

**UNDEAD MELANCHOLIA;  
FROM LOST MODERNISM TO HAPTIC ANTAGONISM**

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**I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.**

**Simon J. Clark:** .....

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

My written thesis modifies George Romero's zombie in an effort to exhume the critical potential of melancholia. The notion of melancholia as a dissenting condition has been rendered obsolete within contemporary culture. I equate the shift from melancholia to depression with the emergence of the postmodern climate that collapses radical opposition from the *outside* by assimilating dissent *within* its own operations. The subversive qualities of melancholia are superseded by the classification of depression as a dysfunctional inability to assimilate the logic of capitalist production.

I initially formulate my own psychoanalytical term – undead melancholia – to describe the figure of the zombie. I then use the notion of sublimation to rewrite undead melancholia as a utopian phantasy of transgressive subjectivity in which life willingly acquiesces to an emancipatory marriage with death. This fiction of a radical new strain of zombie is understood as a melancholic phantasy of an oppositional critical strategy that has now been lost within contemporary homogeneity.

I then discuss the zombie as an abject walking corpse that collapses Symbolic meaning altogether. This reading of the zombie undoes my own formulation of undead melancholia as a transgressive subject position, and re-articulates it as a haptic materiality *beyond* subjectivity instead.

I finally propose a performance practice that might ape the materiality of undead melancholia by interrupting the formal and normalised protocols of contemporary culture. This performative melancholia, as a haptic antagonism, would refuse to consent absolutely to the status quo, asserting that the homogenous procedures determining contemporary cultural production are contingent negotiations rather than essential conditions.

My recent performance practice involves staging unexpected musical interventions at various conferences, symposia, art events and exhibitions to which I have been invited as a guest speaker. This work confounds the professional protocols and the normalised codes of behaviour associated with these events.

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## PREFACE

This preface is designed to frame and contextualise both the written and practical elements of my PhD project. It elucidates the development of the key methodological and thematic decisions I have made whilst working on the written element of my project, and locates these ideas in relation to the concerns and enquires being staged within my ongoing practice.

My project was initially conceived as a response to two key scenes from George A. Romero's zombie oeuvre. I discuss these scenes in detail throughout my thesis, so I will limit myself here to a brief description of their most important properties. In *Day of the Dead*<sup>1</sup>, the character Doctor Logan, during a macabre experiment on an undead corpse, exclaims that zombies are motivated by unrepressed instinct. I read this scene as an invitation to examine and interrogate the properties of the zombie figure using Freud's theory of the instincts. So, at this early point in my research, I set out to analyse undeadliness through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis.

The second Romero scene that is crucial to my project takes place at the end of *Land of the Dead*<sup>2</sup>. A hoard of undead corpses, led by a seemingly self-aware and calculating zombie, has masticated the last surviving human conurbation. However, in the aftermath of the bloody chaos, the undead throng's appetite for flesh appears to have waned; instead of pouncing upon the remaining human survivors, the zombies huddle together and wander off into the night as if in search of their own social order. They have started to deploy reason and cunning, to communicate, to use tools, to act collectively and to demonstrate affective responses to their own suffering; Romero suggests that the undead have evolved to become sentient, civilised beings.

However, Romero never pursued this tantalising proposition in his subsequent zombie films, so I recognised an opportunity within my thesis to make good his omission. My key critical ambition at the beginning of my research was to initially account for and then develop this mutation of the zombie figure, using psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic tool. I intended to use this particular methodological approach in order to

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<sup>1</sup> George A. Romero, *Day of the Dead* (United Distribution Film Company, 1985)

<sup>2</sup> George A. Romero, *Land of the Dead* (Universal Pictures, 2005)

write a fictitious evolution for the zombie – a task which Romero himself had seemingly abandoned.

Whilst researching the term ‘instinct’, I discovered Herbert Marcuse’s account of sublimation, in which the released instinctual drives of Eros and Thanatos become the bedrock of a non-repressive civilisation. This reading radically reverses Freud’s claim that the instincts can only ever be hostile to the civil order. Crucially, Marcuse’s notion of sublimation enabled me to theorise an undead evolution in which the zombies’ erotic and destructive drives transform into sustaining and socially productive forces. A consultation of Marcuse thus facilitated my formulation of a new breed of civilised zombie that exists within a state of utopian communitarianism. I pursued this line of enquiry because Marcusean undeadliness is antithetical to the normative status of the zombie as a body bereft of social conditioning and consciousness. This constituted a claim for originality because I was pushing the conceit of zombie fiction into new territories. Again, this move is set up in my introduction and discussed in detail in Chapter Two. At this point I am just mapping out the development of my thinking within my project.

So, in these early stages of research, I was using psychoanalytical theory to generate new narratives for undeadliness that would push zombie fiction beyond the limits that Romero had placed on his own invention. Because of the idealistic hues of my Marcusean zombie, I initially attempted to write my entire thesis in the style of a utopian novel, but containing my writing within a fictitious conceit constricted my ability to reflect critically and cogently upon my own thinking. My completed thesis still contains small segments of zombie fiction that constitute an attempt to complicate and expand the genre, but these are framed within a much larger self-reflexive commentary. This approach allows me to unpack and interrogate my own zombie narratives without having to constantly sustain the fictitious conceit of undeadliness. Had I not chosen this strategy I would have been effectively asking the reader to do too much theoretical interpretation; instead, I decided to explicitly discuss and reflect upon my own claims in a manner that is consistent with rigorous PhD research.

But not only did I hope to extrapolate the *content* of undeadliness, I also intended to explore the conventions of zombie fiction *formally* within the practical component of my project. My art practice straddles storytelling, musical composition and live performance. I initially imagined that the developments to zombie fiction I was formulating within the written component of my project might migrate directly into my practice. For example, in Chapter Two, I propose a collision of music and humour within the zombie genre in response to Marcuse's notion of orphic play. This led me to set about writing a darkly humorous and irreverent zombie musical. However, I quickly discovered that this approach was far too literal, and my practice suffered for being beholden to, and illustrative of, the theoretical work I was doing in the written element of my project. I realised that I needed to complicate the relationship between my written texts and my practice – to acknowledge that my project was practice-based research, rather than practice as indicative of research.

A number of key developments then took place in my thinking as I expanded my psychoanalytical vocabulary. Freud understands melancholia as a refusal to accept loss – an internal protest against death that inhibits or blocks the process of mourning. Instead of gradually registering the lost object as an absence within life, melancholia preserves, and remains libidinally attached to, the shadow of that which has died. For the melancholic, loss remains present. This notion of death-in-the-midst-of-life/life-in-the-midst-of-death seemed to be a particularly rich articulation of the weird and abject liminality of undeadliness.

However, as I attempted to use theories of melancholia to think through undeadliness, an irresolvable tension emerged. I recognised a fundamental incompatibility between the fact that psychoanalytical theories maintain a biological and empirical distinction between life and death, whereas undeadliness is precisely a fictitious blurring of these mutually exclusive states. Psychoanalysis cannot contend with the conceit of the undead body. Any effort to set up the zombie figure as equivalent to, or as an embodiment of, melancholia was insufficient and unsatisfactory; it failed to productively and cogently contend with the moment at which psychoanalysis and zombie fiction refuse to tessellate – the moment at which the distinct categories of life and death are exceeded by the liminal proposition of undeadliness.

It became necessary to invent a new glossary of psychoanalytical terms in order to cope with the uniquely nebulous status of the zombie. But of course, my new psychoanalytical vocabulary was no longer describing a 'real' human condition; it was describing the entirely fictitious state of undeadliness. By responding to a fiction, my use of psychoanalysis itself became fictional. I thus recognised the emerging dominant term in my research – 'undead melancholia' – in which the conceit of the zombie collides with Freud and Marcuse, as a fictitious intervention into the language of psychoanalysis. My project had been based on the assumption that psychoanalysis would enable the modification of undead fiction. Now I was discovering that the zombie itself was effectively writing a new and fictitious dimension into psychoanalysis.

This realisation allowed me to complicate the notions of 'fiction' and 'narrative' within my project. I started to treat the term 'undead melancholia' itself – a hybrid of psychoanalysis and the zombie – as a fiction. I realised I could construct a fictitious mash-up of theory and undeadliness in the main body of my thesis without needing to write within a hermetically sealed conceit. And instead of striving to locate my Marcusean zombie figure within a sequence of events that sustained a self-contained diegesis, I came to understand the element of narrative within my thesis as the way in which undead melancholia migrates through a range of discourses – a linear process that leads to a rewriting and re-conceptualisation of the term itself. So, in order to accommodate the developing complexity of my research, I surrendered my efforts to devise a coherent storyline for my Marcusean zombie figure, and started narrating the development of the term 'undead melancholia' instead.

And this is the methodological approach that now underpins my finished project; I examine how a range of texts both modify, and are modified by, a theoretical encounter with undead melancholia. The scope of undead melancholia itself mutates as a result of these collisions, to the point where it arrives at a constellation of ideas that is alien to the starting point of my thesis. So, instead of offering an exhaustive survey of the vicissitudes of psychoanalysis, language, digital materialism, contemporary politics and performance art, I explore what happens at the liminal frontiers of these discourses when they interface with and assimilate the hybrid fiction of undead melancholia. Rather than anchoring my enquiry in one particular discipline

or conceptual territory, I approach a range of discourses *through* the prism of undead melancholia, pulling them all into a realm of fiction that exceeds their common usage.

This methodology of continually assembling and then dismantling meanings for the term ‘undead melancholia’ articulates the extent to which my thinking has evolved throughout the writing of this thesis. Each structure has its own coherence and integrity, but by changing the scope of my enquiry I destabilise the edifice at its foundations. I do not wish to hoodwink or frustrate the reader with a project that continually eats itself. Rather, I recognise these moments of collapse as points within a larger, sustained narrative. And the narrative I present is, finally, one of how my research has grown as an autonomous piece of work. Trying to develop one stable articulation of undead melancholia, like an ever-expanding theoretical snowball being pushed through a field of discourse, prohibited me from discussing all the revisions that my thinking went through. But by letting undead melancholia fail and start again – by breaking up the snowball and pushing off the remaining lump in a different direction – I have been able to plot my mutating research interests on an ever-evolving trajectory. Each construction, though eventually abandoned, is a platform from which I launch my next foray; its eventual collapse marks the point at which I set off in a new direction.

But my meandering account of undead melancholia is by no means an arbitrary or improvised narrative. It is plotted both in response to a series of insights and conceptual crises that I encountered throughout my research, and with an overarching ambition to eventually arrive at a discussion of contemporary art practice. I fully intended to calibrate my research with current debates surrounding the politics of cultural production – this is an important part of what is at stake in my project – but the challenge I set myself was to arrive at these ideas via a mobilisation of the term ‘undead melancholia’. Again, I chose this methodology for my PhD because it constituted a more original, productive and nuanced approach than if I had carried out a broad survey of issues surrounding contemporaneity, politics and practice alone. I can now recognise that my research constitutes an attempt to narrate a conceptual journey *from* the zombie *to* contemporary practice *via* the semiotics and politics of melancholia... though I cannot claim to have started out with this intention.

So why does my narrative of undead melancholia cover such particular ground? After the initial merger of psychoanalysis and zombie fiction leads to the conception of undead melancholia in Chapter One, the next significant collision arrives at the climax of Chapter Two. By historicising Marcuse's claims, I draw a parallel between my sublimated zombie's status as a transgressive subject, and the modernism of the late 1950s. My utopian zombie figure becomes an anachronistic construct that cannot engage with contemporary discourses surrounding cultural production. Precisely because there is an acknowledged impossibility to the politics of the Marcusean zombie – its modernist vision of profound social change has been rendered futile by the authoritative homogeneity of postmodernity – there is an inherent conservatism to this manifestation of undead melancholia. It can only function as an articulation of an unobtainable political and aesthetic ideal, and so implicitly affirms the status quo instead of critically contesting it.

So, in Chapter Three, I move away from an understanding of undead melancholia as a transgressive subjectivity – as an anachronistic spectre of a lost modernist moment – and try to conceive of it in terms that might trigger a more contemporary set of concerns. I start by using Kristeva's semiotics and Laura Marks' account of the haptic to reconstitute undead melancholia as the moment at which representative language collapses, exposing the indecipherable and affective materiality of form once its symbolic function has been eviscerated. This allows me to talk about the undead body as a Real object, beyond the parameters of subjectivity, that antagonises hegemonic meaning without being located oppositionally outside the status quo. I self-consciously recognise this new territory for undead melancholia as a critical position that, unlike the modernist strain of my Marcusean zombie, simultaneously operates within, yet antagonises, the homogeneity of contemporaneity.

The next problem I encounter is the fact that zombie fiction has become ubiquitous to the point where the vertiginous weirdness of the undead corpse has been assimilated within the normative language of mainstream commercial cinema. The very body that, in Romero's early films, was a moment of Real nonsense – an abject materiality that defiled symbolic classification – has become an instantly recognised and categorisable figure. So although my reading of undead melancholia as a haptic antagonism updates the scope of my project overall, the term itself is no longer

applicable to the contemporary zombie precisely because undeadliness has become so oversaturated and familiar.

In Chapter Four, I focus on particular and historical instances of undead fiction that escape the current ossification within the genre at large. A discussion of the haptic interruptions triggered by both the slapstick artifice of Romero's early analogue work and the digital glitchiness of zombie fiction on YouTube, allows me to conceive of a spectator who revels in the formal and fragmented materiality of undeadliness, rather than the illusion of narrative coherence. This allows me to set up the final manifestation of undead melancholia within my thesis – a methodology for making contemporary practice that apes the formal rupturing of symbolic surfaces witnessed in certain zombie films. Undead melancholia no longer describes, or looks like, the zombie figure; it articulates a particular approach to making that flattens the illusion of seamless political normalisation with a glitch of affective weirdness. This foregrounding of materiality – learnt from watching zombie films – becomes a politically antagonistic art practice that refuses the symbolic consistency of the status quo.

This moment in my thesis arrived after I re-examined the way I was treating my practice. Instead of instrumentalising my practice to illustrate my theoretical endeavours, as I did early on in my project, I allowed my practical work to have a higher degree of autonomy. I started to reconnect with the concerns embedded within my practice itself, instead of trying to impose fictional content *upon* my practice. I have always been interested in using performance to trigger live moments that exceed the social protocols and expectations of the situation I am working within. I recognise these moments as instances of affect and presence – washes of awkward humour and haptic emersion that swamp comprehension and symbolic coherence. I decided to theoretically engage with this particular feature of my practice in order to formulate a set of contemporary concerns within the written component of my project. So Chapter Four climaxes in an effort to think through and theorise a practical phenomenon; it is the point at which my writing speaks to, and is informed by, my practice. The theoretical methodology that I devise for making is thus a very particular response to my own practical research. I acknowledge that a similar approach to practice might be articulated with a very different set of theoretical terms. I am not trying to offer a

universal vocabulary or a new approach to practice per se; this methodology is a unique composition, specific to my research, through which the constituent components of my project speak to a common concern. If I were to draw a Venn diagramme of my writing and practice, they would overlap at the point at which I formulate undead melancholia as a speculative methodology for making.

So the final assemblage of undead melancholia is a response to issues that play out within my practice – issues that I had hitherto not attempted to theorise formally. It is through this manoeuvre that I am able to understand my project as practice-based research; I eventually build a set of theoretical claims into and around the very procedures I have been investigating in my live performances.

Furthermore, my discussion of undead melancholia as a haptic materiality has enabled me to expand my own critical self-reflexivity with regards to my practice. I can now recognise how I might productively test and antagonise the conventions of lyricism and vocal performance that I tend to rely on in my work. Instead of locating relatively conventional songs within an unexpected set of circumstances, I am currently enjoying a more playful, irreverent and de-stablising engagement with the process of songwriting itself. In particular, my thesis has encouraged me to explore how the spoken/sung word, ‘carried’ by the grain and texture of the voice, might be understood as a haptic material that flattens and fragments language into a series of sonic surfaces. This development of my thinking in relation to practice has ignited my interest in ‘sound poetry’ and a range of contemporary practitioners who wilfully meddle with phonetics in order to antagonise the semantic properties of the word. I see my future practice emerging out of these concerns.

By the end of my thesis, my theoretical discussion starts to escape the terms that I have been using. I reach the elastic limit of undead melancholia at the point at which I acknowledge that the very materiality I am trying to conceptualise can be understood as the potentiality of life rather than the ever-evasive alterity of death. The liminality of undeadliness cannot hold on to the invigorated articulation of life that I set up in my conclusion. Similarly, the conservative streak of melancholia, founded as it is on a lost and irredeemable otherness that can eventually only bolster the operations of the status quo, cannot contend with a more radical notion of immersion and presence

within life itself. So ironically, but perhaps inevitably, undead melancholia – the term that survives countless assaults throughout my thesis – is eventually slain by the very discourse it spawns. It is finally undone by its own progeny; a fittingly Oedipal demise then for a term so beholden to Freudian vernacular.

## INTRODUCTION

### Zombies; They're Everywhere

The walking zombie;<sup>3</sup> the running zombie;<sup>4</sup> the flesh-eating zombie;<sup>5</sup> the brain-eating zombie;<sup>6</sup> the thinking zombie;<sup>7</sup> the talking zombie;<sup>8</sup> the capitalist zombie;<sup>9</sup> the communist zombie;<sup>10</sup> the consumer zombie;<sup>11</sup> the cannibal zombie;<sup>12</sup> the queer zombie;<sup>13</sup> the black zombie...<sup>14</sup>

The zombie as post-apocalypse;<sup>15</sup> as biohazard;<sup>16</sup> as Holocaust;<sup>17</sup> as Vietnam War;<sup>18</sup> as born-again Christian;<sup>19</sup> as militarised state;<sup>20</sup> as slave labour;<sup>21</sup> as bio-weapon;<sup>22</sup> as social critique;<sup>23</sup> as S+M fetish;<sup>24</sup> as domestic help;<sup>25</sup> as gay melodrama;<sup>26</sup> as flash mob;<sup>27</sup> as international politics...<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> George A. Romero, *Diary of the Dead* (Dimension Films, 2007)

<sup>4</sup> Charlie Brooker, *Dead Set* (Zeppotron, 2008)

<sup>5</sup> George A. Romero, *Survival of the Dead* (E1 Entertainment, 2009)

<sup>6</sup> Dan O'Bannon, *The Return of the Living Dead* (Orion Pictures Corporation, 1985)

<sup>7</sup> George A. Romero, *Land of the Dead* (Universal Pictures, 2005)

<sup>8</sup> Ken Wiederhorn, *Return of the Living Dead Part II* (Lorimar Pictures, 1988)

<sup>9</sup> Ben Woodard, *Zombie Economy* (2007) in: *Nought Thought*, accessed 25/12/12 (<http://naughtthought.wordpress.com>)

<sup>10</sup> Magnus Morkove Johannesen, *Zombie Communism* (2006) in: *The Winterwind Papers*, accessed 23/10/12 (<http://www.winterwind-productions.com/issue5/zcp.htm>)

<sup>11</sup> George A. Romero, *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

<sup>12</sup> Marino Girolami, *Zombie Holocaust* (Medusa Distribuzione, 1980)

<sup>13</sup> Bruce LaBruce, *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* (GMfilms, 2008)

<sup>14</sup> George A. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (Pickwick Group Ltd., 1968)

<sup>15</sup> Ruben Fleischer, *Zombieland* (Columbia Pictures, 2009)

<sup>16</sup> Paul W. S. Anderson, *Resident Evil* (Pathé, 2002)

<sup>17</sup> Naomi Alderman, *The Meaning of Zombies* (2011), in: *Granta*, accessed 25/10/12 (<http://www.granta.com/New-Writing/The-Meaning-of-Zombies>)

<sup>18</sup> Karen Randell, *Lost Bodies/Lost Souls: Night of the Living Dead and Deathdream as Vietnam Narrative*, in: Stephany Boluk and Wylie Lenz (eds.), *Generation Zombie; Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2011)

<sup>19</sup> Kim Paffenroth, *Dying to Live: Life Sentence* (Midwest: Permuted Press, 2008)

<sup>20</sup> George A. Romero, *Day of the Dead* (United Distribution Film Company, 1985)

<sup>21</sup> Victor Halperin, *White Zombie* (United Artists, 1932)

<sup>22</sup> Travis Adkins, *Twilight of the Dead* (Midwest: Permuted Press, 2004)

<sup>23</sup> Kim Paffenroth, *The Gospel of the Living Dead; George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006)

<sup>24</sup> Brian Yuzna, *Return of the Living Dead Part III* (Trimark Pictures, 1993)

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Currie, *Fido* (Lions Gate Films, 2006)

<sup>26</sup> Michael Simon, *Gay Zombie* (Passion Fruit Productions, 2007)

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Juliet Lauro, *Playing Dead; Zombies Invade Performance Art*, in: Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (eds.), *Better Off Dead; The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011)

<sup>28</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011)

The Voodoo zombie;<sup>29</sup> the porno zombie;<sup>30</sup> the dancing zombie;<sup>31</sup> the Nazi zombie;<sup>32</sup> the biker zombie;<sup>33</sup> the eco-zombie;<sup>34</sup> the cyberpunk zombie;<sup>35</sup> the newborn baby zombie;<sup>36</sup> the breast-eating oedipal zombie;<sup>37</sup> the Zen zombie;<sup>38</sup> the analysand zombie;<sup>39</sup> the shark vs. zombie;<sup>40</sup> the ovine zombie;<sup>41</sup> the e-zombie;<sup>42</sup> the app zombie...<sup>43</sup>

It would seem that zombies are everywhere and everything; as such, I do not claim to contend with the myriad permutations of undeadliness in this thesis. Nor do I attempt to exhaustively discuss all the ways in which the zombie has been read by other critics, theorists and academics. Throughout this project I use the figure of the zombie to help me re-politicise the obsolete psychoanalytical term ‘melancholia’. This theoretical endeavour eventually enables me to propose the dimensions of a critically engaged contemporary practice. I limit my investigation to the manifestation of the zombie in George A. Romero’s films, and I do this for two reasons; firstly, due to the fact that Romero uniquely targets “instinct” as the motor driving his undead hoards; and secondly, because I detect in his oeuvre a neglected potential – an absence that I seek to address in my own writing. I will expand on these reasons by way of a brief introduction to Romero’s particular brand of zombie.

