object, it frees us from this binary opposition (LAURO 2011b: 232). In general, the authors coincide in seeing in the monster a devolved, dehumanized posthuman.¹⁶ However, the word “dehumanized” implies a nucleus of traits considered human, and the values these reflect. With the reader’s indulgence, these values will be approached by first taking a brief detour to consider the concept “posthuman.”

To date, the academic conversation regarding the posthuman has focused predominantly, though not entirely, on the fields of cybernetics and AI.¹⁷

13) The year of *Night of the Living Dead*’s debut was of great historical importance in U.S. history, following as it did the “long hot summer” of 1968, in which Anti-Vietnam War protests escalated, and race riots exploded into violence in 159 U.S. cities. The 1968 Civil Rights Act, also known as the Fair Housing Act, expanded upon the 1964 law of the same name (see the studies by Michael B. Friedman and Malcom McLaughlin). These tensions are reflected in the film’s ambiguous denouement, in which viewers do not know whether the black hero is shot because he is mistaken for a zombie, or because he is black (although Romero denies hiring the actor for this reason; see Tony Williams’s *George A. Romero: Interviews*, p. 37).

14) On the zombie, ecologism, and politics, see Greg Pollock’s essay.

15) See Horkheimer’s essay in secondary sources.

16) For example, Nick Muntean sees in the post-World War II zombie a posthumanity living in “a psychological realm of such unremitting bareness that it is as though humankind had never existed at all” (2011: 82), SORCHA NI FHLAINN speaks of “our devolution toward a post-human plane, as we perilously slip, ever closer, into the devouring darkness” (157); and Deborah Christie poses the question inspiring the title of the aforementioned book: would we indeed be “better off dead”? (2011: 80).

17) Cf. for example the monographs by Donna Haraway, Scott Bukatman, Katherine Hayles, Elaine Graham, Patricia

The origin of the term “artificial intelligence” is generally attributed to Alan Turing, who proposed that, if when interrogated by humans a computer’s answers were indistinguishable by said humans from those of *homo sapiens*, that thinking machine could be considered intelligent. As Katherine Hayles points out in her classic study *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), the experiment implied a new definition of intelligence based on “the formal manipulation of symbols” (HAYLES 1999: xi). This concept of intelligence carried with it a separation – still only symbolic and theoretical – between information/intellect and substrate/body. This schism was consecrated at the end of the 1940s-early 1950s in the works of Claude Shannon, considered the founder of information theory, and of the mathematician Norbert Wiener, known as the father of cybernetics.¹⁸ Although no one had yet dared to declare openly the possible consequences of this schism, it entered into the Western collective subconscious. Let us recall that the original folkloric zombie narrative employed a similar separation: the separation of the “soul”; i.e., the intellect and will, from its body.

In his book *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988), Hans Moravec explicitly declared the possibility – indeed, the inevitability – of transferring the identity/intellect of a human from its organic substrate into an inorganic, cybernetic one. It was following this hypothetical evolutionary teleology that Vinge presented the aforementioned concept of the technological singularity. From that point, it would be but a step to self-awareness and an independent free will, making humans at the very least obsolete, should our inorganic offspring decide not to exterminate us completely. Technological advances in these areas have spurred debate concerning questions such as: what does it mean to be human? How would the incorporation of such technologies into our own beings change us? What are the ethical implications of the use of this technology? And how would it alter the way humans relate to each other and to their machines? Posthuman possibilities have generated euphoria on one hand and terror on the other; dreams of immortality and near-apotheosis among technophilic “transhumanists” or “extropianists” such as Moravec or Max More, and dire predictions of the legal, ethical, and social consequences among others, such as Francis Fukuyama and Jürgen Habermas.¹⁹ From such fantasies and phobias monsters are born, to warn us of these consequences and

McCormack (2012), and Rosi Braidotti, as well as the essays in Judith Halberstam’s and Ira Livingston’s joint book. Additionally, the articles in the monographic 2003 issue of *Cultural Critique* on posthumanism are excellent.

18) Consult Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1965), and *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1996) by Norbert Wiener.