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<sup>29</sup> Jasper Bark, *Way of the Barefoot Zombie* (Oxford: Abaddon Books, 2009)

<sup>30</sup> Bruce LaBruce, *L.A. Zombie* (Dark Alley Media, 2010)

<sup>31</sup> John Landis, *Michael Jackson’s Thriller* (Vestron Music Video, 1983)

<sup>32</sup> Tommy Wirkola, *Dead Snow* (Euforia Film, 2009)

<sup>33</sup> Todd Brunswick, *Biker Zombies from Detroit* (American Film Partners, 2001)

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Eco-Zombie: Environmental Critique in Zombie Fiction*, in: Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (eds.), *Generation Zombie; Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2011)

<sup>35</sup> Andrea Austin, *Cyberpunk and the Living Dead*, in: Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (eds.), *Generation Zombie; Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2011)

<sup>36</sup> Zack Snyder, *Dawn of the Dead* (Universal Pictures, 2004)

<sup>37</sup> Andrea Bianchi, *Burial Ground: Nights of Terror* (Shriek Show, 1981)

<sup>38</sup> Scott Kenemore, *The Zen of Zombie* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2007)

<sup>39</sup> Marc Fratto, *Zombies Anonymous* (Beyond Home Entertainment, 2008)

<sup>40</sup> Lucio Fulci, *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (The Jerry Gross Organization, 1979)

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan King, *Black Sheep* (The New Zealand Film Commission, 2006)

<sup>42</sup> Brendan Riley, *The E-Dead: Zombies in the Digital Age*, in: Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (eds.), *Generation Zombie; Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2011)

<sup>43</sup> Destination Creation, *Zombie Me*, accessed 25/12/12 (<http://www.zombieme.com>)

## Romero's Zombie

Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)<sup>44</sup> was the first film to establish the zombie as a stupefied and lurching corpse animated by a rapacious appetite for living human flesh. This figure has become a recognised norm within the zombie genre, and when I refer to undeadliness throughout my thesis I am specifically referencing this particular manifestation of it. Prior to Romero's articulation, the zombie was typically cast as a bewitched body – a wholly instrumentalised worker – that carried out the dastardly biddings of a malevolent Voudou master.<sup>45</sup> Zombified undeadliness was often presented as a state from which humans could recover, as if the loss of the characteristics specific to life might be redeemed once a particular spell or curse has been broken. Whilst Romero's zombie shares the dead-eyed stupor and mindless wandering of its celluloid predecessors, his particular re-articulation of the figure brings the finality of undeadliness to the fore. Anyone bitten by a zombie in Romero's films is condemned to a feverish and excruciating demise. Once dead, the victim lies still for only a few agonising moments before rising up again, stiff-limbed and staring – the latest convert to the diabolical undead throng. So Romero's zombie is very specifically and unambiguously an animated corpse, rather than a living human trapped in a mystical or biochemical purgatory.

But more distinctively, instead of treating the zombie as a passive instrument that has acquiesced to the authoritative will of another, Romero casts the walking corpse as a rampaging manifestation of the most malignant of appetites that pays no heed to authority whatsoever, devouring all semblance of order and civility as it stumbles across the prairies of dust bowl America. A redneck posse halts the undead advance in *Night of the Living Dead*, but their trigger-happy zombie purge heralds only a temporary reprieve. In his next film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978),<sup>46</sup> Romero shows the zombie insurrection penetrating deep into the urban sprawl, closing in on media outlets and malls across the country. By *Day of the Dead* (1985),<sup>47</sup> the conurbations of America have been lost. Zombies stumble unimpeded through the wreckage of a masticated society, whilst alligators sprawl across the steps of the national bank and

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<sup>44</sup> George A. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (Pickwick Group Ltd., 1968)

<sup>45</sup> Victor Halperin, *White Zombie* (United Artists, 1932)

<sup>46</sup> George A. Romero, *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

<sup>47</sup> George A. Romero, *Day of the Dead* (United Distribution Film Company, 1985)

dollar bills collect in the gutter. Only a ragtag ensemble of survivors remains, locked inside an underground military bunker, undertaking macabre and brutal experiments on the undead in an effort to fathom their condition.

### **Zombie Fiction and Psychoanalysis**

In a memorable scene from *Day of the Dead* that I discuss in Chapter One, Dr Logan expounds the merits of his wildly gruesome research, claiming that the zombie's violently erotic and fatally disruptive drive for flesh might be the product of an instinctual residue that has survived the death of the rest of the body. I treat this scene – specifically the word 'instinct' deployed within it – as an invitation to understand Romero's zombie using a psychoanalytical vocabulary. Whilst many other manifestations of zombie fiction explore the genesis of undeadliness in relation to contagions, Voudou, toxins, viruses, chemical weapons, nuclear disaster and science-gone-wrong etc, Romero's films attribute undeadliness to an abject psychical disturbance within the recently deceased that, in turn, has apocalyptic ramifications within the social realm. I limit my thesis to an investigation of this particular quality within Romero's films. So in response to Romero's own suggestion within *Day of the Dead*, I initially read the zombie's characteristics using psychoanalytical texts – specifically Freudian texts that contend with the notion of instinct.

Whilst psychoanalysis is now a much-disputed diagnostic tool within contemporary medicine, it nevertheless understands itself as an empirical and structural mapping of the psyche based on observations of, and disclosures from, the analysand. I am not concerned with its veracity as much as I am with its capacity to function as an analytical tool with which I can read the properties of undeadliness. The zombie, however, is a fiction in a conventional sense of the word; it is an invention that does not exist outside its own fictitious conceit – it is a fabricated figure that does not index a pre-existing real beyond the diegesis that contains it. In my first chapter I explore the consequences of using psychoanalysis to analyse the field of zombie fiction. I position myself in opposition to Slavoj Žižek, who cites examples of popular film –

including zombie fiction – in order to illustrate Lacanian psychoanalysis.<sup>48</sup> By claiming that popular culture is able to elucidate elements of Lacan’s thinking, Žižek recognises an equivalence and a direct commonality between fiction and psychoanalysis.

However, through a detailed and rigorous reading of both Romero and Freud, I claim that no such equivalence exists between the two. In fact my work grows from the points at which zombie fiction and psychoanalysis refuse to tessellate – the points at which one antagonises the other. I claim that psychoanalysis cannot contend with undeadliness precisely because the zombie cannot be categorised psychoanalytically – it is neither alive nor dead, and so sidesteps the fundamental classifications that psychoanalysis trades in. There is thus no pre-existing Freudian terminology that can describe the liminality of the zombie. I therefore *add* to Freud’s vocabulary so that I might more accurately describe the moments when conventional psychoanalysis is exceeded by the operations of undeadliness. I do not use existing Freudian terms; I invent my own zombie terminology throughout Chapter One, so at this point my writing breaches the integrity of Freud’s work by inserting a fictional dimension into it. The resulting categories are still couched within psychoanalysis, but a psychoanalysis that is in service to, and expanded by, the fictitious conceit of undeadliness. As such, I claim that my rewriting of Freud, drafted as it is in response to the zombie, is an original hybrid text – a mash-up of Romero and Freud that pulls psychoanalysis into a fictional realm. In my subsequent chapters I perform similar manoeuvres with the psychoanalytical texts of Jacques Lacan, Herbert Marcuse, Julia Kristeva and Darian Leader.

### **The (R)evolutionary Zombie**

So, in Chapter One, I use zombie fiction to revise the psychological categories proffered by psychoanalysis. In Chapter Two, however, I use psychoanalysis to expand the potentials of zombie fiction. Again, this is a very particular response to a narrative trajectory that I have identified in Romero’s films. At the end of *Land of the Dead*

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<sup>48</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry; An Introduction to Lacan through Popular Culture* (London: The MIT Press, 1992)

(2005),<sup>49</sup> the zombies begin to exhibit a sense of compassion and communitarianism towards each another. They cease to be beholden to their base drives, seemingly more concerned with surviving as a social group than they are with procuring more human flesh. This sets up the proposition that undeadliness has been subjected to an evolution of sorts, whereby the zombie acquires a degree of consciousness, restraint and self-reflexivity.

However, in his subsequent films, *Diary of the Dead* (2007)<sup>50</sup> and *Survival of the Dead* (2009),<sup>51</sup> Romero takes us back to the beginning of the zombie apocalypse. The former satirises the culture of reality TV and the impulse to document life (and undeadliness) at all costs, while the latter is effectively a zombie western in which two patriarchal Irish families – both settlers in a hostile post-apocalyptic landscape – are locked in a bitter dispute over how to survive the zombie scourge.

With this sudden change of direction, Romero effectively refuses to explore the potential zombie evolution that he himself suggested in his earlier films. So I use my thesis to imagine a new future for undeadliness by colliding Romero's zombie with Herbert Marcuse's re-reading of Freudian theory. I seek to devise an original direction for the zombie in response to the tantalising proposition at the end of *Land of the Dead* that Romero himself chooses to neglect. Marcuse's treatment of Freud, specifically with its provocative discussion of sublimation, allows me to author an undead civilisation in which the zombie's base instinctual drives are radically transformed into libidinally emancipated and socially responsible tendencies. Again, other authors and filmmakers have modulated undeadliness in all sorts of fascinating ways, but I am specifically concerned with resurrecting Romero's abandoned vision within a lexicon of Marcusean psychoanalysis and political theory. The fictitious undead revolution that Romero hints at already bears a relationship to Marcuse's non-repressive civilisation, so I specifically set out to pull these orbiting ideas into closer proximity by adding an unwritten chapter into Romero's oeuvre. Once again, the text that I write – a fictional zombie utopia – eventually refuses to tessellate with

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<sup>49</sup> George A. Romero, *Land of the Dead* (Universal Pictures, 2005)

<sup>50</sup> George A. Romero, *Diary of the Dead* (Dimension Films, 2007)

<sup>51</sup> George A. Romero, *Survival of the Dead* (E1 Entertainment, 2009)

Marcuse's political aspirations. My fiction of an undead civilisation thus ruptures the integrity of the theoretical text from which it is drafted.

I do not choose to narrate this fiction directly to the reader; rather I use the form of the thesis to reflect upon and discuss the constituent parts of the fiction as I propose them. I claim that the thesis itself, as opposed to a film or short story etc, is the optimum form to carry my proposal precisely because it allows me to critically interrogate my own invention without having to constantly constrain my writing *within* a fictitious conceit.

### **Undead Melancholia**

So far I have identified a methodological approach within my thesis that brings together Romero's zombie and psychoanalysis in order to forge a hybrid fiction, but I have said very little about the *content* of the fictions that grow out of this collision. Whilst 'instinct' provides the way in to my psychoanalytical discussion of Romero, the term that perseveres throughout my project is 'melancholia'. Both the zombie and melancholia occupy an oppositional position in relation to the status quo, mobilised through a particular libidinal attachment to death.

I initially categorise the zombie using the fictitious term 'undead melancholia' – a state that permits the suicidal subject to rid herself of her own life without dying completely. Undeadliness allows the melancholic subject to be reunited with the death that she craves, without succumbing to total annihilation. Whilst the Freudian melancholic orally incorporates the lost object into her psyche on a symbolic level, the undead melancholic is devoured *by* the lost object in a very literal feeding frenzy; this *undead* formulation rewrites the dimensions of Freudian melancholia.

The zombie, as an unthinking and unconscious body, is unaware of its own status. In Chapter Two, however, I use Marcuse's theory of sublimation to establish undead melancholia as a transgressive subjectivity that *knowingly* survives its reunion with death. Sublimated undead melancholia thus becomes a radical subject position that wilfully resists the status quo. I devise a zombie utopia in which life willingly

acquiesces to an egalitarian and emancipatory marriage with death – a marriage that confounds the homogeneity of life precisely through its idealistic inhabitation of undeadliness. My zombie utopia becomes a phantasy of the melancholic urge to refuse the libidinal limitations of mortal existence.

I then explore how the condition of melancholia has been replaced within contemporary medicine by the term ‘depression’. I equate the move from melancholia to depression with the emergence of postmodern homogeneity that collapses radical opposition from the *outside* by assimilating dissent *within* its own operations. The subversive qualities of melancholia are superseded by the classification of depression as a dysfunctional inability to assimilate the logic of capitalist production. The phantasy of transgressive subjectivity evoked by a zombie utopia is then understood as a melancholic introjection of an oppositional critical strategy that has been deemed outmoded and obsolete by the contemporary climate. Sublimated undead melancholia evokes the spectre of a *lost modernism* that might interrogate the homogeneity of contemporaneity.

In Chapter Three I revisit Romero’s original zombie and read it as an outrageously Real collapse of meaning. As a walking corpse that refuses to be laid to rest, it violates the protocols of mourning that typically register death within language. Undead melancholia emerges as a violation of symbolic death that allows the suicidal subject to survive her self-expulsion from language and exist instead within the Real territories of semiotic collapse. Crucially, it is precisely the zombie’s base materiality – its vertiginous mobilisation of the corpse – that makes it so horrifically Real.

This reading leads me to undo my formulation of undead melancholia as a transgressive subject position, and re-cast it instead as a haptic materiality *beyond* subjectivity. At this point I acknowledge that the process of sublimation driving my zombie utopia in Chapter Two is incompatible with the haptic quality of undead melancholia, set up in Chapter Three, that privileges affective materiality over idealised subjectivity.

In Chapter Four I explore the formal qualities of Romero’s zombie films. The allure of his early work owes a lot to his ability to create for the spectator riotous and

frenzied set pieces – gory tableaux of artificial excess – that privilege visceral thrill over narrative cohesion. In these moments Romero does not try to evoke a hermetically sealed fictitious conceit in which a drama can unfold; rather, he displays the materiality of an explicitly artificial diegesis. This playful subversion of filmic protocols might be understood as an eruption of thingness – a moment of haptic materiality – staged not between the zombie and the human *within* the diegesis but between the zombie and the spectator.

I then explore how the haptic quality of Romero's early films invites the practitioner, as a zombie spectator, to harness melancholia as a material antagonism – a glitch of affective weirdness – that flattens the illusion of normalisation specific to contemporaneity. Rather than asserting the interiority of subjective experience, melancholia becomes a performative intervention that scours the uniform ideological consistency of a given situation. Undead melancholia no longer functions as an *unobtainable* phantasy of a lost modernism, but as a *viable* critical methodology within contemporary culture. Zombie spectatorship allows the practitioner to exhume the obsolete term melancholia, harnessing it not as a subject position but as a haptic antagonism to contemporary homogeneity.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Deep, Dark Primordial Instinct



Image 1

A figure lies prone on an operating table, its bloodied ribcage exposed and empty. All of the vital organs have been surgically removed. But this body is not dead; not completely. It is struggling against the restraints that pin it down, straining to bite a doctor whose hand is just out of reach. “See, it wants me. It wants food, but it has no stomach—it can take no nourishment from what it ingests,” says the doctor, toying with the undead corpse. “It’s working on instinct—a deep, dark primordial instinct.”<sup>52</sup> Suddenly the corpse breaks free. The bloody remains of its stomach slop out onto the cotton white sheets and then slither off the side of the bed, accelerating to meet the floor with a wet slap. The doctor grabs a surgical drill and bores a hole deep into its skull. Only now is it completely dead.

It is in this scene from *Day of the Dead* (image 1) that Romero unveils human instinct as the star turn within his zombie films. This proposition – that the endless ranks of undead corpses staggering across the screen are in fact propelled by an instinctual drive – is the closest Romero comes to explicitly offering an explanation or rationalisation of undeadliness within the conceit of his films. As such, Romero invites us to unpack the notion of instinct as a means of formulating an understanding of the zombie figure, and my first chapter is a response to this invitation. I limit myself at this point to a Freudian discussion of instinct; the reasons for this will be made explicit in Chapter Two when I begin to author an evolving figure of the zombie.

But to continue on my current trajectory, this first chapter initially surveys Sigmund Freud’s account of the instincts. Freud’s text is then brought to bear on Romero’s oeuvre in an effort to read further insights into the zombie figure itself. If the undead corpse is indeed a manifestation of instinctual drives, how might a close theoretical study of these instincts impact upon a reading of the zombie? What does a consultation of Freudian psychoanalysis allow us to *see* in the zombie that is not immediately evident? How might psychoanalysis function as a device that allows us to unpack and eviscerate the zombie figure that Romero presents to us onscreen?

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<sup>52</sup> George A. Romero, *Day of the Dead* (United Distribution Film Company, 1985)

I will consult an increasing number of Freudian texts in an effort to enable my reading of the zombie in this first chapter. These texts are not chosen chronologically, and hail from different Freudian typologies of the psyche.<sup>53</sup> By setting these texts in conversation with each other I am treating them as fragments, and, as such, I do not claim that my treatment of Freud maintains a historically accurate perspective on the development and progression of his thinking. So in my thesis Freudian psychoanalysis is not a globalised text that underwrites my analytical endeavour, but a series of provisional frameworks that allow me to approach the figure of the zombie theoretically.

In Chapter One I use the term ‘civilisation’ within an exclusively Freudian context because I am specifically concerned with an exploration of how the zombie figure might interrogate Freudian psychoanalytical vocabulary (and vice versa). As such, I do not claim at this point in my thesis that the term is a relevant or accurate diagnosis of the contemporary status quo.<sup>54</sup> As the chapter climaxes I will explore how the conceit of the zombie figure actually contests certain psychoanalytical overtures. The zombie will eventually refuse to be instrumentalised as a figure that faithfully rehearses a rendition of established Freudian paradigms.

### **Civilisation and its Undead Contents**

Freud claims that human instincts are fundamentally built around an unswerving quest for pleasure.<sup>55</sup> I will discuss the particularities of these urges presently, but at this point it is enough to say that, for Freud, instinctual drives fundamentally underwrite the human urge to pursue as much pleasure as possible. This axiom, which decrees

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<sup>53</sup> My formulation of the *undead pleasure principle* is a response to Freud’s model of the life/death instincts, whereas *undead melancholia* responds to the ego instincts. Despite my use of references that span a significant part of Freud’s career, I do not collapse the fundamental variance between these two formulations of the psyche. The distinction between the *undead pleasure principle* and *undead melancholia* still upholds the differing trajectories of these separate typologies.

<sup>54</sup> I will discuss contemporary and critical implications/applications of the zombie in Chapters Two, Three and Four.

<sup>55</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in: Peter Gay (ed.), *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage Books, 1995) p.596

that instinctual satisfaction is of utmost importance to the psyche, is known as the “pleasure principle”.<sup>56</sup>

Freud points out that when the pleasure principle makes itself felt in the “external world, it is from the very outset inefficient and even highly dangerous.”<sup>57</sup> Total pleasure for one individual typically demands the subjugation of another; any burgeoning civil order would soon melt away in a hot orgy of erotic violence and murderous rivalry. The pleasure principle is thereby replaced by the “reality principle”<sup>58</sup> – an internalised psychological doctrine that advocates the postponement and compromise of pleasure so that the individual might survive comfortably within the civilised group. The reality principle chooses the *unpleasure* of instinctual *dissatisfaction* over the pleasure of instinctual satisfaction because a compromised collective civility is easier to bear than the burden of surviving alone in “a state of nature.”<sup>59</sup>

And so the individual consciously renounces the out and out quest for instinctual pleasure, and is rewarded in return with the privileges of a civilised life – security, leisure time, material wealth, etc. But how are the instincts – the drives that target pleasure before all else – persuaded to relinquish their bounty? Why would they surrender their hold over the individual’s conscious psyche to the anodyne conformity of the reality principle?

Freud claims that the pleasure principle is banished from the individual’s conscious mind by the psychological mechanism of repression. He specifically identifies the concept of “...primal repression, a first phase of repression which consists in the psychological (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance to the conscious.”<sup>60</sup>

This now suggests that instinctual drives are barred from the conscious psyche by this first wave of inhibiting and renouncing control. The individual is never truly exposed to the full-blooded pleasure-seeking mantra of the liberated instincts; these drives are

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.596

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in: Peter Gay (ed.), *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage Books, 1995) p.693

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p.570

ambushed before they have a chance to reach the conscious strata of the psyche. Instead, heavily sedated and benign manifestations of the instincts are harnessed by the civil order and turned into socially useful drives. It is these enslaved and diluted impulses that constitute the individual's conscious ego.

But the pure pleasure-seeking drives are far from defeated. They might be prohibited from conscious expression, but the conscious domain is only the surface of an unfathomable mental entity that stretches deep into the unknown corners of the individual's psyche. Primal repression bars the instincts from finding expression in the conscious realm, and expels them instead into the unmapped territories of the unconscious. But this eviction does not amount to an extermination. Far from it:

The instinctual representative develops with less interference and more profusely if it is withdrawn by repression from conscious influence. It proliferates in the dark as it were, and takes on extreme forms of expression.<sup>61</sup>

And so Freud says that within the unconscious realm of the psyche the pleasure principle still reigns supreme, and rejects the renunciations that the conscious mind has accepted so readily. The pleasure principle gathers force in the dark recesses of the unconscious, and the repressed instincts then secretly plot their own return from the hidden territories to which they have been banished. This is when we discover that the repressive regime of civilisation is unable to carry out its inhibiting project entirely; a pustulous glob of instinctual pleasure always oozes through the cracks in repression's grip. Indeed, the harder the grip – the more tyrannical the repression – the more the pleasure principle resists its own cull and bleeds back into the fabric of civilisation. Freud calls this haunting presence the “return of the repressed”.<sup>62</sup> It is a blister on the social order – an unwanted by-product of relentless authoritarian control. Civilisation is therefore in a constant state of hostile negotiation, always trying to manage the chaos that it creates by repressing the instincts in the first place.

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<sup>61</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Repression*, in: Peter Gay (ed.), *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage Books, 1995) p.570

<sup>62</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1939) p.160

The return of the repressed is dangerous precisely because it nurtures a prohibited commitment to pleasure that ruptures the doctrine of *unpleasure* from which the basic principle of civilisation is drafted. I propose that Romero's celluloid figure of the zombie – the body motored by a violent and transgressive drive that dismantles civilised coherence – can be understood as a fantastical embodiment of Freud's return of the repressed. We can start to understand the zombie as a visual literalisation of the "extreme forms of expression" taken on by the instincts as they spill into the civilised territory from which they were barred. The conflict between humans and zombies in Romero's films now dramatises the struggle that exists between civilized individuals and their own repressed instincts. We can claim that Romero authors a fictitious conceit in which the instinctual urges, ripped out of the civilized population by repression, are manifested in a separate body altogether – the undead corpse. This body, as an agent of unconscious pleasure, then eats its way through the social order in an effort to reunite the civilised body with its lost instinctual drives.

So Freudian theory invites us to conceive of the zombie as an embodiment of the pleasure principle that transgresses the logistics of repression and forces itself into the very civilised territories from which it has been excluded. The return of the repressed testifies to civilisation's inability to annihilate the instincts completely. Similarly, throughout Romero's films there are always *more* zombies beyond those that we see being destroyed. Therefore, within the fictitious conceit of undeath, civilisation never manages to totally subdue the instincts. Romero's films play out the irony inherent in the claim that it is nothing less than civilisation's own repressive squeeze on the pleasure principle that forces the instincts to come oozing back into the social order in the first instance. So in Romero's films the undead corpse is the nemesis, but also the product, of a repressive civilisation. If Freudian civilisation is the author of its own trauma, then Romero hyperbolically exploits this irony to great effect.

I will now explore this claim using some specific examples. In his first two zombie films Romero presents scenarios in which the individual's "superego"<sup>63</sup> – the internalisation of an exterior authoritative law – is overtaken by an aggressive and unlawful quest for power. But crucially, this collapse in civil authority is caused by

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<sup>63</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex*, in Angela Richards (ed.), *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 7: On Sexuality* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) p.319

that same civil authority's repressive regime. Romero effectively fantasises about a tipping point after which civilisation is unable to contend with the forces that its own repressive mechanisms have unleashed upon itself. In *Night of the Living Dead* Mr. Cooper is the traditional patriarchal figure. He is severe and cruel, but the other survivors holed up in the farmhouse no longer respect his authority. His attempt to take control of the situation unravels into a spiteful and neurotic tirade directed at anyone who disagrees with him. As a repressive figure he is no longer functioning effectively precisely because of the threat posed by the growing zombie hoard outside. His ineffective posturing becomes a destructive and treacherous force that exacerbates the already precarious situation. As a result he is constantly undermined by the other individuals who are struggling to survive the night on their own terms. This breakdown of common authority leaves them vulnerable and accelerates the zombies' advance. Ben, who survives until daybreak, is mistaken for a zombie by other humans. The sheriff's men shoot him dead and then throw his body onto a pile of zombie corpses. This scene subtly suggests that Ben's antagonistic and violent struggle with patriarchal authority actually puts him in cahoots with the zombies.<sup>64</sup> The return of organised and disciplined law enforcers quashes the undead advance at the end of the film, amounting to a temporary reprieve for civilisation in its battle with the instincts. But Romero's next film states explicitly from the outset that this remission was only short-lived.

At the beginning of *Dawn of the Dead* civilisation is already crumbling at its foundations. Those humans who normally serve the controlling order abandon their posts in an effort to ensure their own immediate survival. Stephen and Francine work for a television network, whilst Peter and Roger are both policemen. They all desert their civil duties and escape together as the zombie chaos swells out of control. This collapse of common authority effectively creates a void in civilisation's defences that sucks in the advancing hordes of zombies. Romero presents a battlefield in which the struggling humans are effectively caught in a no-man's land between civilisation and instinct. Those who reject the civilized hierarchy and plot a course towards their own immediate gratification are either consumed by the undead or murdered by other more

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<sup>64</sup> I believe there is a subtext of racial identity and conflict being played out in this scene too. Romero's casting throughout the four films touches on significant race issues and warrants more investigation – an undertaking that is separate to the trajectory of this particular piece of work.

civilized humans. As the unlawful individuals attempt to reclaim their prohibited urges, the zombies, as an embodiment of these urges, close in on them. The only survivors are those who surrender their immediate pleasure and adhere to some measure of common civility. But nothing remains of the old repressive regime, so the survivors are faced with the prospect of having to draft an entirely new social contract for themselves. Romero effectively claims that if civilisation is to survive it must fundamentally re-negotiate its repressive relationship with the instincts.

This is played out in the climax of *Dawn of the Dead*. The civilized economy is completely redundant. Within the mall, Francine, Stephen, Peter and Roger are able to take whatever they want for free. The mall has become a domain of lawless pleasure. The zombies in the mall may have been destroyed, but an undead throng is steadily gathering outside. Once the gang of bikers violently force their way through the barricade, destructive incivility takes hold and the zombies return to wreak their bloody havoc. Stephen refuses to surrender the luxurious mall to the marauding bikers without a fight. Because he gives in to his selfish instinctual desire, he is savaged by the undead hoards and becomes a particularly flamboyant zombie himself. Francine and Peter only survive because they leave the mall behind in order to forge a new future amidst the wreckage of their now defunct civilisation.

The presence of zombies in Romero's films becomes inversely proportional to civilisation's ability to enforce its repressive regime. The more we see humans violating civilized law as a result of the zombie threat, the more the zombies close in and destroy the social order. The number of zombies steadily increases throughout his films, so Romero effectively portrays a dysfunctional society that is descending into unlawful chaos. It is unable to cope with the forces it has unleashed against itself. A reading of Freud allows us to state that the horror of Romero's films is founded in this nightmarish vision of a broken civilisation that has definitively lost its repressive grip on instinctual pleasure. The undead apocalypse in Romero's fiction that besets 20<sup>th</sup>-century America is a hyperbolic dramatisation of a Freudian conceit; namely that human instinct refuses to be repressed by the coercive forces of civilisation.

But why should the zombie in particular read as an articulation of the return of the repressed? What is specific to the zombie that makes it *the* body par excellence through which a Freudian conceit might be extrapolated?

### **Eros and Thanatos**

To respond to these questions I will now address the instincts themselves in more detail. Freud claims that human instinct is motivated by two primary drives – Eros and Thanatos – the life and death instincts respectively. Eros is the urge to create and reproduce – to unite, nurture, and protect all human life. It embodies the basic principle of survival and growth. As Freud says,

Eros, by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, preserving it.<sup>65</sup>

This life affirming instinct attempts to generate ever more abundant constellations of living matter; it is the libidinal chemistry that draws people to one another so that they might reproduce and proliferate as a species. Freud goes on to identify a component within the jurisdiction of Eros that functions as the “uninhibited sexual instinct proper.”<sup>66</sup> So the life instinct not only creates all the emotional and psychological bonds that pull groups of people together, it fuels a more extreme desire for immediate sexual gratification as well. Within this sexual dimension of Eros, reproduction and the continuation of the species are only incidental by-products of the overwhelming urge to obtain total physical bodily pleasure from other humans.

Thanatos, on the other hand, is the instinct to regress – to return to the inertia of simple and base matter. Freud identifies this as a “death instinct, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state.”<sup>67</sup> Thanatos is the urge to oppose the proliferating structures of life, and is therefore essentially destructive and violent. It

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<sup>65</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, in: Peter Gay (ed.), *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage Books, 1995) pp.645-646

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p.645

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

yearns to reverse the turbulent process of growth, and summons the universal inertia of death in order to stifle the friction of organic existence. Thanatos drives the work of decay and entropy in an effort to reverse the generative processes presided over by Eros.

Both of these opposing instinctual urges find pleasure in fulfilling their respective tasks, and are thus urgently motivated to achieve their aims so that they might obtain as much pleasure as possible. But as we have already explored, these instinctual drives are blocked from achieving their aims by the coercive culture of civilisation. The repressive order decrees that the body must be primarily engaged as a tool of labour, and this immediately alienates the individual from her erotic pleasure. Civilisation would soon grind to a halt if everyone constantly pursued their own physical gratification, so any manifestation of erotic desire that is not an act of civilized reproduction is heavily repressed by the social order. Through the resolution of the Oedipal Complex the infant learns how to organise eroticism into a socially productive expression of Eros. The child is taught that heterosexual and monogamous reproduction – a strictly private affair that takes place in the meagre supply of leisure time provided by civilisation – is the only permitted manifestation of the sexual instinct. So Eros is not completely annihilated; an element of erotic desire is allowed into the civilised realm. But under the regime of repression, the conscious Eros can only ever be in chains. However, Freud also acknowledges the existence of an infantile sexual drive that doesn't conform to the repressive will of civilisation:

...the oral or, as it might be called, cannibalistic pregenital sexual organisation. Here sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food... the sexual aim consists in the incorporation of the object.<sup>68</sup>

If we apply this to Romero's fiction we can recognise the undead corpse's rampaging appetite for flesh as a pregenital sexual urge that does not obey the logistics of civilised sexuality. The undead refuse any sort of curfew on their erotic quest to obtain oral pleasure from the living human being; they will bite any flesh they can sink their teeth into. This reactivates the victim's entire body as an erogenous zone –

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<sup>68</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, in: Angela Richards (ed.), *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 7: On Sexuality* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) p.117

an object to ingest – and in so doing refuses the monogamous and heterosexual genital contact privileged by civilisation. The zombie’s desire to bite and consume human flesh is also an act of reproduction that causes the undead population to grow at a terrific speed. But as Freud establishes, this reproduction and self-perpetuation – the hallmark of Eros – is merely a by-product of the immediate urge for total sexual gratification.

### **The Undead Pleasure Principle**

It would seem paradoxical to claim that a walking corpse can somehow embody and carry out the will of the life instincts. But Freud himself claims that Eros in its most crude manifestation is overtly hostile towards the measured compromises of civilisation. The unchecked excesses of eroticism that violate the sanctity of the civilised body come into orbit with death. The zombie becomes an apt articulation of Eros’ disregard for the rarefied human body that civilisation presides over. The seemingly oppositional drives of Eros and Thanatos – of life and death – thus share, on closer inspection, a curious alliance.

Let’s explore this alliance further. If the zombie’s bite is indeed a moment of erotic proliferation, then this act of reproduction can only take place through death; the undead corpse can only be born once the living human has passed away. So within Romero’s conceit Eros *needs* Thanatos. The erotic bite transforms living civilised human beings into walking rotting corpses, but in doing so it simultaneously strips away the complexities of identity so that individuality is substituted for the generic dead-eyed vacancy of undeadliness. Living people, as the working parts of the civilized infrastructure, are dismantled and reanimated as undead husks – receptacles of deceased matter. These corpses stumble around, wearing uniforms that used to define their roles within civilisation when they were still alive. The uniforms speak of a civil function that is rendered obsolete under the reign of the destructive instinct. The individual regresses to dead matter – becomes no more than walking decay – and is therefore released from the tribulations of a compromised civilized existence. And this is precisely the ambition of Thanatos – an ambition that it could not accomplish

without the erotic bite in the first instance. Again, within Romero's conceit, Thanatos *needs* Eros.

This sheds more light on the alliance between Eros and Thanatos. The destructive nature of Thanatos corrupts the proliferation of life as decreed by Eros. But in turn, the proliferation of Eros corrupts the destruction of life as decreed by Thanatos. By collapsing their oppositions onto one surface – the ultimate paradox of the living corpse – both instincts simultaneously subvert and propagate each other in their conflicting alliance. Eros and Thanatos sign a pact to reanimate the dead body, a deal that demands their mutual corruption, but nevertheless allows them to burst forth into the social order so that they might satisfy their diabolical thirst for instinctual gratification. Their union spawns a new mandate – the undead pleasure principle.

The corrupting coalescence of Eros and Thanatos within the logic of the zombie figure moves beyond a purely faithful Freudian account of the instincts. The alliance that I have been describing rests on a liminal state that resides between life and death, but of course this is a fictitious proposition that Freud himself never entertained. Whilst he wrote at length about the complex ways in which Eros and Thanatos oppose and attract each other, he always conceived of this relationship as a dialectic that either plays out within life or pushes towards death. To put this bluntly, there is no human state of zombie liminality – no category of undeadliness – within Freudian psychoanalysis.

The zombie wrests Eros and Thanatos away from their containment within the theoretical paradigms of Freud and starts to write its own theory of the instincts – a theory in which an adapted and completely fictional account of the return of the repressed is proffered. Romero's zombie sanctions a theoretical formulation of Eros and Thanatos that corrupts the structural logic of psychoanalysis by exposing it to a diegesis that sustains the anomaly of undeadliness.

Freudian psychoanalysis does not have the vocabulary to contend with this fictitious and liminal state, so any further psychoanalytical treatment of the zombie must acknowledge that the psychoanalysis being deployed has, itself, been infected by the conceit of zombie fiction. Freud has been bitten; his theory is now infected with the

contagion of undeadliness – a presence that adds a fictitious dimension to psychoanalysis. This is an important claim because up until now I have been treating zombie fiction and psychoanalysis as mutual texts that can stand in for each other. I have been using one text to elucidate the particularities of the other; the zombie is *equivalent* to the return of the repressed for example. But in fact these two texts cannot tessellate because, as I have discussed above, the fictitious liminal state of undeadliness has no equivalence with the logic of psychoanalysis. So despite my initial claims that explored the commonality and coherence between psychoanalysis and zombie fiction, it is now necessary to acknowledge the incompatibility of the two texts. This schism then produces in turn a liminal text – a zombie text perhaps – that is both fiction *and* psychoanalysis, but not exclusively one or the other. Each text opens up to – and is changed by – the other’s conceit. The zombie brings a fictitious liminality to psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis brings an explicit theoretical context to the zombie. Both are modified as a result. This resulting text – my own thesis – is itself a liminal overlapping of both fiction and psychoanalysis. Two registers of liminality are now emerging: the liminality of the undead corpse within the conceit of zombie fiction, and the liminality of my own writing as it inhabits a porous space at the edges of undeadliness and psychoanalysis simultaneously.

The following short story is a stand-alone piece of writing that plays with the possibilities of colliding zombie fiction with Freudian theory.

## The Freudian Zombie

The walking corpse is motored by a single and overwhelming urge to consume flesh. If Freudian theory invites us to recognise this urge as specifically erotic, then the undead body is effectively engorged with desire – bloated by its own sexual appetite. The rigid and stumbling corpse now reads as a tumescent phallus, stiffly swaying this way and that in its quest for pleasure. Eros is resurrected as an unruly swelling of desire within the civilized order – a transgressive fleshy bulge within the very social fabric that attempts to smother all manifestations of sexual arousal. Civilisation requires the body to be instrumentalised and malleable, yet the sexually primed and defiantly stiff corpse refuses to be moulded into a pliable and subservient human tool.

But the zombie is more than phallic. It consumes life so that it might give birth to death. And by spawning death it simultaneously creates a new life – undead life. Barbara Creed argues that the Freudian castration complex perpetually casts women as being sexually and symbolically passive.<sup>69</sup> She recites instead the figure of a consuming and all-encompassing womb that wishes to draw life back into itself. The female genitals are no longer castrated, but castrating. This notion of a devouring femininity summons the mythological image of the *vagina dentata* – the toothed vagina – that literally consumes life and returns it to the womb from whence it came. That which gives birth now also gives death. Thanatos is thus able to find symbolic expression in the devouring capabilities of the womb. The bloodied mouth of the undead corpse – the very thing that consumes living flesh and turns it into decaying mater – becomes a vivid articulation of the consuming female genitals.

And so the alliance between Eros and Thanatos casts the zombie as both a phallus *and* a *vagina dentata*. Its stiff body is the insubordinate erection and its bloody mouth the toothed entrance to the devouring womb. The two

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<sup>69</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993) p.105

symbols coalesce as an undead psychoanalytical monster with an erotic appetite for death. The phallus is all a-quiver, coursing with a libidinal intent that refuses the reality principle's doctrine of un-pleasure. Its frenulum splays open to reveal a fissure on the underside of the glans. This parting of flesh forms a pair of labia that frame a glistening set of teeth. This diabolical symbolic hybrid shuffles along awkwardly, propelled only by the motion of its cumbersome testicles that lilt and lurch erratically one after the other.

And so it is that psychoanalysis and undeadness collide with and corrupt one another to author an entirely new breed of zombie.

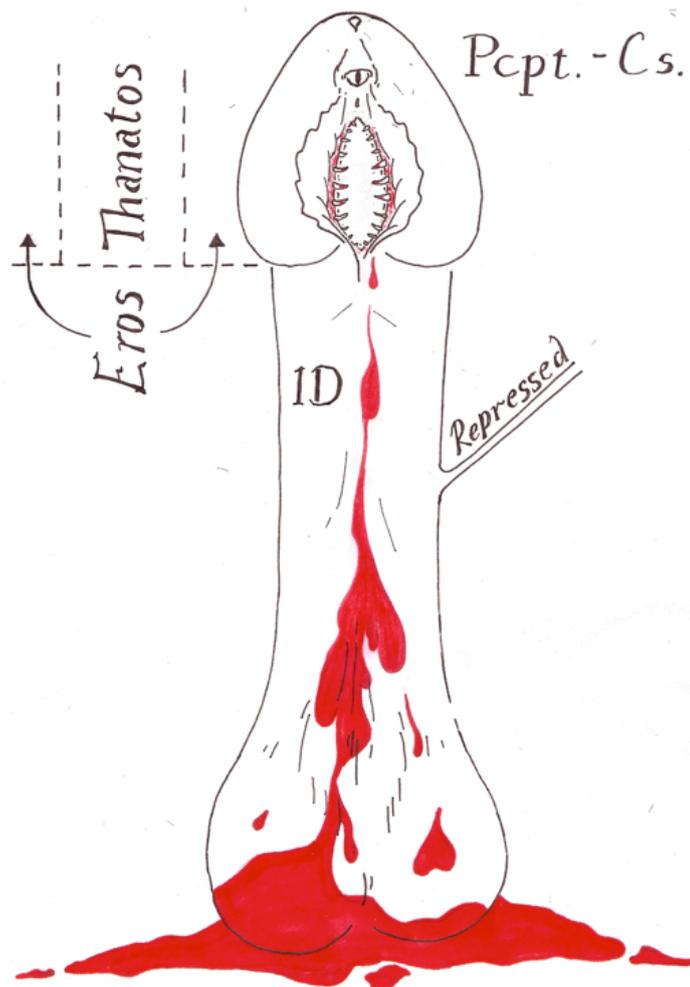


Image 2

## The Zombie as Lost Object

The undead alliance of Eros and Thanatos allows us to understand the zombie as a fictitious extrapolation of the return of the repressed. But the zombie is also the return of that which has died, and we should not casually conflate repression and death. So far I have explored undeadliness as a means of overcoming repression, but not as a means of overcoming death itself. It is necessary to remember that the zombie is fundamentally a deceased body, and yet it continues to assert its presence on the living. To explore this in more detail I will consult a text that resides within a phase of Freudian thinking that pre-dates the conception of Eros and Thanatos.

Freud understands melancholia as a very particular response to loss. This condition is typified by the ego's refusal to give up its yearning for an object, even though that object is no longer available. The object here is understood as anyone or anything with which the individual in question has formed a strong relationship. Freud claims that the attachment the ego makes to its object is facilitated by the libido. This can be understood as a feeler stretching out from the ego into the external world that allows the individual to form loving and emotional bonds with other people. If the object becomes unavailable, the ego gradually detaches its libidinal connection to it through a process of mourning, and eventually learns to form connections with other objects instead. However, in cases of melancholia, the ego is smitten with the absent object to the point where it cannot bear to separate itself from what it has lost. The bereft ego thus performs a very particular manoeuvre.

The free libido was not displaced onto another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego.<sup>70</sup>

And so a trace of the lost object emerges within the ego through a process of identification. Freud's use of the word "shadow" reminds us that this is an echo or an outline – an insufficient and incomplete psychical image – of that which has been lost.

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<sup>70</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, in: Peter Gay (ed.), *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage Books, 1995) p.586

This remnant exists precisely because the ego wilfully incorporates it. The presence of this shadow splinters the ego's coherence as it attempts to contend with the internalised presence of an external absence. The lost object might be an idea, a principle or an estranged partner, but it typically describes a person who has died. In cases of the latter example, melancholia becomes a blooming identification with the deceased in which the "shadow" of death erupts within the living ego.

If we apply this to Romero's undead fiction, to what extent can the zombie be understood as an articulation of the melancholically introjected lost object – as the emergence of death's spectre within life? The first point to make is that there is nothing spectral, ghostly, immaterial or otherworldly about the zombie. It is a resolutely material presence – an active corpse, devoid of human consciousness, that nevertheless insists on rising from its own grave and walking around. In this sense the zombie might resemble the shadow of the lost object on account of its paradoxical and preposterous liminality. The zombie is a perverse echo of the person it used to be; it is a horrifically incomplete and hollowed out rendition of life. It superficially looks like the living person, but it no longer *is* that person.<sup>71</sup> So in this sense undeadliness can initially be understood as the shadowy return of the lost object in that it is a radically flawed and traumatising presence of that which has died.

### **Melancholic Introjection**

But we now encounter the problem of introjection that is so important to the melancholic model. If the zombie is indeed the shadow of the lost object, how could we then understand it as having been internalised by the living individual through a process of identification? This is the move that would have to take place in order for the zombie to conform to the Freudian model of melancholia. The living human body and the undead corpse would need to be understood as mutual constituents of a single melancholic identity, whereas in fact Romero presents the zombie as being very much a separate body that is independent from, and indeed hostile towards, the living

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<sup>71</sup> For a discussion of the zombie in relation to conceptions of the self understood through the body, please consult: William S. Larkin, *Res Corporealis: Persons, Bodies and Zombies*, in: Richard Green and K. Silem Mohammed (eds.) *The Undead and Philosophy*, (Illinois: Carus Publishing Company, 2006)

individual. There are countless scenes in Romero's film in which the living stare on in disbelief as the undead hoard draws ever closer. The humans affect their escape by smashing their way through the bloody throng, or else they succumb to the zombie's rapacious appetite for flesh. Either way, there is no integration or coalescence of the zombie within the living human. We could counter this by claiming that the zombie bite injects the undead contagion into the living human body. So that which was external to the living body now becomes internalised in the form of a virus. But this still does not fit the model of melancholic introjection because the presence of the contagion is dependent on an external hostile act as opposed to a process of identification carried out by the individual. Despite the undead contagion breaching the integrity of the human body, it still hails from an aggressive undead agency without. To put this in Freudian terms, the human ego in Romero's films (the living body) is still very much separated from the shadow of the lost object (the undead body), and so we cannot yet claim that the zombie is equal to the psychical incorporation of death within life. We can claim that the zombie is an uncanny *presence* of death within life, but we still have some work to do before we can assert that this presence is beholden to a process of melancholic identification. For this formulation to work, the external antagonism of the zombie itself would need to be in some way introjected by the living ego. To address this I will consider the particularities of Romero's films in more detail.