19) See More’s “The Extropian Principles: A Transhumanist Declaration,” in the list of secondary sources.

safeguard the borders of human identity, cultural functions clearly present in many sf novels: e.g., *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey* – both from 1968, the birth date of the classic zombie – or films such as the *Terminator* series (1984–2009, with another coming out in 2015) or *Matrix* series (1999–2003), to name but a very few.

Nonetheless, there is another branch of the posthuman family tree that has received far less attention, the biotechnological. Since 1953, when James Watson and Francis Crick proposed the double helix structure of DNA, the world has witnessed a series of scientific discoveries and technological achievements that have continued to marvel, enthuse – and worry. For example, in 1971 Paul Berg performed the first gene slicing and transplantation, making possible the production of the first transgenic plant in 1983. In another line of research, in 1958 stem cells were reprogrammed for the first time in lab rats; this accomplishment led in turn to the first successful cloning of an animal in 1979, which consequently made possible the cloning of a mammal, the famous ewe Dolly, in 1996.

Investigation into stem cells has given birth to many more triumphs, such as the regeneration of bone marrow in rats in 1990, the continuing discovery of further sources of these cells, and the revealing of more of their capabilities to regenerate blood, tissues, and even entire organs. In 2003, the Human Genome Project determined the sequence of chemical base pairs that compose DNA and identified and mapped the nearly 20,000 human genes according to physical properties and function. Let us not forget that the most recent return of the living dead occurred in 2002, just prior to the realization of this goal.

In the light of the posthuman one sees quite clearly what characteristics are considered constitutive of “humanity,” and the values they reflect, values that are none other than those of humanism, basis of the modern *weltanschauung*. Humanism replaced the theocentric Medieval cosmivision with an anthropocentric one, substituted the physical sciences and mathematics for theology as authoritative explanatory discourses or paths to understanding the universe, and identified reason as the defining trait of *homo sapiens*. It affirmed the value of the individual and the right to self-determination (that is, individualism). This turn made possible the development of technoscience, with the implication of the universality and objectivity of knowledge. It enshrined “Man” as unique, the origin of all meaning, protagonist of History, the hegemonic measure of all things. From this lofty position above nature, this exceptionalism has authorized us to intervene in, manipulate, and exploit at will the instrumental application of science known as technology. From Heidegger through the

Frankfurt School, many have affirmed that this world view, informed by a formal-instrumental reason that is totalizing and thus totalitarian, causes “Man” to treat his fellow humans as just another resource to exploit, dehumanizing them. Nor should we forget humanism’s implication in the development of capitalism, whose marriage to technoscience engendered the globalized neoliberalism many scholars see manifested in the zombie genre today.²⁰

In opposition to the glorification of humanity implicit in transhumanist or extropianist visions of posthumanity lies a school of thought that Stefan Herbrechter calls “critical posthumanism” (HERBRECHTER 2013: 4), an anti-humanist group including scholars such as Cary Wolfe and Neil Badmington, who aim to evict “Man” from his ideologically privileged place.²¹ They reject human exceptionalism in favor of a view of humanity as just one of many species inhabiting Earth, each with an equal right to exist on it and to enjoy it. They see in humanity a diversity that puts the lie to any pretense of an essential, universal, and transhistorical “human nature,” favoring instead a vision of the species as a collective of individuals each the product of specific material and historical circumstances. This antihumanist posthumanism recognizes the limits of human knowledge, rejecting the possibility of an absolutely “objective” perspective not implicated in the field of what is observed.

Let us consider the characteristics of the typical classical zombie: without identity, free will, or intelligence, animated only by a desire to consume human flesh and annihilate our species. It is an irrational drive, since the creature does not need this sustenance to survive, and does not control the impulse but is rather controlled by it. I therefore propose that the classical zombie is not only posthuman, but metaphorically anti-humanist: like the thinkers of critical posthumanism, it attempts to wrest from humanity its dominion over the planet. To human reason, it opposes irrationality; to intellect, anthropophagic instinct. In opposition to the free will and individualism held so dear by humanists, the zombie lacks autonomy and individual identity, each acting exactly the same as its peers and thus functioning – literally unwittingly – as a collective.

This antihumanism continues in the genre’s third stage, which, as previously stated, began with the 2002 cinematic version of the video game *Resident Evil* and the premier of Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later*. These films set in motion what

20) Cf. Heidegger’s essay, as well as Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s book in secondary sources. On the relationship between late capitalism, zombies, and monsters in general, see Steve Shaviro, Newitz, Bishop 2010a and 2010b, Loudermilk, Russell, Dendle (2001 and 2010), Glenn, Walker and Tony Williams.