In *Night of the Living Dead*, a group of humans are trapped inside a farmhouse whilst a growing number of zombies gather outside. Barbara, who sees her brother being attacked by a zombie at the beginning of the film, is rendered hysterical. She is semi-comatose, her body is rigid and she stares at the other humans with wide unblinking eyes. She utters guttural noises and appears to have lost the faculty to think rationally for herself. Her behaviour starts to echo that of the mindless corpses gathering outside. If we also consider again the last sequences of this film, Ben is shot because the sheriff's men mistake him for a zombie as he cautiously approaches the farmhouse window. So Romero initially invites us to see a trace of the zombie's unthinking inertia in Barbara's hysterical behaviour, and then uses the execution of Ben to suggest that the perceived differences between the living and the undead have temporarily collapsed. Barbara assimilates undead qualities into her own identity,

whilst Ben is actually *identified as* a zombie by other human beings. Characteristics of undeadliness start to constitute and contextualise the identities of the living.

Romero accentuates this in *Dawn of the Dead*. Once Fran, Stephen and Peter have cleared the mall of zombies they have nothing else to do. They start to wander around listlessly and perform futile tasks devoid of meaning. Everything has lost its value, and the dollar bills blowing around in the bank are nothing more than worthless pieces of paper. The mall itself becomes a lifeless shell – a kernel peppered with worthless tat – that has been utterly stripped of its function and its interior logic. The characters stare vacantly into empty space for an indeterminate amount of time. These passages echo earlier sequences in the film in which the zombies toy mindlessly with various consumer trinkets as they stumble purposelessly beneath the harsh neon light. Their undead eyes flit from one object to the next with prevailing indifference. Romero intersperses these shots with images of the shopping mall mannequins, whose plastic features echo the gormless countenance of undeadliness.

In one particular scene, a heavily made-up Fran gazes listlessly at her own reflection. Her numb and dispassionate features appear to be no different from the images of hollowed out mannequins and undead corpses that surround her – grotesque imitations of the human body with no interior psychical life (image 3).



Image 3

Romero explicitly portrays the humans in the mall as an echo of the zombies who occupied it previously. The humans internalise undead behaviour to the point where we could claim that a process of identification is taking place – the living start to emulate undeadliness within the rubric of their own identities. It is now possible to claim that these characters in Romero’s films do indeed introject the shadow of the lost of object through a process of melancholic identification. They constitute their own sense of selves through an internalisation of the dead.

### **An Ego at War with Itself**

By melancholically identifying with the zombies, the human characters become increasingly de-motivated and unconcerned about their own particular existences. This exposes them to danger. The only human survivors are those who refuse to assimilate undead indifference and maintain a wilful desire to affirm their own individual human lives.

This can be seen at the end of *Dawn of the Dead*. Fran actively plans her escape, and climbs up to the roof in order to pilot the waiting helicopter. However, Peter remains in the storeroom, having resolved to shoot himself. As the zombies draw ever closer he stares on coldly, neither escaping nor pulling the trigger (image 4). His indifference and inertia almost deliver him into the hands of the zombies. Only at the last moment does he spring into action and save himself.



Image 4

This scene in particular demonstrates the notion of self-reproach that Freud claims is an important part of melancholia.

The self-tormenting in melancholia which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies... a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned around upon the subject's own self.<sup>72</sup>

Idealised love is mirrored by strong feelings of hate precisely because the ego is rendered exposed and vulnerable by the intense intimacy of its libidinal connection to its object. In cases of melancholia the ego feels acutely abandoned by the object and directs a ferocious fury against it. But as soon as it incorporates the lost object, the ego's ambivalent feelings are channelled inwards.

This is graphically demonstrated when Peter turns his gun on himself. His zombie-hatred re-constitutes as self-hatred, and the bullet once destined for an undead brain is aimed at his own brain instead. His is a splintered ego at war with itself, propelled towards self-destruction by a melancholic identification with the dead. Freud says that it is precisely this "tendency towards suicide which makes melancholia so interesting – and so dangerous."<sup>73</sup> This logic is played out by Peter, whose ego is perilously at odds with its own introjection of the lost object. Only a sudden assertion of his own will to live saves him from himself.

Roger and Stephen, however, do not survive their identification with the lost object. Just before their respective deaths they become hysterically gung-ho. Their strategy of cautious and intelligent self-preservation is replaced by a giggling and dumb machismo. They mete out a casual and indiscriminate violence that starts to reflect the zombies' mindless and voracious marauding. Their reckless rampaging puts them in harm's way until the zombie throng eventually closes in and delivers its fatal bite. Roger and Stephen identify not with undead inertia and indifference (like Peter) but with the zombie's overarching appetite for violence at the expense of self-preservation. This internalisation of undeadliness effectively prompts Roger and

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<sup>72</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, in: Peter Gay (ed.), *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage Books, 1995) p.588

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Stephen to fatally jeopardise themselves in a hysterical blaze of melancholic self-reproach.

### **Undead Melancholia**

Freud goes on to claim that the melancholic's introjection of that which has been lost is a regressive rejection of external object choices. Instead the ego satisfies its libido through the process of oral incorporation.

The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development... ..it wants to do so by devouring it.<sup>74</sup>

So Freud says that the melancholic ego internalises the lost object through a symbolic process of oral incorporation. But crucially, within Freudian melancholia identification and oral incorporation are played out simultaneously by the ego's introjection of the lost object. If we map this understanding of melancholia onto the zombie an important incompatibility emerges.

I have already discussed how certain human characters start to identify with undeadness in Romero's films. This identification leads to an ineffective listlessness or a violent thoughtlessness that makes them increasingly unable to repel the undead advance. The zombies then draw closer and closer until a bloody feeding frenzy ensues. But this now jars with Freud's account of melancholia; in Romero's films it is clearly the lost object itself – the zombie and its appetite for human flesh – that stages the act of oral incorporation. The individual is consumed by the undeadness that he/she identifies with, thereby reversing the conventional process of melancholic introjection. Whilst Freudian melancholia dictates that the ego's identification with death is staged through the symbolic incorporation of the lost object, Romero presents a much more literal act of incorporation in which the ego itself is devoured by its own lost object. Zombie fiction thus authors a new psychoanalytical text – undead

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p.587

melancholia – that stages the ego’s identification *with* the lost object, and its reversed oral incorporation *by* the lost object, as two different events.

There is still another crucial difference between Freudian melancholia and undead melancholia. For Freud, the melancholic’s internalisation of death proliferates in an odyssey of self-reproach (as discussed earlier). The living ego battles with the introjected shadow of the lost object until it destroys itself completely. This is the trajectory towards suicide that Freud recognises in melancholia. If the living human being in Romero’s films is completely incorporated by the zombie then he or she is indeed devoured out of existence. There is nothing left save for a steaming pile of bones. But this does not take into account one of the most enduring facets of Romero’s fiction. Those living humans that are bitten or only partially devoured become zombies themselves. They survive the total annihilation that their melancholia propels them towards. Freud’s melancholic either suffers life or surrenders to death, whereas the undead melancholic inhabits a fictitious liminality strung out between the two.

A Freudian treatment of Romero’s zombie therefore facilitates the formulation of a new psychoanalytical subject – the undead melancholic – who lives through the coalescence with death that she craves so ardently. This theory clearly transgresses Freudian vocabulary and moves into the realm of a psychoanalytic fiction. Within this new conceit the undead melancholic can choose death without completely letting go of life. She is delivered from the burden of mortal existence without succumbing to total annihilation; life *and* death are overcome.

This reading allows zombie fiction to be understood as a phantasy in which the melancholic is able to survive death. It sets up undeadliness as an idealised melancholic subject position – albeit a subject position that that we, as viewers, know to be impossible except within zombie fiction. Within this conceit, however, the melancholic *wants* to be bitten in order to escape the privations of life. Undead melancholia becomes a libidinal alternative to suicide.

A new and un-chartered trajectory for undead fiction is emerging here, but before this burgeoning story can be mapped out there is still a significant problem to be

overcome. My claim that the undead melancholic is able to inhabit death does not yet take into account the fact that there is no conscious residue of the person left within the undead corpse. The body might continue to exist, but there is no sense in which individual human identity and consciousness can survive within undeathliness.

Romero does suggest that the zombie retains a residue of basic memory or habitual behaviour. In *Dawn of the Dead* Stephen claims that the undead swarm to the mall precisely because that is how they behaved when they were still alive. Once Stephen himself becomes a zombie at the end of the film he is able to lead the other zombies to the human hideout. This unconscious retention preserves a trace of the person that the zombie used to be, but does not amount to a continuation of conscious self-reflexivity. Romero is always quick to remind us that any appeal made to the zombie's better nature falls on dead ears; the undead corpse will unflinchingly bite into the flesh of its closest friends and relatives without reflection or regret.

So choosing to become a zombie would still amount to an act of suicide on a conscious level because the victim would have no awareness of her newly acquired undead subject position. The undead melancholic can only exist as an unconscious, hollowed out and abjectly destitute rendition of her former self. More work needs to be done before my conception of undead melancholia can be understood as a phantasy – an idealised fiction – of life that *knowingly* survives the reunion it craves with death.

### **An Undeadly Dissent**

At the beginning of this chapter I discussed how undeathliness forges a particular union between Eros and Thanatos that goes beyond a Freudian articulation of the instincts. I then explored how the conceit of Romero's fiction authors a formulation of undead melancholia that transgresses the theoretical integrity of Freud's original text. As I have already claimed, these two sections reference Freudian typologies that hail from different points in his career. This is a strategic decision on my behalf because in Chapter Two I will claim that these two differing psychoanalytical accounts of the zombie can function in cahoots with one another to author a new formulation of undeathliness. But I acknowledge that whilst Freud himself used one set of terms to

revise and replace the other, I am using these two opposing registers of theoretical vocabulary concurrently.

Both the undead pleasure principle and undead melancholia set up undeadliness as a defiant refusal of the psychical limitations and privations placed upon the living individual. The alliance of Eros and Thanatos rejects the ubiquitous regime of civilised repression by resurrecting the undead pleasure principle; undead melancholia allows the subject to pursue and finalise a libidinal attachment to the lost object *within* death without succumbing to total self-annihilation. In both these cases a close psychoanalytical study of the liminality of undeadliness reveals a moment of critical transgression. Psychoanalysis has allowed us to fathom readings of the undead corpse that are antithetical to its surface presentation and to psychoanalysis itself.

The zombie starts to articulate a particular yearning to go *beyond* the constraints of the mortal body – to push through the perceived privations of life – without capitulating to notions of transcendent divinity on one hand or emancipatory suicide on the other. And from this position of animated death/inert life the zombie refuses to accept that which must be so; it cries out for what the viewer knows to be impossible outside the conceit of undeadliness. The rank and petrified husk of Romero's undead corpse nurtures a kernel of yearning that rejects the hegemonic dichotomy of life and death, and demands life *within* death (and death *within* life) instead. When filtered through psychoanalysis, the zombie's gurgled groaning starts to bear the harmonic strains of a fictitious idealism. The undead cacophony becomes a perpetual and protesting dirge that refuses to be cadenced.

But this song remains trapped and encased within a crude and vile body that cannot conceive of its own exception. As such, the surface presentation of the zombie's liminality remains a desperate and unthinking purgatory, rather than a wilful and affirmative inhabitation of an idealised subject position. How might undead fiction be modified so that the basely indifferent and diabolically transgressive zombie starts to read as an idealistic phantasy of dissent and refusal? Can the zombie evolve to embody and articulate the impossible yearnings that remain hidden beneath its senseless wailing? What would undeadliness look like if it were to shift from being a horrific apparition of walking death, to an idealistic evocation of the melancholic

desire to be released from the frustrations of mortal existence without succumbing to complete annihilation?

## CHAPTER TWO

### Phantasy and the Non-Repressive Reality Principle

In the previous chapter I explored how Freud understands the reality principle as the condition under which the pleasure-seeking instincts are banished from conscious life so that the authoritative coercions of civilisation might function effectively. Freud can only recognise the sexual and destructive drives as vile impulses that would push civilised humans towards a state of diabolical nature; as such, he says, they must be repressed at all costs. The return of the repressed is the ghost in the machine – the operational glitch – that interrupts civilisation’s attempts to eradicate the pleasure principle exhaustively. Civilisation subsequently exists in a perpetual state of hostile negotiation with the unconscious instinctual forces it created through its own project of repression.

In *Eros and Civilisation*, Herbert Marcuse draws attention to the fact that the repressive coercion of the pleasure principle is never exhausted; there is no definitive resolution to the schism between civilisation and the instincts. But whilst Freud understands this tension as the inherent product of the human struggle to survive cohesively as a society, Marcuse suggests that the struggle between civilisation and the instincts is a contingent product of the historical processes that have moulded it. He challenges the Freudian assertion that “another form of civilisation under another reality principle is impossible”,<sup>75</sup> and claims that Freud misrecognises “a specific historical *form* of civilisation as the *nature* of civilisation.”<sup>76</sup> Instead Marcuse – writing in the mid-1950s – proposes that the current status quo is not an inevitable, essential and timeless reality, but a particular point on a spectrum of progress that has the potential to move *beyond* the ostensible ubiquity of the repressive reality principle.

Marcuse speculates as to how the instincts might have a relationship with civilisation that exceeds the Freudian model. He takes as his starting point Freud’s own claim that

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<sup>75</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation; A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge, 1998) p.147

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

a small portion of instinctual activity, in the form of phantasy, is able to escape the mechanisms of repression and manifest consciously within civilisation:

Freud singles out phantasy as one mental activity that retains a high degree of freedom from the reality principle even in the sphere of developed consciousness.<sup>77</sup>

Phantasy – the mental play of imagination – bubbles up into conscious life without passing through the ‘cooling’ strata of the reality principle. It is pure pleasure made conscious – an instinctual eruption on the hardened crust of repressive reality. This register of mental activity is indifferent to necessity, pragmatism, obligation and coercion. But, unlike the return of the repressed, phantasy is not a hostile overflow of pent-up instinctual forces that manifest as an antagonistic counterpoint to civilisation. It is instead a vent that allows a harmless portion of pleasure to flow freely *within* civilisation without disturbing the fundamental integrity of the reality principle. When harnessed within specific fields of creative endeavour, phantasy serves civilisation under the banner of the arts. Otherwise, this imaginative frolicking can be understood as an end in itself, devoid of a rational function, that is committed to pleasure for pleasure’s sake alone. Disembodied from the social, it is a ‘useless’ mental act – a puff of intangible dreaminess that escapes the grinding mechanisms of repression without interfering with the instinctual austerity of civilisation. But then Marcuse makes an important manoeuvre.

In its refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle, in its refusal to forget what can be, lies the critical function of phantasy.<sup>78</sup>

Marcuse claims that precisely because phantasy does not consent to the reparations of repressive civilisation, it is critical of the status quo espoused by the reality principle. Phantasy holds on to the prospect that the instincts might yet be freed – a prospect sustained by an archaic memory of a time prior to their subjugation. The instincts have not *always* been culled by civilisation; it is only the current *form* of civilisation

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p.140

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p.149

that denies them access to the conscious strata of human mental life. Even though phantasy is *unrealistic* according to the logic of the reality principle, it nonetheless dreams of a different reality altogether in which the instincts are not curtailed. Phantasy contains a seed of dissent – a “protest against unnecessary repression”<sup>79</sup> – that refuses the ubiquity of the reality principle, and insists instead upon a new organisation between the instincts and civilisation. The transient, immaterial and groundless nature of the imagination – the very quality that made phantasy harmless to the function of the reality principle – suddenly opens up a space *beyond* the reality principle that becomes, in itself, a *real* proposition. It is phantasy alone that sustains the “Great Refusal”<sup>80</sup> – the dogged determination to not coalesce completely to the existing status quo. This refusal spurs humans on in their efforts to conceive of a reality counter to the one in which they currently exist. Marcuse calls this the “revolutionary implications of Freud’s discoveries”,<sup>81</sup> stating that the transformative potential suggested by phantasy is not a utopian proposition but a *real* political possibility – “a new reality principle.”<sup>82</sup>

If Marcuse understands phantasy as the first step towards the articulation of an alternative political reality, then it is important to remember at this point that phantasy is itself a conscious manifestation of the pleasure principle within civilisation. Furthermore, if the pleasure principle describes the conditions under which the instincts can pursue their aims freely, Marcuse’s vision of a new reality principle is founded on the release of the very instinctual drives that civilisation sought to subjugate. The freeing of the instincts – the one manoeuvre that repressive civilisation must prohibit – acquires a revolutionary potential that opens up the possibility of a non-repressive reality.

### **The Conscious Zombie**

In Chapter One, I set up the idea of the undead pleasure principle as a fictional hybrid that straddles psychoanalysis and undeadliness. A reading of Marcuse allows us to

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p.150

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p.149

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p.197

start developing this fiction; we can now claim that the instinctual urges that drive the undead corpse on its diabolical odyssey of chaotic erotic destruction contain the seed of an organised instinctual insurgency. Beneath the undead husk of the zombie lies a kernel of revolutionary fervour. Undeadliness need no longer be antagonistic to the social order; it contains within itself – within its own instinctual drives – the blueprint for a new and emancipated relationship between the zombie and civilisation. I will explore the details of a non-repressive zombie reality principle presently. But I want to draw attention to one particular Marcusean claim that has massive implications for the fiction of undeadliness.

In Marcuse's vision of a non-repressive reality principle, "the unreasonable images of freedom become rational, and the 'lower depth' of instinctual gratification assumes a new dignity."<sup>83</sup> He claims that the unconscious barbarism of the instincts that haunted *repressive* civilisation is re-formatted as a galvanising and organised force within the conscious strata of a *free* civilisation. The previously "destructive and 'savage' forms"<sup>84</sup> of unchecked sensuousness would acquire "a new rationality"<sup>85</sup> when released from the grips of repression. In short, that which was previously phantastical becomes tenable, and the repressed and savage unconscious assumes an emancipated and dignified consciousness.

What would be the implications to the unthinking and derelict zombie figure if its base and repugnant urges were to be reconstituted as conscious drives? Is it possible to understand the zombie's mindless and indiscriminate hankering for flesh – its repressed instinctual urges – as the bedrock of a new undead civility? If the undead pleasure principle in my first chapter was a fictional collision between Freud and Romero, how does the introduction of Marcuse into this mash-up allow us to rewrite the fiction of the zombie?

Marcuse's efforts to recognise in the instincts a capacity for conscious rationality allows us to conceive of a measure of self-awareness within the fictional figure of undeadliness. However, this would initially appear to be an oxymoron when so much

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p.160

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p.187

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p.198

of Romero's work establishes the zombie as a body without cognition and consciousness. But Romero himself lays the foundations of the conscious zombie in *Day of the Dead*. He depicts a zombie called Bub who has been singled out by the unhinged and unethical Dr Logan for a series of experiments. Deep in an underground military bunker, Dr Logan demonstrates that Bub retains certain memory traces from his previous life. As Bub successfully interacts with and negotiates the objects placed in front of him, Logan coos like a proud mother and Bub himself gurgles with pleasure. Under Logan's supervision, Bub picks up a gun and points it in a manner that demonstrates an understanding of its function (image 5).



Image 5

This is in direct contrast to previous Romero films in which we see zombies limply clinging on to rifles with complete indifference to their utility. At the end of *Dawn of the Dead* for example, the wounded Stephen attempts to effect his getaway by climbing out the top of an elevator, but he is attacked and bitten by the marauding undead mob before he is able to escape. Stephen still manages to expel the zombies from the elevator before he dies, and this of course means that instead of being devoured out of existence, he will himself turn into a zombie. Meanwhile a hoard of undead corpses is gathering outside, and one of them inadvertently presses the button that summons the elevator. The doors slide open to reveal a bloodied and newly undead Stephen. Indifferent as they are to their own kind, the other zombies immediately turn away and stumble off in their never-ending pursuit of human flesh.

The pistol that Stephen had been clutching with violent intent now dangles limply from his finger. The weapon of repression – the instrument that keeps the undead pleasure principle at bay throughout Romero’s films – is rendered impotent in the hands of the repressed (image 6).



Image 6

Bub, however, has a very different relationship with the gun. The soldiers in the underground bunker eventually murder Logan for experimenting on one of their own company. On witnessing this brutal slaying Bub is visibly devastated, and breaks free from his chains. As the zombies above ground spill into the bunker to wreak their bloody chaos, Bub closes in on the soldier who murdered Logan. Crucially, Bub battles with him using a gun that he finds discarded on the floor. Bub is no longer interested in eating the soldier in order to satisfy his erotic urge for flesh; he shoots him instead. This is a pure revenge killing, evidenced by Bub’s display of steely satisfaction once he has destroyed his nemesis. The rest of the zombies close in on the floundering soldier, and plunge their hands deep into his abdomen before ripping him in two. Bub salutes sarcastically, turns away and shuffles off down the corridor.

Bub clearly grieves for Dr Logan and is motivated to avenge his death; his mindless appetite for flesh is thus superseded by other more complex demonstrations of interiority. So this is the first time that Romero presents us with an evolving zombie that is able to make conscious decisions that mitigate and modify its unconscious

instinctual urges. However, at this point in the trajectory of the zombie (r)evolution, an alternative reality principle does not emerge through Bub's actions. Whilst his act of defiant revenge is a self-aware rejection of authority, his gesture can only mimic the gun-toting aggression of repressive civilisation. His dissent amounts to a watershed manifestation of undead consciousness, but this does not yet constitute a new reality principle that might author a non-repressive relationship between civilisation and the instincts.