21) Among the many studies published recently, I recommend the ones by Neil Badmington (2003), Cary Wolfe (2010), and Stefan Herbrechter (2013).

Kyle Bishop baptized “the zombie renaissance” (BISHOP 2010: 12).²² Dendle observes that these revenants, which I will call “third generation zombies,” are more “biological” than their predecessors, as more emphasis is placed on their physical aspect than on the violence they wreak (DENDLE 2011: 183).²³ This emphasis on the biological may also be witnessed in the fact – crucial, in my opinion, to an understanding of this zombie’s significance – that the most common cause of zombiism is also biological, normally a bioweapon, and most frequently a virus. This biological factor is sometimes left undefined and of vague origin; other times it is explicitly the product of scientific experiments; that is, created by human technological intervention in nature, with a marked predilection for genetic alterations (normally on the part of the military, the government, some multinational corporation, or a terrorist group – or any combination of the above). In addition to the movies mentioned above, and to cite but a few examples, such genetic alterations can be found in *Blood of the Beast* (2003), *The Zombie Diaries* (2006) and its 2011 sequel, Romero’s own *Day of the Dead* (2008), in the French *Mutants* (*Mutants* 2009) and the German *Rammbock* (*Battering Ram*) from the following year; as well as in the novels *La zona* (*The Zone*, 2011) from Spain and Mexico’s *Los que deambulan sin sentido* (*Those Who Walk Mindlessly*, 2013).

The fact that genetic manipulation is so commonly represented as the cause of third-generation zombiism indicates that the zombie renaissance responds at least in part to anxiety produced by advances in genetic engineering and their threat to human identity – and perhaps even existence.²⁴ It is a tendency that takes antihumanism one step further: the zombie becomes the biological or biotechnological equivalent of the apocalyptic cyborg or AI: a creation of humanity that threatens its very survival. In the same way that the notion of separating the human psyche from its “host” organism to implant it in an electromechanical device, or AI’s surpassing our species’ intellectually, gave rise to nightmares

22) On the causes of the zombie renaissance, see Dendle (2010), Bishop (2010a), Muntean (2011), Boon (2011), and Glenn.

23) Some scholars have suggested that this last wave of zombie fictions are a response to the events of 11 September 2001 and the growing number of terrorist attacks globally since then (by perpetrators both domestic and foreign to the site of the attack). On this, see Dendle (2011), Bishop (2010a), Nick Muntean and Matthew Thomas Payne (2009), and Kevin J. Whetmore (2012). Others have seen in these works allegories of numerous infectious diseases such as the avian influenza, AIDS, or Ebola. See for example Dawn Keetley’s 2012 article. To these sources of anxiety one could add the global economic meltdown of 2008, the rise of globalization and globalized neoliberalism, with the accompanying erosion of the welfare state in Europe and the acceleration of class inequality within and between nations, global warming and other ecological crises, all of which can definitely be identified as motifs reflected in zombie narratives.

24) Concerning the theme of human identity, and the human-zombie relationship, consult the essays by Craig Derksen and Darren Hudson Hick, and the one by Christopher Moreman and Cory James Rushton (2011).

such as the Terminator and Matrix series, fear of the possible consequences of genetic manipulation revived the zombie, a biological monster that is animated yet soulless. It also expresses our paranoia concerning the political and economic powers that develop this biotechnology, manifesting the impotence we feel in their presence. It was the schism between body and soul in the originary figure that made possible its adaptation as a symbolic expression of anxiety toward the posthuman, its conversion into the emblem of its biological variety.

The third-stage zombie is also anti-rational and lacks the free will and individual identity so dear to humanists. Moreover, it is deprived of the ability to communicate, and thus the perfect metaphor for the alienated individual of modernity. It is a monster that violates one of the most sacred taboos, the prohibition of cannibalism (although in this case it might more accurately be considered parricide). As a dehumanized human, its genocidal collective behavior may serve as a vengeance fantasy on the part of any group to have suffered at the hands of powers created during a modernity informed by humanist ideology: workers, minorities, ethnicities, colonized cultures, non-normative sexualities, colonized civilizations, or even as justice on behalf of all the species annihilated by human "civilization." And nature, the world, survives us. One sees a bitter irony here: the being that considered itself the *raison d'être* of the entire universe converts itself – precisely through the use of instrumental reason – into an anti-rational monster that belies its belief that it is itself the end of the evolutionary process. Moreover, as an inversion of humanist values, it incarnates a rejection of this world view by a humanity disappointed in its legacy and disillusioned in itself.

There is one other important symbolic correlation between the cyborg and the third-generation zombie. Both the technoscience that produces the Terminators and that which creates the zombies are based on *information*: in the cyborg and AI, it is codified in zeros and ones; in genetic manipulation, in sequences of deoxyribonucleic acids.²⁵ The cyborg/AI's computer programming is the functional, logical, and semiotic homologue to the genetic programming that produces the famished revenant: in both cases, they are programmed to destroy humanity.

This monster always continues to evolve in step with its new consumers, many of which, as Dendle asserts, are the so-called "millennials," born around the same time as MTV (1981), familiar with technology since their most tender

25) Eugene Thacker notes this parallel in his article "Data Made Flesh".

years and hence used to fast-paced, special-effects enhanced video (DENDLE 2011: 179).

I must recognize that not all third-generation zombies correspond to the norm I've outlined here. They are certainly more heterogeneous than in the past, and new branches have sprouted from the family tree. For example, zombie comedies or "zomedies" such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Fido* (2006), *AAH! ZOMBIES!!* (2007) or 2009's *Zombieland* have become popular; even romantic zombie comedies or "romzomcoms" have appeared, such as 2013's *Warm Bodies* based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliette*.²⁶ Some have become faster or been granted some level of intelligence, appearing ever more like their human enemies. *28 Days Later* and its sequel *28 Weeks Later* (2007) are good examples of this: those infected with the Rage virus are possessed by uncontrollable violent impulses but are not revenants, do not eat flesh, and are not immortal – they are not, in fact, "zombies" according to any traditional definition, despite the fact they have been popularly seen as such.²⁷ It also makes the virus much more plausible, as such diseases exist in nature (rabies, for example). I believe this branch of the family tree can be explained as the phenomenon that David Roas has termed the postmodern "naturalization" of the monster, a process by which its ability to inspire terror decreases, and its powers must therefore be amplified to maintain its horror value (450). Romero himself gave zombies the capacity to learn from experience in his 2005 *Land of the Dead* and even to some extent in his 1985 *Dawn of the Dead*, in which one responds to Pavlovian-type training. These developments may make the monsters scarier for some audiences, although they cease to be zombies in the strict sense; nonetheless, the biological emphasis is undeniable.

Having hopefully answered the question posed concerning recent reincarnations of our beloved revenant, I'd like to turn my attention to the other query about its unusual durability: the mere fact that it has been transformed so many times, changed so radically while still being recognizable, and lent itself to so many cultural uses and interpretations demonstrates that, despite the rigidity of its limbs, it is a very flexible figure indeed, much more so than the werewolf

26) This humanized, less- or non-threatening zombie may prove to constitute the fourth generation. On new directions such as these, see Linda Badley, Lynn Pifer, and Bernice Murphy.

27) According to Lauro, this generation of zombies share only two characteristics (LAURO 2011:232): what Dendle has called "despersonalización," and epidemics (DENDLE 2010: 4). Sorcha Ní Fhlainn has noted a significant number of human characters who, due to traumatic circumstances or experiences lose the capacity to feel emotion, and proposes that they too constitute a type of zombie; Muntean also notes this and baptizes them "trauma zombies" (MUNTEAN 2011: 82).

or the vampire, for example. I offer seven theses that I think will explain why this is so:

The first, already noted by Dendle (2001) and Bishop (2006) is because it is the only Western monstrous legend that lacks written folkloric or literary antecedents – at least, European ones – and therefore creators do not run the risk of violating them. Moreover, due to its African origins, it is the only modern monster that is truly “foreign,” truly “Other,” to the countries of the so-called “first world.”