### **The Undead (R)evolution**

In *Land of the Dead* Romero introduces another zombie that displays a degree of self-awareness. This particular zombie was a garage attendant when he was still alive, and the name Big Daddy is sewn into his work overalls. He now shuffles around the forecourt performing a set of impotent and non-functioning tasks that mimic his old work routine. However, Big Daddy is visibly distressed when he witnesses the slaughtering of his undead brethren at the hands of a group of pillaging humans. Big Daddy remembers the vehicle used for these brutal forays, and the next time it drives through his town he attempts to warn his fellow zombies to take cover. When he fails to save them he is incensed, and throws his face skywards as a guttural moan escapes his decaying lips. We then see him starting to organise his fellow zombies. He gathers them into an ever-growing group until he has assembled a vast army that is ready to march on the one surviving human conurbation. His army closes in on the city with unswerving determination, apparently galvanised by the collective desire to be rid of the human murder squads that have been destroying their kind indiscriminately. Big Daddy's mob can start to be recognised as the victims of a highly oppressive regime; they become the instinctual revolutionaries marching to overthrow the seat of repressive power. They learn how to use weapons, they display compassion towards one another, they develop a cunning strategy to invade the city and above all they start to share a common political goal. Zombies are no longer indifferent to each other; they have become a conscious and self-aware collective who operate communally in order to affect the demise of repressive civilisation.

As Big Daddy leads his undead comrades into battle he picks up a discarded machine gun. He notices that the human soldiers have an advantage because of their weaponry, but quickly works out how to use the gun himself. He then hands it to a young cheerleader zombie, and together they dispatch a prostrate soldier with a torrent of bullets (image 7). The two zombies work in cahoots with one another, and for the first time we witness the undead using firepower not as a means of personal retribution, as in Bub's case, but as a tool that aids their collective emancipatory revolution.



Image 7

Sure enough, Big Daddy's army brings about the downfall of the capitalist organisation that controls the human city. In the aftermath of the zombie onslaught, the main human protagonist and Big Daddy gaze at each other from a distance. Instead of closing down on the surviving humans, Big Daddy keeps his distance and then leads his undead entourage off into the night. Romero implies that the zombies' appetite for flesh has been superseded by a newfound desire to exist peacefully as a coherent and self-contained community that is free from the tyranny of the repressive reality principle. So we can now say that the undead pleasure principle has not only found its way into conscious existence, it has spearheaded a violent overthrowing of the repressive regime under which it suffered. This trajectory is both evolutionary *and* revolutionary, hence the title of this section: The Undead (R)evolution. After their inevitably bloody insurrection destroys the subjugating order, the zombies appear to be organising themselves peacefully in a new order of their own. A Marcusean

reading of these scenes would assert that whilst civilised *human* life is forever fraught with conflict and aggression, undeadliness has the potential to foster a non-repressive reality principle in which the released instincts propagate within a new civil order. But Romero's narrative ends at this point, and in his subsequent films he takes us back to the beginning of the zombie outbreak, so we are denied the opportunity of seeing Big Daddy pioneer an emancipated existence for the undead pleasure principle.

If we could, however, imagine a fictional follow-up to *Land of the Dead* in which the zombie revolution has taken hold, what would a non-repressive civilisation built on the undead pleasure principle look like? How might the unchained Eros and Thanatos be the bedrock of an emancipated undeadliness? Following the trajectory set out by Romero in *Land of the Dead*, the subsequent sub-section of writing is an attempt to write undeadliness directly *into* Marcusean political philosophy in order to author a fiction of non-repressive zombie civilisation. I cite Marcuse directly, but modify his quotes with a zombieified vocabulary in order to formulate a philosophical claim for the emancipation of undeadliness. These modified quotes constitute the main body of text in the following section of writing, whilst the footnotes contain the original corresponding quotes from Marcuse.

### **Zombies and Civilisation**

The vision of a non-repressive culture aims at a new relation between zombies and reason.<sup>86</sup> Liberated from the tyranny of repression, the undead instincts tend toward free and lasting existential relations – they generate a new reality principle.<sup>87</sup> This notion of an undead instinctual order must first be tested on the most disorderly of all instincts – namely, sexuality.<sup>88</sup> A non-repressive order is possible only if zombies can, by virtue of their own dynamic and under changed existential and societal conditions, generate lasting erotic relations among themselves and their living counterparts. We

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<sup>86</sup> The vision of a non-repressive culture, which we have lifted from a marginal trend in mythology and philosophy, aims at a new relation between instincts and reason. (Ibid. p.197)

<sup>87</sup> ...liberated from the tyranny of repressive reason, the instincts tend toward free and lasting existential relations – they generate a new reality principle. (Ibid.)

<sup>88</sup> The notion of a non-repressive instinctual order must first be tested on the most “disorderly” of all instincts – namely, sexuality. (ibid. p.199)

have to ask whether the erotic drive of undeadliness – the compulsion to consume flesh – after the elimination of all surplus repression, can develop a libidinal rationality which is not only compatible with but even promotes progress toward higher forms of civilised freedom.<sup>89</sup> As we have previously noted, the entire human body is re-sexualised when the undead pleasure principle erupts within civilised life. The zombie's pursuit of erotic gratification through the ingestion of human flesh does not discriminate between body parts. The spread of the undead libido manifests itself in an undead appetite for all erotogenic zones and, consequently, in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous feeding. The living human body in its entirety becomes flesh to be enjoyed – a source of oral pleasure for the zombie's orgiastic appetite.<sup>90</sup>

These prospects seem to confirm the expectation that instinctual liberation can only lead to a society of undead sex maniacs – that is, to no society. However, the emergence of the *civilised* undead pleasure principle involves not simply a release but a transformation of the libido.<sup>91</sup> This free development of the transformed libido would *minimize* the violent manifestations of the zombie's crude sexual appetite by integrating it into a larger<sup>92</sup> libidinal rationality which promotes progress toward higher forms of civilised freedom for both humans and zombies.<sup>93</sup> In this context, undeadliness tends to its own sublimation: its libido would not simply reactivate the human body as a site of erotic gorging, but would also transform the perverted content of its instinctual craving for living human flesh.<sup>94</sup> Libido can take the road of self-

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<sup>89</sup> Non-repressive order is possible only if the sex instincts can, by virtue of their own dynamic and under changed existential and societal conditions, generate lasting erotic relations among mature individuals. We have to ask whether the sex instincts, after the elimination of all surplus repression, can develop a libidinal rationality which is not only compatible with but even promotes progress toward higher forms of civilised freedom. (Ibid.)

<sup>90</sup> No longer used as a full-time instrument of labor, the body would be resexualised. ...this spread of the libido would first manifest itself in a reactivation of all erotogenic zones and, consequently, in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and a decline in genital supremacy. The body in its entirety would become... a thing to be enjoyed – an instrument of pleasure. (Ibid. p.201)

<sup>91</sup> These prospects seem to confirm the expectation that instinctual liberation can only lead to a society of sex maniacs – that is, to no society. However, the process just outlined involves not simply a release but a transformation of the libido: from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy to eroticisation of the entire personality. (Ibid.)

<sup>92</sup> ...the free development of transformed libido... would *minimize* the manifestations of *mere* sexuality by integrating them into a far larger order, including the order of work. (Ibid. p.202)

<sup>93</sup> We have to ask whether the sex instincts, after the elimination of all surplus repression, can develop a libidinal rationality which is not only compatible with but even promotes progress toward higher forms of civilised freedom. (Ibid. p.199)

<sup>94</sup> In this context, sexuality tends to its own sublimation: the libido would not simply reactivate precivilized and infantile stages, but would also transform the perverted content of these stages. (Ibid. p. 202)

sublimation only as a social phenomenon: it can promote the formation of a non-repressive civilisation only by uniting constellations of humans and zombies<sup>95</sup> within a system of expanding and enduring libidinal relations.<sup>96</sup> In light of this revolutionary idea of non-repressive sublimation,<sup>97</sup> the Erotic zombie now strives to form undead substance into ever-greater unities so that undeadliness may be prolonged and brought to higher development.<sup>98</sup> Undead sublimation thus proceeds in a system of expanding and enduring libidinal relations – prolonged and sustained bouts of feeding – which are in themselves work relations in so far as they sustain the burgeoning zombie order.<sup>99</sup> The zombie’s biological drive to consume flesh at all costs becomes a cultural drive to produce more zombies, thereby engendering the proliferation of unrepressed and sublimated undeadliness.<sup>100</sup>

But is there perhaps in the zombie itself an inner barrier which “contains” its driving power? Is there perhaps a “natural” self-restraint in the undead Eros so that its genuine gratification would call for a delay, detour and arrest of its own appetite for flesh? Then there would be obstructions and limitations imposed not from the outside, by a repressive reality principle, but set and accepted by the zombie itself because they have inherent libidinal value. Unrestrained feeding from the beginning results in lack of full satisfaction;<sup>101</sup> if a human is completely devoured it cannot turn into a zombie. What distinguishes sublimated undead pleasure from the blind satisfaction of want is the zombie’s refusal to exhaust itself in immediate satisfaction – its ability to build up barriers against its own appetite so as to intensify the erotic fulfilment of

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<sup>95</sup> Libido can take the road of self-sublimation only as a social phenomenon: as an unrepressed force, it can promote the formation of culture only under conditions which relate associated individuals to each other in the cultivation of the environment for their developing needs and faculties. (Ibid. pp.209-210)

<sup>96</sup> ...sublimation proceeds in a system of expanding and enduring libidinal relations, which are in themselves work relations. (Ibid. p.212)

<sup>97</sup> ...revolutionises the idea of sublimation. (Ibid. p.169)

<sup>98</sup> In light of the idea of non-repressive sublimation, Freud’s definition of Eros as striving to “form living substance into ever greater unities, so that life may be prolonged and brought to higher development” takes on added significance. (Ibid. p. 212)

<sup>99</sup> ...sublimation proceeds in a system of expanding and enduring libidinal relations, which are in themselves work relations. (Ibid.)

<sup>100</sup> The biological drive becomes a cultural drive. (Ibid.)

<sup>101</sup> But is there perhaps in the instinct itself an inner barrier which “contains” its driving power? Is there perhaps a “natural” self-restraint in Eros so that its genuine gratification would call for delay, detour, and arrest? Then there would be obstructions and limitations imposed not from the outside, by a repressive reality principle, but set and accepted by the instinct itself because they have inherent libidinal value. Freud indeed suggested this notion. He thought that “unrestrained sexual liberty from the beginning” results in lack of full satisfaction. (Ibid. p.226)

creating *more* zombies.<sup>102</sup> The striving for *lasting* gratification makes not only for an enlarged order of libidinal relations (a community built on the undead pleasure principle's extension into consciousness) but also for the perpetuation of this order on a higher scale as the sublimated zombie population swells. The sublimated zombie's reasonable erotic urge to proliferate as an undead and unrepressed civilisation is what sustains the order of gratification.<sup>103</sup> With the transformation from sexuality into Eros, undeadliness evolves into a sensuous order, while reason becomes sensuous to the degree to which it comprehends and organises the consumption of human flesh in terms of protecting and enriching a larger and emancipated zombie community.<sup>104</sup>

The mere fact that the undead erotic urge to bite human flesh is not guided by reciprocity constitutes a source of unavoidable conflict between zombies and humans.<sup>105</sup> How can the road to undead sublimation promote the formation of a non-repressive culture that tends to the developing needs and faculties of living human beings?<sup>106</sup> Put simply, why would the living willingly choose undeadliness?

Prior to the acceptance of the reality principle<sup>107</sup> the human psyche accessed a different, lost reality,<sup>108</sup> formed through identification with the mother and expressed in a castration-wish rather than a castration-threat.<sup>109</sup> At this early stage, reality is not

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<sup>102</sup> What distinguishes pleasure from the blind satisfaction of want is the instinct's refusal to exhaust itself in immediate satisfaction, its ability to build up and use barriers for intensifying fulfilment. (Ibid. p.227)

<sup>103</sup> The striving for *lasting* gratification makes not only for an enlarged order of libidinal relations ("community") but also for the perpetuation of this order on a higher scale. The pleasure principle extends to consciousness. Eros redefines reason in his own terms. Reasonable is what sustains the order of gratification. (Ibid. p.224)

<sup>104</sup> With the transformation from sexuality into Eros, the life instincts evolve their sensuous order, while reason becomes sensuous to the degree to which it comprehends and organises necessity in terms of protecting and enriching the life instincts. (Ibid. p.223)

<sup>105</sup> The mere fact that, in the choice of its objects, the sex instinct is not guided by reciprocity constitutes a source of unavoidable conflict among individuals. (Ibid. p.226)

<sup>106</sup> Libido can take the road of self-sublimation only as a social phenomenon: as an unrepressed force, it can promote the formation of culture only under conditions which relate associated individuals to each other in the cultivation of the environment for their developing needs and faculties. (Ibid. pp.209-210)

<sup>107</sup> He speaks of a pre-genital, pre-historic, pre-oedipal "pseudo-morality prior to the acceptance of the reality principle, and calls the mental representative of this pseudo-morality" the *superid*. The psychical phenomenon which, in the individual, suggests such a pregenital morality is an identification with the mother, expressing itself in a castration-wish rather than a castration-threat. (Ibid. p.228)

<sup>108</sup> ...traces of the "superid" appear as traces of a different, lost reality... (Ibid. p.229)

<sup>109</sup> He speaks of a pre-genital, pre-historic, pre-oedipal "pseudo-morality prior to the acceptance of the reality principle, and calls the mental representative of this pseudo-morality" the *superid*. The psychical phenomenon which, in the individual, suggests such a pregenital morality is an identification with the mother, expressing itself in a castration-wish rather than a castration-threat. (Ibid. p.228)

hostile and alien to the ego, but intimately connected with, originally not even distinguished from it. This reality is experienced in the child's libidinal relation to the mother, before the maturing ego is subsequently divorced from it at the hands of the repressive reality principle. And with this division of the original unity, an urge towards re-establishing the original unity develops: a libidinal flow between infant and mother. At this stage the primary experience of reality is that of a libidinous union<sup>110</sup> to which the ego responds with an attitude of integral identification with the environment. But in the light of the repressive reality principle, the "maternal concept" of reality here emerging is immediately turned into something negative, dreadful. The impulse to establish the lost maternal unity is interpreted as a "threat," namely, the threat of "maternal engulfment" by the overpowering womb. As such, the incest wish to be bitten by a zombie is punished in order to protect the living from being annihilated completely by a union with maternal undeadliness. The question does not arise whether this maternal reality cannot "return" in less devouring forms under the power of the sublimated zombie in a mature undead civilisation.<sup>111</sup>

It is only beyond the repressive reality principle<sup>112</sup> that sublimated undeadliness offers living humans a libidinal union with their social environment – a sensuous maternal engulfment<sup>113</sup> – in which being consumed to the point of becoming undead is an erotic castration-wish rather than a monstrous castration-threat.<sup>114</sup> By *devouring* the condition of repression, the undead womb *delivers* the human, as a newly undead

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<sup>110</sup> ...at this early stage, reality "is not outside, but is contained in the pre-ego of primary narcissism." It is not hostile and alien to the ego, but "intimately connected with, originally not even distinguished from it." This reality is first (and last?) experienced in the child's libidinal relation to the mother – a relation which is at the beginning within the "pre-ego" and only subsequently divorced from it. And with this division of the original unity, an "urge towards re-establishing the original unity" develops: a "libidinal flow between infant and mother." At this primary stage of the relation between "pre-ego" and reality, the Narcissistic and the maternal Eros seem to be one, and the primary experience of reality is that of a libidinous union. (Ibid. pp.229-230)

<sup>111</sup> ...a reality to which the ego responds with an attitude, not of defense and submission, but of integral identification with the "environment." But in the light of the paternal reality principle, the "maternal concept" of reality here emerging is immediately turned into something negative, dreadful. The impulse to establish the lost Narcissistic-maternal unity is interpreted as a "threat," namely, the threat of "maternal engulfment" by the overpowering womb. The hostile father is exonerated and reappears as savior, who, in punishing the incest wish, protects the ego from its annihilation in the mother. The question does not arise whether the Narcissistic-maternal attitude toward reality cannot "return" in less primordial, less devouring forms under the power of the mature ego and in a mature civilisation. (Ibid. p.230)

<sup>112</sup> It is only beyond this repressive reality principle that the "maternal" images of the super ego convey promises than memory traces – images of a free future rather than of a dark past. (Ibid. pp.230-231)

<sup>113</sup> But in the light of the paternal reality principle, the "maternal concept" of reality here emerging is immediately turned into something negative, dreadful. (Ibid. p.230)

<sup>114</sup> ...a castration-wish rather than a castration-threat. (Ibid. p.228)

body, into a newly emancipated reality. The prospect of being bitten by and then becoming a sublimated zombie within undead civilisation conveys to the living the promise of a free future.<sup>115</sup>

For living humans, the brute fact of death denies the reality of a non-repressive existence. Death is the final negativity of time, but joy wants eternity. The zombie, however, suspends death by slowly decaying *within* joyful undeadliness.

Timelessness is the ideal of pleasure, and the liminality opened up by becoming a zombie creates a libidinal intermission between life and death.<sup>116</sup> The death instinct operates under the Nirvana principle: it tends towards that state of “constant gratification” where no tension is felt – a state without want.<sup>117</sup> If the instinct’s basic objective is not the termination of life but of pain – the absence of tension – then the conflict between life and death is the more reduced as the pleasure principle and Nirvana principle then converge in a state of sublimated undeadliness.<sup>118</sup> As the suffering and want of repressive civilisation recede, the Nirvana principle may become reconciled with the undead reality principle. Thanatos – as the instinct to draw back to an earlier state – would be effectively sated by the drawn out process of entropy attained by undeadly decay.<sup>119</sup> The finality of death itself, whilst remaining a fact, would cease to be an instinctual goal for the sublimated zombie.<sup>120</sup>

The zombie’s second and final demise can become a token of freedom. The necessity of death does not refute the possibility of it being experienced as a final liberation. It is made rational and painless by the passage of undeadliness that precedes it.

Sublimated zombies can die their second death without anxiety if they know that what they love – a proliferating undead civilisation – is protected from misery and oblivion.

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<sup>115</sup> It is only beyond this repressive reality principle that the “maternal” images of the super ego convey promises than memory traces – images of a free future rather than of a dark past. (Ibid. pp.230-231)

<sup>116</sup> The brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of a non-repressive existence. For death is the final negativity of time, but “joy wants eternity.” Timelessness is the ideal of pleasure. (Ibid. p.231)

<sup>117</sup> The death instinct operates under the Nirvana principle: it tends towards that state of “constant gratification” where no tension is felt – a state without want. (Ibid. p.234)

<sup>118</sup> If the instinct’s basic objective is not the termination of life but of pain – the absence of tension – then paradoxically, in terms of the instinct, the conflict between life and death is the more reduced, the closer life approximates the state of gratification. Pleasure principle and Nirvana principle then converge. (Ibid. pp.234-235)

<sup>119</sup> As suffering and want recede, the Nirvana principle may become reconciled with the reality principle. The unconscious attraction that draws the instincts back to an “earlier state” would be effectively counteracted by the desirability of the attained state of life. (Ibid. p.235)

<sup>120</sup> Death would cease to be an instinctual goal. It remains a fact, perhaps even an ultimate necessity... (Ibid.)

After a fulfilling entropic demise, they may take it upon themselves to crumble into nothingness at a moment of their own choosing, satisfied in the knowledge that they have contributed towards, and are survived by, an emancipated civil undeadliness.<sup>121</sup>

### The Kiss of the Dead

From this experiment we can claim that Marcuse's theory of revolutionary sublimation, when exposed to the conceit of undeadliness, allows us to draft a new trajectory for zombie fiction that stretches beyond that imagined by Romero. If the zombie, as an embodiment of an undead union between Eros and Thanatos, is subjected to the same process of sublimation that Marcuse applies to the instincts, a transformed rendition of undeadliness can be postulated. I will summarise the key manoeuvres of this transformation. For Marcuse, liberated sexuality becomes reunited with the pure version of Eros – the instinct to “combine organic substances into ever larger unities.”<sup>122</sup> The task of building and maintaining a free civilisation becomes erotic and therefore instinctually gratifying in its own right. It is now possible to formulate a new fiction in which the sublimated zombie embodies the transformation of repressed sexuality into emancipated Eros – a shift that, for Marcuse, is the hallmark of a non-repressive civilisation. The repressed Eros, previously manifested in the zombie's violently sexual bite, is liberated. Released from the clutches of repression, Eros expresses itself in the undead desire to proliferate as a community and to organise a libidinally harmonious mode of existence. Crucially, we can claim that humans would be compelled to join the revolution of undeadliness precisely because it offers an emancipatory release – an instinctual freedom – that is impossible to achieve under the repressive reality principle's stranglehold over human life. Within the evolving fictitious conceit of sublimated undeadliness, becoming a zombie – that which is so abhorrent to human life under repression – is the very means of *escaping* repression and pioneering a new political order. The zombie bite becomes a sensuous embrace, a kiss – the kiss of the

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<sup>121</sup> Death can become a token of freedom. The necessity of death does not refute the possibility of final liberation. Like other necessities, it can be made rational – painless. Men can die without anxiety if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion. After a fulfilled life, they may take it upon themselves to die – at a moment of their own choosing. (Ibid. p.237)

<sup>122</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in: Peter Gay (ed.), *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage Books, 1995) p.616

dead – that heralds a release from the tribulations of repressive life. In this emerging new order, to give oneself to a zombie would be a radical act of self-initiation into a realm of pleasure and freedom.

The state of zombiehood suspends the inevitability of time passing, opening up a liminality *within* death but *without* finitude. This undead delay to the work of entropy expands and extrapolates the condition of death so that time, as the ultimate inhibitor of instinctual pleasure, is drawn out of shape. Rather than playing out the inevitable succumbing of life unto death, undeadliness opens a non-repressive Nirvana between the two. It is a gradual tapering of life *within* death; it moulds the strict dichotomy of *either* life *or* death into a condition of *neither* life *nor* death. Thanatos, as the urge to be relieved from suffering and tension, no longer positions death as its ultimate aspiration. It finds satisfaction in the process of rotting away pleasurably within a civilised state of undeadliness, untroubled by the constant burden of being alive under a repressive regime. The sublimated zombie therefore embodies a fully gratified and emancipated Eros and Thanatos – the bedrock of Marcuse’s non-repressive civilisation.

### **Orpheus and Narcissus**

I would like to spend some time exploring the specific properties of Marcuse’s non-repressive civilisation in order to flesh out my own fiction of sublimated undeadliness. In order to develop his conception of a civilisation in which the instincts are released, Marcuse uses the mythical images of Orpheus and Narcissus as “symbols of a non-repressive erotic attitude toward reality.”<sup>123</sup> These two figures help Marcuse sketch his vision of an emancipated reality principle. Orpheus is the image of un-alienated and libidinal play that has been released from a sense of work, obligation and duty. Whereas work is the perpetual delay and repression of pleasure, play is gratifying in itself – it serves no purpose other than that of creating pleasure. Marcuse then uses the notion of play to formulate his definition of freedom:

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<sup>123</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation; A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge, 1998) p.167

The play impulse is the vehicle of... liberation. The impulse does not aim at playing “with” something; rather it is the play of life itself, beyond want and external compulsion – the manifestation of an existence without fear and anxiety, and thus the manifestation of freedom itself. ... Freedom is thus, in a strict sense, freedom from the established reality: man is free when the “reality loses its seriousness” and when its necessity “becomes light.”<sup>124</sup>

It is through this sense of light Orphic playfulness – the antithesis of alienated labour – that the released Eros manifests as a “culture building”<sup>125</sup> force that is at the same time instinctually gratifying in its own right.

Marcuse then explores how the image of Narcissus being libidinally connected to his own image outside himself evokes Freud’s “oceanic feeling”<sup>126</sup> – a sense of “oneness with the universe”<sup>127</sup> – “of being one with the external world as a whole.”<sup>128</sup> Marcuse reminds us that “narcissism is more than auto-eroticism; it engulfs the “environment,” integrating the narcissistic ego with the objective world.”<sup>129</sup> The Narcissistic image of connectivity and immersion – of seeing and contemplating beauty as an extension of one’s own self – allows Marcuse to further establish the nature of libidinal relationships within non-repressive civilisation. He formulates the idea of a community in which subjects are not set against each other competitively in order to acquire private wealth, but are instead connected harmoniously – in union – to the point where individual narcissistic gratification is at the same time a public phenomenon of libidinal coalition.

These images of Orpheus and Narcissus can be used to ‘flesh out’ certain characteristics of the sublimated zombie. The original zombie emits no more than a monotone groan. It cannot be said to be a speaking body; it has no language. But the sublimated zombie is a conscious body – and with this consciousness comes

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p.187

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p.211

<sup>126</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in: Albert Dickson (ed.), *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 12: Civilization, Society and Religion* (London: Penguin Books, 1985) p.252

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p.260

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. p.252

<sup>129</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation; A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge, 1998) p.168

language. If the emancipated Eros within the sublimated zombie is forged in the image of Orpheus and Narcissus we can imagine how civilised undeadness might engage with language. Marcuse tells us that Orpheus' "language is *song*, and his work is *play*,"<sup>130</sup> whilst "Narcissus' life is that of *beauty*, and his existence is *contemplation*."<sup>131</sup> From this we can imagine that the sublimated zombie articulates its playful odyssey of oral consumption through collective song – a radical and communal aestheticisation of undeadness. Whilst hegemonic language is the mode of communication within repressive civilisation, these purely pragmatic linguistic tools would burst into harmonious melodies within an emancipated undead civilisation. The functional drone of language that marks the displeasure of repressive civilisation would be animated and embellished by a musicality – a sonorous celebration – articulating the newly acquired pleasure of undeadness. The zombie, as an unconscious body without civilisation, could only emit a guttural moan. Once sublimated as a conscious body within civilisation it would be free to sing as part of a larger Erotic unity – free to celebrate undeadness as a harmonious chorus of pleased and playful bodies.

### **An Undead Requiem**

We can imagine a scenario from this new fiction of sublimated undeadness in which a living human who, tired of the repressive conditions of life, decides to join the growing zombie throng. She approaches the new undead conurbation looking haggard and desperate, her drawn features etched with the pain of having suffered for too long under the regime of *unpleasure*.

Two zombies welcome her, reaching out to touch her arm reassuringly. They lead the woman to an open-air makeshift hospital that is full of other wretched and dejected-looking humans. The two zombies find an empty bed and gesture for the woman to lie down. They then sit on the edge of the bed and start to stroke the full length of her body. The woman appears to relax. She then fixes one of the zombies with an intense stare, and nods slowly. The zombie leans in towards her and bites into her midriff.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p.171

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p.171

The woman sits up sharply, her face suddenly contorted by a skeletal grimace. Her body spasms repeatedly and she lets out a series of gasps and groans. She gradually lies prone again as a large pool of crimson blood ebbs from the gaping wound. The zombies stroke her brow and gurgle sympathetically. The woman slips unconscious and death quickly follows. A small crowd of zombies gathers around her bed. One of them reaches into the dead woman's wound and claws around inside her abdomen. The zombie eventually extracts the spleen and passes it into the undead crowd. Each zombie utters an ecstatic groan before taking a little nibble.

The gurgling recedes, and a single note gradually emerges from the undead cacophony until all the zombies are humming in unison. This single note then breaks into a polyphonic kaleidoscope of harmony as the zombies launch into a profane Requiem – *Requiem Aeternam Non Habebo* – I Will Not Rest In Peace. The musical composition remains faithful to the formal conventions of the Classical Requiem, yet the adapted Latin text subverts the devout orthodoxy of its content.

The dead woman has been lying still on the bloodied sheets beneath her, but then slowly rises up from her bed as a newborn undead corpse. A broad grin now animates her pallid countenance. One of the zombies hands her the remains of her own spleen. She offers a gracious nod in return and then bites into it enthusiastically. Throughout the makeshift hospital, more and more freshly-conceived and sublimated zombies are rising up from their beds, apprehending their newfound freedom with gentle astonishment. The older zombies coo and cluck over the latest additions to their fold.

Some of the zombies then extend their pocked and decaying left arms as if gesturing formally to the ground before them. They reach over with their right hands and start plucking at the exposed and stringy tendons lining their outstretched arms. They pull at these bony lyres – strung out off their own dead bodies – until the mellifluous hue of zombie song has been overtaken by a pounding sinewy riff. The rest of the undead motley mob stumbles around in a jaunty and jerky dance. Orpheus and Narcissus manifest in the zombies' collective and erotic immersion in a scene of joyful musicality.

## From Horror to Slapstick

There is a further sense in which Orphic playfulness might inform the fiction of a sublimated undead civilisation, and the seed of it can actually be detected in Romero's films. I have already discussed a scene from *Dawn of the Dead* in which the zombified Stephen emerges from the elevator with his gun dangling limply from his finger. He stumbles out into the mall with an exaggerated zombie-shuffle, lurching precariously on an over-turned ankle that threatens to topple his undeadly perambulation at any moment (image 8). The actor David Emge's commitment to the evocation of Stephen's zombiehood is playfully enthusiastic to the point where its sheer excessiveness drains the narrative conceit of its horrific and 'serious' content. Even though one of the main protagonists has just become a zombie, this scene surprisingly and amusingly veers towards comedy slapstick.



Image 8

In fact, this slippage away from the pure horror genre takes place at numerous points throughout the film. When Romero first shows us the zombies in the shopping mall he presents them via a series of slapstick set pieces. We see zombies variously: failing to grasp which way to walk up an escalator; tumbling over a safety barrier and then plunging into an ornamental water display; walking on an ice rink with a hockey stick before becoming entangled in the goal; pawing impassively at consumer trinkets that no longer have any meaning or function... all the while, the mannequins populating

the shopping mall ‘gaze on’ blindly through gaudy eye shadow and fake lashes. Their static plasticity echoes the zombies’ gormless features as a saccharine muzak soundtrack pumps through the PA system. The nauseatingly cartoonish music renders these scenes grotesquely comical, and at points the film teeters on the edge of pure slapstick silliness.

As the biker gang plunders the mall towards the end of the film, one of the raiders audaciously and inexplicably tests his own blood pressure on an arcade machine just as the zombie chaos is reaching a climax. The undead mob descends upon him and wrenches him from his seat, leaving only his severed arm attached to the machine. A close up shot shows the blood pressure gauge dropping to zero (image 9). Romero does not attempt to locate this scene within the narrative conceit in terms of the biker character’s motivation; he is clearly drawn to this visceral gag as an end in itself.

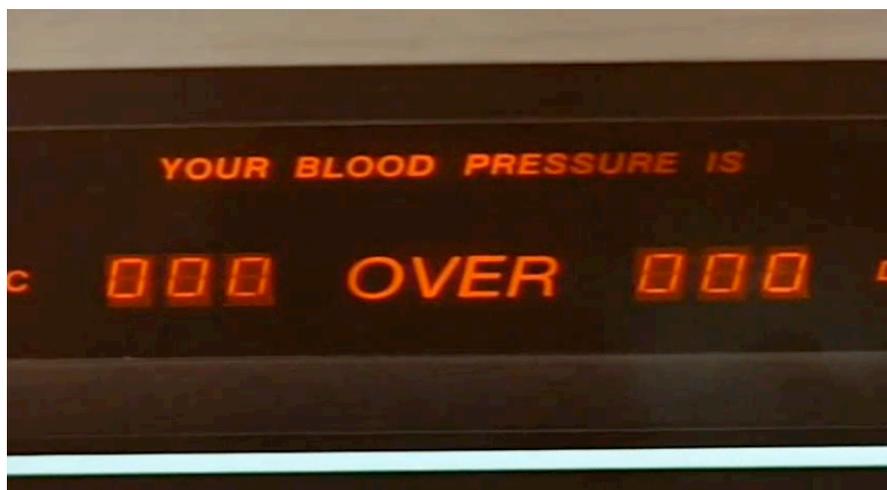


Image 9

I will analyse the specific properties of these scenes in more detail in Chapter Four, but for now I will concentrate on how this playfulness might have implications for my conception of a sublimated undead civilisation.

These scenes that already exist in Romero's films, considered alongside images of the playful Orpheus and the erotically-immersed Narcissus, allow us to imagine an undead civilisation in which the comedic qualities of the zombie come to the fore. The horror of the trundling shuffle of undeadliness might be transformed into a playfully choreographed sequence of absurd set pieces. The zombies would be constantly playing with themselves and each other in a manner that is perpetually "light" and antithetical to the horrific seriousness that shrouded them before their own sublimation. They would no longer inspire horror in the living, they would instead exist within a state of perpetual play that the living themselves would be encouraged to immerse themselves in through the act of being bitten.

But not only might the sublimated zombies within a non-repressive civilisation interact with each other in line with the images of Orpheus and Narcissus, the genre of undead fiction itself might migrate from the 'seriousness' of horror into something more playful; zombie fiction would then become less beholden to the conventions in which it previously existed. The typical narrative devices that deliver the conceit of undeadliness might be allowed to sing – to playfully migrate into other cultural forms and stylistic modes of presentation. My fiction of a sublimated undead civilisation – my collision of Romero's zombie with Marcuse's philosophy – could exist as a trans-disciplinary mash-up of song, dance and comic absurdity. I will return to discuss my fiction in relation to *form* at a later point in this chapter.

### **Undeadliness vs. Sublimated Undeadliness**

Within the conceit of an undead civilisation, only those humans who give themselves freely to the zombie bite are able to acquire the status of sublimated undeadliness. Zombies that were created through a non-consensual attack would remain unsublimated – they would be no more than mindless corpses with a violent appetite for human flesh. In the aftermath of the undead revolution, whilst some zombies

sublimate of their own accord – like Big Daddy and his cohorts at the end of *Land of the Dead* – there would remain packs of zombies that have not gone through the same transformation. Marcuse claims that it is “those who have died in pain... that darken the prospect of a civilisation without repression.”<sup>132</sup> It is precisely the unsublimated zombies who died in pain – who were turned into walking corpses against their will – that threaten the integrity of the new undead order. As I have already discussed, the sublimated zombie wilfully restrains its appetite for flesh; it only takes a little bite, thereby transforming consenting humans into zombies rather than devouring them completely. However, the unsublimated zombie would show no such restraint; it would seek out and consume as much human flesh as possible. Potential recruits for sublimated undeadliness would be eaten out of existence before they had a chance to become zombies, and the non-repressive order would therefore not be able to replenish and proliferate. An undead civilisation *needs* humans to keep on reproducing so that there is always a fresh batch of potential new recruits; the unsublimated zombie mob, however, simply wants to *devour* humans with no concern for the future. Furthermore, a rapacious zombie hoard preying on the living would perpetuate a hostile struggle between human life and the instincts, and this is precisely the struggle that undead sublimation seeks to defuse.

So in order to protect their burgeoning civilisation – and the humans who might populate it as future undead citizens – the sublimated zombies would be forced to police their unsublimated counterparts. All the undead corpses that have not evolved would need to be herded up, and so the violently erotic instincts that these zombies embody would effectively be repressed once more. These imprisoned corpses would be the very shadow that Marcuse speaks of – the spectre that darkens the prospect of a civilisation that is completely without repression. Within my fiction I could set up a tension between the emancipatory project of non-repressive undead civilisation, and the fact that this civilisation, in order to libidinally prosper, must still repress the instincts that do not conform to its regime. There would be a secondary population of imprisoned unsublimated corpses desperate to break free so that they might consume more human flesh. The sublimated zombies would wring their hands in desperation, appalled by the underlying hypocrisy of their ostensibly non-repressive order. They

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p.237

would resolve to devise a rehabilitation programme that encourages zombies to sublimate of their own accord. However, a more hardline faction of sublimated zombies would want to destroy their unsublimated counterparts once and for all, because the risk they pose to the emancipatory project of civilised undeadliness would be too great to countenance.

### **Marcuse Would Never Choose to Become a Zombie**

I have been drawing from Marcuse's non-repressive reality principle in order to sketch out the fictitious proposition of sublimated undeadliness as an emancipated social order. However, I need to state at this point that what I have now written is in no way *equivalent* to Marcuse's account of a free civilisation. Though born out of a close reading of Marcuse, my text has become antithetical to his project for a number of important reasons. In *Eros and Civilisation* Marcuse attempts to formulate a political philosophy – a new reality principle – that might, in time, engender radical social change. He dismisses the notion of utopia because it describes a short-circuit within the process of praxis that rarefies the political idea whilst starving it of any corresponding action. As soon as a project becomes utopian it is politically harmless because it acknowledges within its own conceit that it is impossible and unobtainable. As such, a utopia for Marcuse is not critical of the status quo; its intangible idealism perversely asserts the impossibility of change, thus tacitly confirming the prevalence of the existing conditions. However retroactively utopian Marcuse's thinking becomes to the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, it is important to acknowledge that he was *attempting* to spearhead a revolution that would liberate the full potential of the instincts. In stark opposition to this, my writing effectively hijacks the political aspirations within Marcusean thinking and uses them to formulate the figure of the sublimated zombie. This new text, reliant as it is on the conceit of the undeadliness, becomes a purely fictitious proposition. Marcuse has allowed me to conceive of an idealised and unobtainable civilisation – an undead utopia – that is precisely at odds with the political intentions of his own project.

But more than this, whilst Marcuse is attempting to author a political theory that might expand the potential of civilised human life, I am attempting to author a

fictional theory that expands the category of zombiehood. Marcuse's formulation of a non-repressive civilisation is an affirmation of life; Thanatos is assimilated within an expanded Eros, and so *rejects* death as its instinctual aim. My formulation of a non-repressive civilisation, however, is an affirmation of undeadliness; Eros is assimilated within an expanded Thanatos, and so *embraces* death as its instinctual aim. Whilst Eros in Marcuse's civilisation proliferates in opposition to death, Eros in an undead civilisation proliferates in service of death – it reproduces the condition of undeadliness under an ascendant Thanatos. The undead Eros – manifested in the zombie's bite – is a slave to the process of entropy over which Thanatos presides; it allows undeadliness to multiply. My undead utopia therefore inverts the union between Eros and Thanatos that defines Marcuse's non-repressive civilisation. In a coalition of undeadliness, the sublimated Eros becomes the junior partner to Thanatos; its own aims are corrupted by the overarching influence of its senior counterpart. Marcuse's vision of emancipated life, when devoured by the conceit of zombie fiction, transforms into its own antithesis – a condition in which life resides *within* death. An undead utopia would not suffice for Marcuse; he wants his text to inspire political change, not a fiction about musical zombies.

### **Sublimated Undead Melancholia**

So what are the consequences of the fact that my desecration of Marcusean thinking has moved the political proposition of a non-repressive civilisation into the territories of zombie utopianism? What can we do with this irreverent construction?

In Chapter One, I explored how the Freudian melancholic introjects the lost object, triggering an internalisation of death within her own psyche. This yearning to *become* the death with which she identifies so ardently propels her towards self-annihilation. The split psyche – the hallmark of melancholia – stages a mortal struggle in which Thanatos and Eros battle for supremacy. The melancholic's libidinal connection to death is stronger than her appetite for life, so Thanatos inevitably asserts a superior influence over the weakened Eros until the ultimate act of reversal and regression – suicide – presents itself as a desirable option. Whilst suicide is the final expression of the melancholic's identification with death, there is bitter irony in the fact that death

*prohibits* the melancholic from experiencing the union she yearns for; she cannot consciously experience *being dead*. I then set up undead melancholia as a fictitious state that would *allow* the melancholic to have this experience; as a zombie, the suicidal melancholic can inhabit the death that she craves without being completely dead.

This initially allowed us to conceive of undead melancholia as a transgressive subject position that defies the limitations of life that deem death to be forever inaccessible to the libido. Melancholia acquired a critical content, but then the problem of consciousness (or the zombie's lack of it) re-emerged. The undead melancholic would be unable to conceive of itself precisely because it inhabits a body that is devoid of self-reflexivity. The zombie, at this point in my project, was still understood as a mindless corpse that could not consciously acknowledge its own existence. Undead melancholia could not then be positioned as a transgressive subject position, simply because the zombie cannot be understood as a subject.

But my invention of sublimated undeadliness re-casts the zombie as a conscious and thinking body. The suicidal melancholic would be able exist within sublimated undeadliness as a self-aware subject, and could therefore *knowingly* inhabit death without dying. Sublimated undead melancholia thus becomes a fictitious subject position that opens up a liminal alternative to suicide. As a sublimated zombie, the melancholic is able to consummate her yearning for death by transgressing the prohibitions placed upon her libido all the time she was alive.

This allows us to articulate the fundamental different between a Marcusean and a zombie civilisation. Marcuse wants to conquer death by enhancing the potential of life, whereas the melancholic wants to be *conquered by* death in order to *escape* life. Not all humans would be drawn to a zombie civilisation. Only those with a melancholic disposition would find solace in sublimated undeadliness. Earlier on in this chapter I referenced the notion of “the Great Refusal” – the part of the human psyche that does not accept the given reality principle as final, and strives instead for an improved mode of existence. We can now see in melancholia the traces of this refusal. It spurns a reality in which it cannot reclaim that which has been lost, and pursues instead its connection to death, despite there being no space for this

relationship within life. Only sublimated undeadliness can offer the melancholic the reunion she craves; the melancholic's Great Refusal of life thus finds purchase in the undead reality principle – a condition of sublimated zombiehood that allows her to exist within death.

Marcuse sees in the Great Refusal the possibility of a better life for future generations of humankind – it excavates a nugget of hope based on the memory of a time prior to displeasure. As such, a Marcusean civilisation would be of no interest to the melancholic. Marcuse offers an ameliorated life. But it is precisely the condition of life, however emancipated it might have become, that bars the melancholic from what she wants more than anything else. In relation to the future prospects of human life, Marcuse is hopeful whereas the melancholic is hopeless. Her rejection of the future propels her towards a Great Refusal of life itself – a state that can only be accommodated by sublimated undeadliness.

So we must make a final modification to my burgeoning zombie fiction. Only a suicidal melancholic would be drawn to the condition of sublimated undeadliness. Non-melancholics, however repressed they might be, would still choose to be hopeful amidst their displeasure. Only those who are hopeless – who yearn for death over any possible organisation of life – would find sublimated undeadliness libidinally attractive. So within the conceit of my fiction, those humans who approach the zombies in order to be bitten are, by definition, melancholics; furthermore, they already know that undeadliness has evolved to become self-aware, so that when they are bitten they will be able to continue their conscious existence in a radically transformed state of being neither alive nor dead, but libidinally connected to death.

But what of those melancholics who are not aware that they now have a liminal alternative to suicide? Within my fiction we can imagine the sublimated zombies forming outreach groups at popular suicide spots. They would target vulnerable melancholics and let them know that should they choose it, they have the potential to be freed from their suffering without succumbing to total annihilation. Some humans might still choose outright suicide; this would sadden the sublimated zombies because they are motivated by the prospect of creating an ever-expanding unity of undeadliness. We can imagine that non-melancholic humans might be hostile towards

the sublimated zombies. Even though sublimated undead melancholics only bite when asked – they would not submit a human to an undead initiation without gaining explicit consent – the living might still be disturbed by the hopeless vision of life proffered by undeathliness. The sublimated zombie outreach groups would therefore need to be discrete; we can imagine them loitering surreptitiously at Beachy Head or the Clifton Suspension Bridge under the cover of darkness, trying to spot the suicidal melancholics without drawing attention to their own undeathliness. They would probably remain undetected because a sublimated zombie civilisation can only grow out of a violent zombie revolution, so the human population would already be greatly depleted.

### **The Zombie as a pre-1960s Critical Impulse**

In this section I take a step back from the process of constructing the internal conceit of an undead Utopia, and speculate as to how this fiction might operate as a contemporary cultural artefact. Marianne Dekoven discusses how Marcuse's political philosophy after *Eros and Civilisation* diagnoses an insidious one-dimensionality that coopts dissent within its own logistics, yet still holds on to the possibility of a fundamental shift within these operations that would be tantamount to widespread socio-political upheaval.