The second is that the cause of the zombie apocalypse can be anything, as Christopher Moreman and Cory James Rushton point out (MOREMAN – RUSHTON 2011: 2). Therefore, the origin can be adapted to the collective psychological necessities of any time or place. Is there a predominant phobia toward the colonial African Other? You use voodoo. Is there panic concerning the spread of AIDS, or the possession by terrorists of bioweapons? One creates a virus. Are people suspicious of multinational corporations or their government? There you have the culprits who created the disease.

The third is the fact that it lacks identity, personality, and intellect, offering a perfect *tabula rasa* upon which one can project any symbolic, metaphoric, or allegorical meaning. Dracula, for example, could hardly represent the alienated working class. Although filmmakers have occasionally granted it intelligence, this has simply been a trick to avoid the aforementioned naturalization; moreover, even in these cases it continues to be a completely Other intelligence, with its own way of understanding its place in the universe, as evidenced by its desire to destroy humanity.

The fourth: likewise, its anthropophagic compulsion is a signifier that lends itself to a plethora of signifieds. Since it does not eat for nourishment, it is motivated by a pure drive, separated from corporal necessities, and this drive can be made to mean nearly anything.

Fifth, from Romero forward, zombies offer the first truly apocalyptic monster, obsessed not only with the destruction of individuals but of the human race as a whole. Vampires, for example, as rational beings would not wish to wipe out their food source but would most likely convert it into a farm animal as in the Spierig brothers' 2009 film *Daybreakers*.²⁸ It is a characteristic that fits well within the post-nuclear zeitgeist and particularly within the proliferation

28) Even in narratives in which zombies have developed some intellectual capacities they have not demonstrated such capabilities. This may be explained by the fact that, were they to do so, they would no longer be recognizable as zombies but become a new monster, or would simply be cannibals.

of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic works since the turn of the millennium.²⁹ Its apocalyptic potential, in addition to sharing the semiotic flexibility offered by its lack of identity and anthropophagic drive, makes it the perfect vehicle for critiquing virtually any social ill one wishes to address.

Sixth: as Bishop has affirmed, the zombie possesses a characteristic of which not all monsters can boast: it inspires terror primarily because it is familiar: characters recognize in them their neighbors, friends, and loved ones, yet are not recognized in turn (BISHOP 2006: 196). Horror arises from this tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, in what I like to call an *unheimlich* maneuver. Furthermore, the zombie reminds us that we all run the risk of being converted into them, and, unlike the case of vampirism, which offers not only immortality but enviable superhuman powers, zombiism is not at all a desirable fate.

Seventh, the zombie is the only solitary monster – they cannot communicate with their peers – that acts collectively. It thus at once incarnates complete alienation from one’s peers and belongs to a vast, anonymous, and terrifying collectivity united in a genocidal enterprise. An enterprise that none of them, nor all of them together, can control, but one that controls them.

Both the classic Romerian zombie and its third-generation counterpart of the *Resident Evil* genome offer, at least in part, a cultural construct that reflects a posthuman, antihumanist world view. The fact that the most prevalent cause of the zombie apocalypse is technoscientific warns us about our intervention in nature; in one sense, this monster may be seen as the rebellion of nature itself against its human masters (LAURO 2011b: 235). They attack not only humans, but metaphorically humanism and the values it espouses: reason, technoscience, anthropocentrism, and human exceptionalism. Inferior to us in all that we value—intellect, free will, our notions of morality—the zombie reminds us of the subjective and chauvinistic nature of these measuring sticks because, as Lauro reminds us, “the concept of evolution, as Darwin described it, did not imply a teleological trajectory. Evolution signified only adaptability” (IBID.: 233).

Like all monsters, it is an ambiguous creature: it satisfies certain desires for revenge at the same time that it warns us of unforeseen consequences of our world view and behavior. Simultaneously and paradoxically, this Other that consumes us, is us: rapacious beings whose hunger, completely detached from its true needs, destroys. Masters of the world enslaved by our own appetites,

29) See Dale Knickerbocker’s article in secondary sources.

without the will to resist. Solitary and alienated beings who nonetheless act in conformity, impelled by forces that dominate us and that we neither understand nor are able to control, our beloved free will and individualism revealed as frauds. No matter how much we evolve, nor how fast we run, and although our insatiable appetites are different, zombies are us. The perfect emblem for a posthuman antihumanism.

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