Modernity's belief in the meaningful possibility of utopian revolution is still a very powerful force for Marcuse, despite his evident pessimism concerning any realistic prospect for bringing it about.<sup>133</sup>

Marcuse's pessimism is formed in response to what he recognises as a cultural and political homogeneity that is able to "coopt, absorb, neutralize, and render ineffective all opposition."<sup>134</sup> Dekoven claims that Marcuse's diagnosis of a status quo that eliminates "revolutionary negation or Great Refusal, is a prime marker of

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<sup>133</sup> Marianne Dekoven, *The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) p.29

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* p.30

postmodernity.”<sup>135</sup> And so Marcuse recognises just a few years after writing *Eros and Civilisation* that his vision of civil emancipation, inspired by the human psyche’s un-repressed phantasy of social amelioration, has been eclipsed by an overarching hegemony that nullifies radical dissent by recuperating it within a field of “non-contradictory difference.”<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, Dekoven recognises this shift in Marcuse’s thinking as a response to the emergent idea of postmodernism that grew throughout the 1960s. Whilst *Eros and Civilisation* diagnoses the hegemony of repressive civilisation, it does not acknowledge the extent to which the social order is able to absorb and assimilate difference within its prevailing operations. In relation to the climate of “modern/emergent postmodern”<sup>137</sup> pluralism that, for Dekoven, typifies the early sixties, *Eros and Civilisation*’s assertion of oppositional political aspirations places it more in the former camp – the modern moment – of the blurry divide. Because the fiction of an undead civilisation borrows heavily from Marcuse’s political thinking, my own project can be recognised as a critical anachronism that references a set of political strategies belonging to the late 1950s; sublimated undeadliness – as a vision of a radically transgressive subjectivity – evokes a strain of modernist thinking that has been very much consigned to the past. I will presently explore the implications of deploying modernist utopian strategies within the current contemporary climate, but I will first address the anachronistic hues of sublimated undeadliness in more detail.

### **Undead Modernism**

In *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* Christine Ross explores, through her discussion of the psychoanalyst Elisabeth Roudinesco, how the term ‘melancholia’ has been replaced by ‘depression’.

“[now] everything is as though no rebellion is possible, as though the very idea of social, even intellectual, subversion has become illusionary [...] hence the paradigm of depression.” This is one of the main manifestations of what

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. p.29

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. p.29

Roudinesco calls the paradigmatic shift from [...] melancholia to depression, which brings with it the decline of psychoanalysis as a subversive force.<sup>138</sup>

Ross sets up melancholia as a “conflict”<sup>139</sup> in which the psyche refuses to internalise and assimilate the hegemonic status quo. This tessellates with my account of the melancholic who refuses to consent to the absence of, and her separation from, that which she has lost. Ross then evokes a contemporary climate in which this melancholic opposition now seems impossible, and the collapse of psychoanalysis as a “subversive force” heralds “the paradigmatic shift from melancholia to depression.” The status of melancholia as “a potential form of critique of social rules”<sup>140</sup> is subsumed by the notion of depression as a failure to adopt the standardised values of economic independence and productivity. Ross describes these overarching and socially determined identity categories as:

...norms of independence based on generalised individual initiative (personified by the model of the entrepreneur), self-sufficiency, and pluralism of values (exemplified by the dictum “It’s my choice”).<sup>141</sup>

So whilst the melancholic might have wilfully *refused* this normative homogeneity, depression is cast as the *failure* to assimilate these values. The potential of the melancholic psyche to operate as an oppositional force *outside* the status quo is neutered, becoming instead a depressive inability to assimilate the consensual values of economic self-determination. The dissenting antagonism of melancholia is normalised as depression – as a disempowered state contained *within* the “noncontradictory difference” of contemporaneity.

Crucially, we can now equate melancholia’s capitulation to depression with modernism’s acquiescence to the prevailing ubiquity of postmodern homogeneity that collapses radical opposition from the *outside* by assimilating dissent *within* its own operations. It is important to note here, as Dekoven herself does, that melancholia

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<sup>138</sup> Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p.xxiv

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p.xxiv

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. p.xxiii

might be understood as being *akin* to postmodernism in regards to its fracturing and fragmentation of meaning and the splintering of grand narratives. I will explore these ideas in my subsequent chapters, but at this point I will continue to understand melancholia according to its status as a potentially subversive psychological force *prior* to the emergence of postmodernism.

I can now claim that my fiction of sublimated undeadliness, as an inhabitation of dissent, rejects the contemporary condition of depression, and insists upon the oppositional qualities of melancholia instead. Within this reading, the transgressive subject position of sublimated undeadliness stands for the *text* of melancholia itself – an anachronistic critical discourse that has returned to haunt the contemporary system of classification that has decommissioned it. The phantasy of radical refusal evoked by my undead utopia can now be understood as a melancholic introjection of a lost modernist strategy that has been deemed outmoded and obsolete. My fiction is, in itself, the internalisation of an oppositional critical impulse that is now lost to the contemporary practitioner. The notion of a zombie utopia does not of course resurrect modernism, but I claim my fiction of a transgressive oppositional subjectivity evokes an anachronistic and phantastical spectre of it – an *undead* modernism – that might critically examine the contemporary condition's ubiquitous tactic of assimilating dissent and collapsing opposition by means of cooption and normalisation.

### **A Melancholic Utopia**

In his book *Utopias*, Richard Noble explores the critical potential of utopian strategies within the contemporary cultural climate. He acknowledges in his introduction the shift that I have been describing over the preceding pages, namely that as the 20<sup>th</sup> century has proceeded, the possibility of full-scale cultural revolution has gradually been replaced by a condition of ubiquitous relativity that is always able to assimilate and nullify dissenting voices into its own project of self-perpetuation. The utopian urge might therefore be to create provisional and temporary manifestations of alternative realities that function as micro-utopias within the prevailing hegemony. These interventions do not claim to rupture the status quo or to imbue themselves with a radically oppositional politics; rather they offer little glimpses of something

*other than* the status quo that might then feed back *into* the status quo as a set of provocations or critical questions surrounding the assimilation of cultural practice into a non-oppositional norm.<sup>142</sup>

Noble cites relational aesthetics and participatory practices as examples of situations that might, albeit temporarily, draft alternative strategies of human interaction and production. There is a particular quality in their formal procedures – in the experiences they engender – that opens up a critical space. This point raises an important limit to the work I have carried out throughout this chapter. My undead utopia is a speculative and self-consciously provisional fiction contained within the constraints of this thesis (provisional in the sense that I have not attempted to present this fiction as an exhausted and entirely resolved proposition). It does not exist as a cultural product – as a film, novel or some sort of live experience etc – that has *formal* properties beyond those of this thesis itself. I have not set up a sustained fictitious conceit that has asked you as a reader to suspend your disbelief; rather, I have explicitly acknowledged the thinking that has informed my construction of a zombie fiction throughout this chapter. I have specifically chosen to do this because to explicitly argue my case for an undead utopia is, I believe, more theoretically cogent than trying to narrate the fiction directly. This decision has allowed me to reflect on my own invention. As such, I claim that this thesis, as a self-reflexive and critically engaged piece of academic writing, is actually the optimum form in which to devise, and then discuss, the qualities of an undead utopia.

To bring this back to the ongoing discussion, I do not claim that the formal properties of this thesis might be able to create a micro-utopia – a tangible experience that opens up a critical space – as formulated by Noble. This *might* be the outcome for someone reading my thesis, but it has not been written with this in mind; any such response belongs to the reader and is outside my jurisdiction as the author. However, Noble also sets up the idea of a “critical utopia”<sup>143</sup> that does not try to *formally* produce a utopia, but deploys the *content* of utopian discourse in order to critically interrogate a particular facet of society. A critical utopia might deploy images and scenarios that ape and exaggerate aspects of the status quo; it might construct an absurd

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<sup>142</sup> Richard Noble (ed.), *Utopias* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009) p.17

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

foreign/alien ‘other’ as a thinly veiled personification of the issue that it wishes to critically examine. My fiction in its current state – as a theoretical proposal within my thesis – seems to perform a manoeuvre that is comparable to these strategies. It deliberately uses an anachronistic and outmoded notion of oppositional discourse – melancholia – in order to interrogate the conditions that render this discourse ‘out of time’ in the first instance. My utopia, by evoking the perpetuation of life *within* the radically transformative state of undeadliness, articulates the impossibility of transgressive opposition being mobilised by anything *except* a zombie fiction.

Frederic Jameson warns in *The Utopian Enclave* that if “the utopia in question proposes the kind of radical transformation of subjectivity presupposed by most revolutions, a mutation in human nature and the emergence of whole new beings;”<sup>144</sup> then:

We find ourselves in a science-fictional world [...] in which human beings can scarcely even recognise themselves any longer (and which would need to be allegorised [...] in order to bring such figuration back to any viable anthropomorphic and utopian function[.]).<sup>145</sup>

So I can immediately say that the transformed subjectivity of sublimated undead melancholia does indeed author “new beings” that cannot be recognised as human. If this is indeed the case, my treatment of undead melancholia would need to be allegorical for some facet of human life in order for it to function as a utopian strategy. Undeadliness would have to speak of something other than itself – something human instead – if its political function is to be redeemed. Without this anchoring of zombie figuration within the human realm, my fiction would not tally with Jameson’s definition of a utopia. I address the function of allegory in detail in Chapter Four, but I might provisionally claim that my undead utopia functions as an allegorical articulation of the fact that the contemporary climate has eradicated the possibility of being able to mobilise the sort of radical opposition to the status quo associated with the modernism of the late 1950s. But despite the presence of this

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<sup>144</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Utopian Enclave*, in: Richard Noble (ed.), *Utopias* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009) p.72

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

allegorical “figuration” in my project, there remains a sense in which my utopia does not sit at all well with Jameson’s definition of the term. His text climaxes with a rousing trumpeting of the utopian impulse:

Utopia thus now better expresses our relationship to a genuinely political future than any current programme of action, [...] it forces us precisely to concentrate on the break itself: a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right. This is very far from a liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived.<sup>146</sup>

My own project, like Jameson’s utopia, meditates on an “impossible” prospect – that the suicidal melancholic might consciously survive her reunion within death. But the “unrealizable” nature of this proposition does not jolt into a hopeful anticipation of some as-of-yet-unknown but radical future. An undead utopia anticipates only that which can in fact never be recouped, precisely because it has already been lost to the passing of time. For Jameson, the impossible is hopeful. The *impossibility* of my zombie fiction, however, can only confirm the hopelessness of melancholic politics. Jameson’s utopia looks forward to a life that “has not yet arrived”, whereas my melancholic phantasy of an undead modernism is a lament for that which cannot be redeemed.

So my zombie utopia acknowledges that its own themes of transgressive subjectivity and radical opposition are impossible to realise. Whilst it might expose the failings of the contemporary condition, my fiction cannot propose a critical alternative precisely because its so-called oppositional politics are themselves no more than a phantasy. This tacitly endorses the postmodern notion that no *viable* alternative to the status quo is available. Ironically therefore, by conforming to this contemporary diagnosis of an insurmountable homogeneity, the radicalism of sublimated undead melancholia becomes, in the end, a conservative proposition.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid. p.74-75

## CHAPTER THREE

### **They're Dead. They're All Messed Up**

The zombie. An Oxymoron made flesh. A vile and stinking embodiment of paradoxical weirdness. A contagion of gory and slapstick nonsense that defiles reasonable sensibilities. As the louche and drawling sheriff from *Night of the Living Dead* says of the walking corpses stumbling before him, “They’re Dead. They’re All Messed Up.”<sup>147</sup>

This chapter suspends my efforts to conceive of an undead utopia in response to the climax of Romero’s film *Land of the Dead*. It contends instead with undeadliness as a violation of hegemonic meaning – a rupturing of the symbolic protocols of language. I examine how the zombie’s vertiginous weirdness interfaces with Julia Kristeva’s account of the symbolic collapse engendered by melancholia. This discussion will eventually lead to a further interrogation of the critical claims imbedded in my formulation of an undead utopia.

In his book *Looking Awry, An Introduction to Lacan through Popular Culture*, Slavoj Žižek reads “the return of the dead” as an articulation of a breakdown in the symbolic mechanisms that locate and fix the deceased within an established order of meaning.

The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization... ..The funeral rite exemplifies symbolization at its purest: through it, the dead are inscribed in the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will “continue to live” in the memory of the community. The “return of the living dead” is, on the other hand, the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> George A. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (Pickwick Group Ltd., 1968)

<sup>148</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry; An Introduction to Lacan through Popular Culture* (London: The MIT Press, 1992) p.23

Žižek is not specifically talking about zombies at this point; he is including all manner of ghouls, ghosts and gore-mongers within his categorisation. But we can already see from this quote that the symbolic disturbance – the corruption of established and reasonable meaning – triggered by the return of the dead in popular culture is explicitly linked by Žižek to a failure in the reconciliation and acceptance of loss. To unpack the role that loss plays in this collapse of meaning I will now return to a discussion of mourning and melancholia.

### **Failing to Kill the Dead**

In his book *The New Black; Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* Darian Leader establishes the Lacanian idea that biological death is a separate event to symbolic death. A person may die physically, but this death is not automatically fixed within the Symbolic; the myriad traces of the lost object continue to press upon the subject as a haunting and unprocessed traumatic affect. The dead must therefore die twice before their absence can be registered within language.

For symbolic death to occur, the dead must be banished and kept at bay. ...

The second killing represents a movement from empirical biological death to symbolic laying to rest.<sup>149</sup>

Crucially, Leader claims that the living must enact this process of “killing the dead”<sup>150</sup> so that the lost object might be framed within an ordered matrix of meaning. The deceased need to be subjected to a second symbolic demise that reifies them within language as that which has definitively gone. Leader claims that the registering of this second death within symbolic language allows the process of mourning to proceed. An example of this is the funeral service. It functions to ossify death as an event that can be understood – as an event that has meaning – however painful that meaning might be. The dead person’s name no longer signifies a life; it becomes

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<sup>149</sup> Darian Leader, *The New Black; Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London: Penguin Group, 2008) pp.116-117

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p.114

instead an engraving on a tombstone that *names* an absence and thus fixes death within language.

At the beginning of Romero's first film *Night of the Living Dead* we see Johnny and Barbara – a feuding brother and sister – driving into a cemetery. Romero never explicitly tells the viewer whose grave the siblings are visiting; all we know is that they are there at the behest of their mother who is not well enough to make the journey herself. Already there is a sense of foreboding and disquieting ambiguity surrounding the fact that the dead person has not been positively identified. Death is not fixed within the symbolic register – it has no definite form or meaning – and so haunts these opening credits as an unnamed presence that has not been pinned down by language. Johnny constantly moans about the inconvenience of travelling so far to the cemetery, and refuses to afford the occasion any sense of gravitas. Johnny scoffs at the cross-shaped wreath that they have bought which bears the inscription “we still remember.” He retorts petulantly, “I don't. I don't even remember what the man looks like.”<sup>151</sup> Johnny then complains that the wreath will inevitably be gone by the time they next visit, and jokingly speculates that the same one is probably sold back to them year after year.

A little spit and polish, you could clean this up and sell it next year. I wonder how many times we've bought the same one?<sup>152</sup>

Not only does Johnny's banter exhibit a cynical irreverence towards the protocols of the cemetery, it suggests that the wreath is no more than a banal commodity object with no intrinsic symbolic meaning. It is unable to function effectively as an articulation of loss that might frame death and allow the process of mourning to proceed. Once again death is present as an unnameable affect – a mood, a rising sense of tension – that has no corresponding form or sign that might fix it within symbolic meaning. This is heightened by the fact that the radio starts to buzz as they park the car. The tuner is unable to grasp a clear signal, and we hear a swirl of glitchy feedback and white noise before an announcer is heard apologising for the technical difficulties that took them off air. Johnny looks momentarily troubled by the

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<sup>151</sup> George A. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (Pickwick Group Ltd., 1968)

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

portentous sound of the radio not *making sense*, but he is able to manage his anxiety by simply turning off the device. He immediately shrugs off this disruption and continues his puerile ribbing of his long-suffering sister. But as soon as Johnny switches off the radio an extradiegetic bell chimes, followed by a flurry of nervous and jittery strings. Romero immediately pushes the soundtrack beyond the diegesis, signalling to the viewer a new ambiguity and tension that Johnny cannot keep at bay. The music does not articulate Johnny's interior mood – his own sense of foreboding – it serves to highlight just how much his cheery ignorance is fatally out of kilter with the peril that *we know* he is in. That tolling bell states that the sadistic narrative,<sup>153</sup> supported by the probing and voyeuristic gaze of the camera, has something terrible in store for him. He does not bear the gaze, nor is he a protagonist with whom we identify – a screen surrogate who carries our own spectatorial desire. In that moment the injection of a doom-laden extradiegetic affect states that he is an object, hurtling towards his demise, being acted upon by an unnamed and unknown ambiguity.

A storm breaks over the cemetery. Flashes of lightning streak across Johnny's face as he turns to see a figure walking slowing in the background. He does not react, but, as spectators, we note this classic cinematic trope for looming disaster. Whilst Barbara is praying at the graveside, Johnny taunts her with memories of the game they used to play in the cemetery when they were younger. Again he fails to heed the appropriate symbolic protocols associated with mourning the dead, and takes pleasure in disrupting Barbara's attempts to align herself with these recognisable and familiar behavioural codes. Johnny remembers how scared she used to be in the cemetery, and on noticing Barbara's continued unease he resurrects their childhood game.

They're coming to get you Barbara!<sup>154</sup>

The figure in the background wanders through the graves as Johnny continues to taunt Barbara. The man starts to draw closer, and Johnny incorporates him into his teasing.

They're coming for you! Look! Here comes one of them now.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in: Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000; An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) p.987

<sup>154</sup> George A. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (Pickwick Group Ltd., 1968)

Barbara is agitated and rebukes Johnny for his churlish behaviour, but as the unidentified male figure approaches she composes herself. She turns away and starts to walk after Johnny, presuming that the stranger will simply pass her by on the path. But he does not. Instead he grabs her and tries to bite a chunk of flesh out of her neck.

And it is through this unknown character in the cemetery that Romero introduces undeadliness for the first time (image 10). This man is a corpse. He is dead, and yet he tries to devour Barbara. She initially escapes him, but later succumbs to the devouring zombie throng. We do not know *why* the zombie exists – undeadliness remains a symptom without a cause throughout Romero’s films – but, as a walking corpse that evidently refuses to be laid to rest, his presence is a total violation of Leader’s second symbolic death. His attack on Barbara makes no sense, destabilising her normalised experience of reality with a sudden collapse of meaning.



Image 10

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

## A Real Problem

If Leader's process of mourning involves the living symbolically "killing the dead", then Romero's zombie desecrates this procedure on two levels: firstly, by reversing it so that the dead are now killing the living, and secondly, by turning the act of *symbolic* killing into an abjectly *literal* killing, whereby the living are devoured by the dead until they are no more than a steaming pile of bones. Leader's "killing the dead" *makes* sense – it is a strategy that generates meaning around death; Romero's zombie makes no sense whatsoever – it violates symbolic death through its outrageous and undeadly ambiguity that does not sit within an ordered category of either life *or* death.

This zombie *nonsense* throws Barbara into an encounter with an unnameable force outside of the Symbolic. If language constructs subjectivity as an inhabitation of lack that establishes the subject's difference from the other, then the zombie is an agent of abjection<sup>156</sup> that radically collapses the levees of subjectivity keeping the other at bay. Its vile bite breaches subjective coherence and infects the victim with a corrupting contagion – a malignant exteriority that proliferates under the skin. Undeadliness pollutes subjective integrity, turning it into an unclassifiable and grotesque anomaly – a macabre paradox of life infected with death. The zombie thus forces the subject into the horrifying Real beyond language – a territory of vertiginous and corrosive affect where meaning and selfhood collapses.

In the build-up to the zombie cemetery attack, Barbara and Johnny fail to perceive the threat posed to them. They fatally misrecognise the undead body lurching toward them. Johnny incorporates the zombie into his childish game – he projects a meaning onto it that he had previously *invented* himself in order to assert his own subjective mastery over his sister. In his book *The Sovereignty of Death*, Rob Weatherill explores how Lacanian theory posits the Real as an absence of meaning that lurks behind a "phantasy screen",<sup>157</sup> and it is precisely this screen that the undead corpse tears asunder with a violent eruption of Real abjection that shatters Johnny's Imaginary game. Lacan claims that:

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<sup>156</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p.3

<sup>157</sup> Rob Weatherill, *The Sovereignty of Death* (London: Rebus Press, 1998) p.89

The real has to be sought beyond the dream – in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation of which there is only one representative.<sup>158</sup>

Barbara's zombie is this "representative" of the "lack of representation" precisely because it stands in the spot where both Symbolic and Imaginary meaning no longer function. Johnny projects his phantasy of the dead rising from their graves onto the figure in the cemetery, and yet hidden behind this imaginary screen is a Real walking corpse that defies all symbolic conventions. The zombie inhabits a void where meaning ceases to operate. Johnny initially misrecognises the undead corpse as a monster from the Imaginary – as a fiction with which he can taunt his sister. But as soon as the zombie inexplicably lunges for Barbara, it gouges through Johnny's "phantasy screen" and emerges instead as a monster from the Real. The zombie spews forth from a rent in the Imaginary, spreading a vile contagion of Real nonsense that devours the conventional protocols of language.

### **Misreading Melancholia**

This collapse of meaning around death, so freakishly engendered by undeadliness, invites a re-examination of the term melancholia. Leader sets up melancholia as a state that occurs when living humans are unable to separate themselves from what they have lost. Instead of securing loss within the symbolic, and therefore *outside* of themselves, the melancholic preserves an element of that loss within her own psyche. The melancholic is unable to establish any distancing perspective that can frame and contextualise her loss. Instead death becomes a pervasive presence that seeps into the core of her being. Melancholia is effectively a collapse in meaning that prohibits death from being adequately laid to rest within language.

If mourning establishes the *absence of a positive* by symbolically framing the disappearance of a loved one, then melancholia asserts the *presence of a negative*; it injects a morbid identification with death into the living subject's own psyche.

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<sup>158</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1964) p.60

Melancholia stubbornly tries to keep death alive – however impossible this might be – by refusing to let it settle within the Symbolic.

The melancholic suffers precisely because she has within herself an overarching urge to re-connect with what she has lost. The only state that would fundamentally satisfy the melancholic is a reunion with the death that she craves so ardently, and so self-annihilation starts to assert its dark allure. As Leader says, “In mourning, we grieve the dead; in melancholia we die with them.”<sup>159</sup> Leader here sets up the idea that whilst the mourner builds a buffer zone of symbolic meaning around death, the melancholic inhabits death through a process of identification. But crucially, Leader’s claim that “in melancholia we die with [the dead]” is a metaphorical articulation of the living melancholic psyche that submits to an *Imaginary* death. However Romero’s fiction re-stages this process, creating a conceit in which the living *actually* die at the hands of the dead. He depicts a scenario in which the dead stumble forth from a fissure rent through the Symbolic, and pull the living into the deadly abyss of *Real* nonsense. Zombie fiction is thus a grotesque literalisation of the psychoanalytical poetics of melancholia.

If Žižek can claim that “Shakespeare had read Lacan”<sup>160</sup> due to the Bard’s treatment of the eponymous protagonist in *Richard II* who is unable to inhabit his symbolic status as ‘King’, then I will claim that Romero has wilfully *misread* Leader in order to fashion his particular celluloid monster. Zombie fiction plagiarises psychoanalysis, restaging the melancholic’s *Imaginary* encounter with death (through identification) as a *Real* encounter. The zombie, as an abject literalisation of the collapse of meaning outside language, bites into the living subject – ripping sinew from skin and tearing gristle from bone – until she has been devoured out of symbolic existence.

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<sup>159</sup> Darian Leader, *The New Black; Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London: Penguin Group, 2008) p.8

<sup>160</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry; An Introduction to Lacan through Popular Culture* (London: The MIT Press, 1992) p.9

## The Undead Thing

Julia Kristeva develops this relationship between melancholia and the collapse of meaning in exquisite detail in her book *Black Sun – Depression and Melancholia*. She formulates a particular brand of narcissistic depression<sup>161</sup> that, unlike the pure Freudian model of melancholia explored in Chapter One of my thesis, does not involve the introjection of the lost object.

The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing. Let me posit the “Thing” as the real that does not lend itself to signification...<sup>162</sup>

This Thing does not operate within the symbolic register; rather it asserts itself affectively on the subject as “the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, something unrepresentable...”<sup>163</sup> This “something” is an archaic sense of self that eludes representation and dwells in the Real beyond the parameters of symbolic life. The Thing is the part of the subject that holds on to a sensation of supreme wholeness and connectivity that precedes the arrival of language. Kristeva claims that this yearning to re-establish links with a lost sense of self plunges the melancholic into a “battle with symbolic collapse.”<sup>164</sup> This struggle persists,

Until the weight of the primal Thing prevails, and all translatability become [sic] impossible. Melancholia then ends up in asymbolia, in loss of meaning: if

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<sup>161</sup> Kristeva acknowledges that depression is not only a term used in contemporary psychology to describe a set of surface symptoms. She states that depression, like melancholia, has ontological roots in psychoanalysis. This immediately complicates Leader’s use of depression as a term for a mental illness effectively created by pharmaceutical companies – an illness that can be readily treated with CBT and anti-depressants. Kristeva writes about depression from a psychoanalytic perspective, and acknowledges how closely related it is – as a self-denigrating response to loss – to melancholia. Despite negotiating a subtle difference between depression and melancholia within psychoanalytic terminology, Kristeva acknowledges that she uses the terms interchangeably; for example she frequently refers to the depressive mood of the melancholic. Once the reader is immersed in Kristeva’s poetic and complex writing, the relatively insoluble terms set up by Leader dissolve into a more pluralistic concoction of overlapping nuances. In opposition to Leader’s position, Kristeva also writes frankly about the benefits of medication alongside analysis, and acknowledges that in certain cases anti-depressants have a role to play within the larger therapeutic process.

<sup>162</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun; Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.13

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. p.24

I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and I die.<sup>165</sup>

The “Thing prevails” at the point where translation and metaphor – mechanisms of meaning within the symbolic register – fail, and the subject is then pulled into a fatal encounter with the “depressive void”<sup>166</sup> at the heart of melancholia.

### Dead Language

But why exactly should the Thing occasion a breakdown in meaning for the melancholic? Kristeva claims that “language starts with a *negation (Verneinung)* of loss,” in which the “lost essential object” is recovered “in signs.”<sup>167</sup> The speaking subject unconsciously accepts that her loss of archaic unity has been replaced by language, and it is precisely the function of words – the ability of signs to link to their referents – that allows the subject to reach over the depressive void and locate herself within a field of Symbolic consistency. Speaking marks the subject’s ascension to a normative position among other subjects within language. However, Kristeva goes on to say:

Depressed persons, on the contrary, *disavow the negation*: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted.<sup>168</sup>

So the melancholic refuses the compensation offered by symbolic meaning. She chooses instead to fixate not on the substitute for her loss – language – but on the initial loss itself. Language fails to span the melancholic’s depressive void because it cannot place the Thing within an over-arching signifying chain that applies consistency and order to *everything*. So for the melancholic, words simply do not work:

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid. p.42

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. p.99

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p.43

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. pp.43-44

The dead language they speak, which foreshadows their suicide, conceals a Thing buried alive. The latter, however, will not be translated in order that it not be betrayed; it shall remain walled up within the crypt of inexpressible affect...<sup>169</sup>

The melancholic apprehends a deathliness *within* language. She is drawn to the Real death of suicide precisely to escape the stultifying ossification of the Symbolic that prevents her from reuniting with her Thing. The words she utters are dead – flat fragments of monotonous droning that has no signifying potential – and yet under this petrified husk of sound, the Thing lies buried as a kernel of unnameable and unrepresentable affect that refuses to be categorised and tamed by language.

### **A Double Disavowal of Death**

Within Romero's fiction, the subject's encounter with the zombie is a violent negation of symbolic meaning that propels her into the territories of the Real beyond language. Crucially, we can now add that this embrace with undeadliness allows her to be reunited with her own Thingness. The melancholic's "unspeakable anguishes" push her towards a "fringe of strangeness"<sup>170</sup> at the outposts of language. It is here that she encounters the zombie, who drags her through into the Real so that she might become one with her own Thing. The zombie that bites her is not *her* Thing, though it stands in the place of a more general Thingness. However, the zombie that she *turns into*, presuming that she is not devoured entirely, is *her* particular Thing – *herself* without language. Undeadliness becomes an abject contagion of violent affect that collapses the lack upon which subjectivity is based, and in so doing, reunites the melancholic with everything from which she was barred in life.

Kristeva notes that the reunion with the Thing is unrepresentable; only the act of "devouring"<sup>171</sup> might come close to invoking it. This reminds us of the symbolic oral incorporation staged by the Freudian melancholic who seeks to introject the lost

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p.53

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. p.14

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. p.13

object. Once again we can claim that Romero's fiction both reverses the act of psychoanalytical oral consumption, and pushes it from poetic metaphor into literalism; whilst Kristeva's melancholic is reunited with Thingness by an imagined and un-representable act of devouring, the undead melancholic is herself devoured by Thingness in a very Real and crude feeding frenzy.

Within Kristeva's account of Melancholia this reunion is tantamount to self-annihilation; to meet one's Thing is to disappear from language altogether. But the zombie offers the melancholic a 'third way' that sidesteps the dichotomy of either unbearable life or emancipatory death. Instead of dying within the Real, the melancholic in zombie fiction can endure it within a state of undeadliness. This means that the zombie can occupy the impossible position of the Thing outside of language without succumbing to total annihilation. Crucially, this position is critical and transgressive; it refuses the logic of symbolic meaning that imposes a deathly limit – the limit of language – on the subject. Whilst Kristeva's melancholic could only yearn for this oppositional refusal within life, or surrender to its fatal appeal through death, the undead melancholic can exist within this collapse of meaning – it can occupy the vertiginous territories of the Real as a Thing, without yielding to absolute dissolution. The zombie thus escapes the death *within* language without succumbing to the death *without* it. Rob Weatherill, quoting Jacques Lacan and then Malcolm Bowie, writes of:

...a deathliness written into the symbolic. Lacan indicates this: "The symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the externalisation of his desire." Bowie continues, "Death is the eventual triumph of the Real (finally), but is already homeopathically present in speech..."<sup>172</sup>

Weatherill here sets up two registers of death. The first is the death of the Thing – a demise that destroys archaic wholeness and constitutes the desiring subject within language – whilst the second is the Real death of dissolution beyond the symbolic. Both Kristeva's suicidal melancholic and the undead melancholic refuse this first

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<sup>172</sup> Rob Weatherill, *The Sovereignty of Death* (London: Rebus Press, 1998) p.85

death, or “*disavow this negation*” as Kristeva herself puts it, by refusing to inhabit the symbolic dominion. As Weatherill outlines above, death is present in language in tiny measures. It infects all speaking subjects, but by refusing to consent to this death within language, the suicidal melancholic is felled by the Real death without it. However, at the moment of self-annihilation the suicidal subject is thrust back into the Symbolic. Lacan says of the suicidal melancholic:

If he abolishes himself, he is more of a sign than ever, for the simple reason that it is precisely from the moment when the subject is dead that he becomes an eternal sign for others.<sup>173</sup>

The suicidal subject inevitably ossifies her own place within the Symbolic by affecting her own demise. However awful this meaning might be, it is a fixed meaning that makes tragic *sense* within the Symbolic. It is also highly ironic, because the melancholic then becomes fixed forever as a ‘suicide victim’ – fixed, categorised and labelled within the very system that she was trying escape by doing herself in.

In opposition to this, the undead melancholic avoids being cast back into the deathly grasp of symbolic consistency due to being neither alive *nor* dead. She continues to make no sense once she has propelled herself beyond language precisely because she becomes *undead*. Through her reunion with the archaic Thing, she does not succumb to the Real, but survives *within* it in a state of continual symbolic collapse and vividly affecting nonsense. The undead melancholic thus stages a double disavowal of death – she refuses the death within *and* without language.

### **Undead Materiality**

When reading Kristeva, we have a strong sense of her poetic approach to psychoanalysis. She actively invites the reader to think into the spaces that she creates around her words. As such, the notion of the Thing – though the word itself pushes

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<sup>173</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book V, Les formations de l'inconscient*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished) p.14, in: Rob Weatherill, *The Sovereignty of Death* (London: Rebus Press, 1998) p.80

towards a description of an indeterminate or unclassified form – is primarily an invocation of a *formless* space – psychological space – that is experienced by the subject as a disembodied affect of “unspeakable anguishes.” However, there are a number of striking passages in *Black Sun* where Kristeva talks about the materiality of the Thing as if it were on some level embodied – of the body – as opposed to purely of the mind.

In the tension of their affects, muscles, mucus membranes, and skin, they experience both their belonging to and distance from an archaic other [the Thing] that still alludes representation and naming, but of whose corporeal emissions, along with their automatism, they still bear the imprint.<sup>174</sup>

Here Kristeva suggests that a trace of Thingness haunts the living subject’s body, more specifically the parts of the body over which the human does not assert conscious mastery. Corporeal emissions and unconscious motor functions confront the subject with her own materiality – they constitute a purely physical dimension to her sense of self that is independent to the language through which she self-conceives. Kristeva says there is an “automatism” within subjectivity, implying a sense of mechanical functionality that is not driven by will, and it is precisely this *embodied* stratum of subjectivity that bears the “imprint” of the Thing. Kristeva continues:

...the Thing is a recipient that contains my dejecta and everything that results from cadere [Latin: to fall] – it is a waste with which, in my sadness, I merge. ... For those who are depressed, the Thing like the self is a downfall that carries them along into the invisible and the unnameable. *Cadere*. Waste and cadavers all.<sup>175</sup>

This passage bears a resemblance to Kristeva’s account of the abject corpse in *Powers of Horror*:

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<sup>174</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun; Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.14

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. p.15

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall)... ..refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit is what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such waste drops so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.<sup>176</sup>

From these two passages we can observe an unnameable Thingness to the corpse, and an abject corpse-ness to the Thing. Both are that which the subject must push aside if she is to retain her coherence within the symbolic order. The effluence and the base materiality of the inert body must be renounced if subjectivity is to retain its integrity, and the abject Thing is expelled so that symbolic life might function *meaningfully*. However, in time “the corpse encroaches upon everything” – it devours meaning – until such a point that the melancholic subject, in her sadness, “falls beyond the limit” into its material dominion.

And this starts to sound like an entirely apt articulation of Romero’s monstrous creation. Outside the conceit of undeadliness, the corpse is a passive object that can be mourned. The actual body is hidden and replaced by a network of signs that attest to its absence. To encounter the Real corpse is to experience a rupture in the way the living are able to manage their dead. But in Romero’s fiction, the undead corpse is animated and active; it is a weirdly anomalous material – a body with an unnameable purpose but without personhood – an abject Thing that devours meaning and collapses the symbolic armature holding the subject within language. From a reading of Kristeva we can say that this body is driven by a yearning to reconnect with itself outside the constraints of the Symbolic. Crucially, the condition of undead melancholia can for the first time be understood as a material condition. It is precisely the zombie’s embodied Thingness – its nonsensical mobilisation of the corpse – that makes it so horrifically Real.

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<sup>176</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p.3

## The Haptics of Undeadliness

The critical challenge posed to the Symbolic by undead melancholia is engendered by its abject materiality. The depressive void in meaning – the unfathomable dimension of the Real – collapses and congeals onto the surface of undeadliness. The zombie becomes a transgressive *texture* within language – a corrupting plane of glitchy flatness amidst Symbolic space – that collapses the normative distance of signification with a deathly closeness.

In her book *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Laura Marks describes haptic looking as an intimate encounter with surface, materiality and texture that opposes the formulation of rational knowledge engendered by the more distant optical gaze.

When I insist on the materiality of an image, I draw attention to its aspects that escape our symbolic recognition.<sup>177</sup> ... Haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.<sup>178</sup> ... In a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface.<sup>179</sup>

Marks goes on to use the term haptic to distinguish smooth space from striated space. Whilst striated space frames and categorises separate objects, keeping them distinct and symbolically familiar, smooth space collapses depth, distance and perspective onto a haptic surface of indiscernible texture. The haptic scours optical consistency and blurs familiarity; it evokes the materiality of the object without trying to forge a symbolic reading of it.

Romero's fiction plays out Marks' account of the haptic on a gruesomely literal level. The zombie corrupts the striated space of stable symbolic consistency and plunges the subject into a viscerally haptic encounter with the "smooth space" of undeadliness where meaning gives way to base materiality. The walking corpse demands an abject

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<sup>177</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p.xi

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* p.8

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* p.xvi

proximity, instigating a vile embodiment of the subject until she is *no more than a* body – until her subjectivity collapses altogether onto the surface of undead Thingness.

Deleuze and Guattari assert that neither smooth nor striated space can exist independently.<sup>180</sup> I dwell on this point because it helps me think through an essential quality of zombie fiction. If a subject encounters a hoard of zombies she will be inevitably devoured into non-existence. As Marks says:

To lose all distance from the world is to die a material death, to become indistinguishable from the rest of the world.<sup>181</sup>

So a total immersion in smooth space equates to a death in which the subject becomes no more than inert matter. This is the fate that befalls the victim who is devoured completely by the undead throng; she soon becomes no more than a pile of dead bones. But if “life is served” by an oscillation between smooth and striated space – “by the ability to come close, pull away, come close again”<sup>182</sup> as Marks suggests – then undeadliness is served by the subject coming close, being bitten, pulling away, dying, and rising again as a zombie. Only the subject who is not entirely devoured – who is plunged into the smooth space of the abject zombie attack but then makes an escape of sorts back into the striated space of boundaried subjectivity (albeit until the fatal contagion takes hold) – is able to arrive at a state of undeadliness. She becomes a corpse, yet she is not completely inert, and retains “the look” of the subject she once was. There is a tension here between the opposing registers of the smooth body and the striated body – the body as pure material Thingness, and the body as recognisable and categorised subjectivity. This articulates the delicious and unique horror of Romero’s fiction; the zombie still looks like the living person that it once was, even though it has retained none of her subjective personhood. It is a vertiginously weird mixture of material Thingness and symbolic familiarity – the Real with a residual whiff of evacuated meaning still hanging around it. Undeadliness is not a single point

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<sup>180</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004) p.474

<sup>181</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p.xvi

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

along the spectrum of smooth and striated space, it is simultaneously smooth *and* striated – two separate points folded in on one another. The symbolic function is totally decommissioned in that this body can no longer sign towards the subject, and yet the hollowed out shell of that same subject – the structural surface of signification – still remains on a visual and striated level.

### **Against Sublimation**

Throughout this chapter I have been talking about the Thing *outside* language, but my latest analysis demands that I complicate this formulation. The zombie's criticality lies in its ability to traumatise the fabric of the symbolic – it creates a weird materiality that renders the sign non-functional though still visible. So this interruption does not take place outside the Symbolic so much as *within* the texture and the grain of it. In the graveyard scene at the beginning of *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie does not arrive from without – from some transcendent beyond; it exists within the weave of the Symbolic reality, but does not behave according to the protocols of that reality. Instead, its Thingness – its base materiality – creates a texture of haptic and nonsensical undeadliness in the very space where the corpse *should* submit to its symbolic death. The original zombie from *Night of the Living Dead* does not, unlike my sublimated zombie, articulate the melancholic phantasy of an undead modernism that yearns for a radically oppositional space *outside* postmodern homogeneity. Instead undeadliness now articulates a haptic materialism that pocks the status quo from *within*. Furthermore, the impossible and intangible nature of melancholic phantasy is replaced by a more pragmatic and critical notion of melancholic materiality.

I will return to the potential political implications of this claim in Chapter Four, but I should now address the impact it has on the fiction of an undead utopia that I generated in Chapter Two. I claimed that the sublimation of undead melancholia allowed zombie fiction to be reworked as a utopian introjection of lost critical strategies of dissent. Sublimated undeadliness became the impossible phantasy of a transgressive subjectivity, reunited with death, that resists the ubiquity of the status quo. But what does sublimation *do* exactly to melancholia?

Kristeva claims that whilst the rhythms and melodies of hegemonic language become naturalised in the subject who is fully integrated within the symbolic, speech retains a deathliness that renders it devoid of meaning for the melancholic. Kristeva says that precisely because the melancholic sees speech as artificial and arbitrary, she has access to a poetic “polyvalency”<sup>183</sup> – a radical plurality of signification – that wrests the word away from having a single function within the Symbolic. The melancholic’s conversational manner can be typified by either an *authentic* monotone that is absent of all expressive protocol, or an *artificial* colouring of speech that is rich in alchemical signification. Alchemy is understood here as a process that sublimates the deathliness of language into a poetic affect. The melancholic’s words become a melodious song – “a beautiful façade carved out of a foreign language”<sup>184</sup> – in which an ornate and formal surface of sonorous artistry hides the void over which her speech is reaching. Words become free-floating signifiers that pour forth as an excess of fragments. From this detritus – this scrap heap of words – the melancholic can fashion semiotic meanings within the Imaginary realm, and this prevents her from dissolving completely into the depressive void of the Real. Conventional language perpetually fails the melancholic, but new constellations of melodic words might nevertheless move towards a poetic invocation of her unspeakable loss. Sublimation thus allows the melancholic to transform the spectre of the Thing into an aesthetic mask that deflects its fatal allure: “beauty emerges as the admirable face of loss, transforming it in order to make it live.”<sup>185</sup>

Kristeva goes on to set up allegory as “a subtle alchemy of signs”<sup>186</sup> that sublimates the melancholic’s dead language.

it endows the lost signifier with a signifying pleasure, a resurrectional jubilation even to the stone and the corpse...<sup>187</sup>

I will return to the specifics of allegorical meaning in Chapter Four, but the crucial point I wish to highlight is that Kristeva’s process of sublimation allows the

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<sup>183</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun; Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.14

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. p.55

<sup>185</sup> Ibid. p.99

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p.101

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. p.102

melancholic to position herself once again within language through the Imaginary process of creativity. This amounts to the reconstitution of melancholic subjectivity within the Symbolic; through the poetic manipulation of normalised meaning the melancholic is able to accept the deathliness within language. This in turn allows her to reclaim her own subjectivity *within* life. Sublimation therefore diverts melancholia *away* from the reunion with the Thing *without* life.

So within the conceit of zombie fiction, the creative act would protect the living subject from being devoured by the Symbolic dissolution of undeadliness. Her semiotic language would keep undeadly Thingness at bay by maintaining a degree of distance between herself and the collapse of meaning; the Real would remain hidden behind the artificial screen of the creative Imaginary. Sublimation would wrap the melancholic in a force-field of poetic agency that would repel any undeadly advances. Her newfound creativity would be her salvation.

But what about those who have already turned into zombies? Sublimation would allow the zombie – the undead melancholic – to take up poetic language and thus locate herself as a transgressive subject who partakes of the Symbolic whilst remaining *outside* of symbolic life. The sublimated undead melancholic would become the phantasy of the artist who occupies a radical subject position outside the constraints of the status quo.

In both these cases sublimation allows subjectivity to retain a measure of coherence. However, it is precisely the notion of a material and embodied Thingness *within* Symbolic language but *without* subjectivity that has allowed me to conceive of the haptic quality to undead melancholia. My *melancholic phantasy* of transgressive undead subjectivity is thus incompatible with the *melancholic texture* of haptic undead materiality. So whilst sublimation allowed my critical manoeuvres to proceed in Chapter Two, it now jars my efforts in Chapter Three to understand undead melancholia as a haptic surface, evacuated of its meaning, that exists outside the conceit of subjectivity. Sublimation takes the Real Thingness out of the zombie – it makes stable and familiar that which must remain volatile in order to function as an entangled artefact on the surface of the Symbolic.

## The Grumbler

In his utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, William Morris creates the figure of “the grumbler”<sup>188</sup> – a sceptical old man who believes he was happier in the years preceding the socialist revolution that has transformed Britain into a bucolic idyll. This figure, as a narrative device, puts in place a self-reflexive strategy through which Morris can test his own claims. The grumbler interrogates the other protagonists who become in turn, through their replies, fervent mouthpieces for Morris’s utopianism.

Whilst Morris uses the grumbler to examine his own thinking within the fictitious conceit of his utopia, the zombie from *Night of the Living Dead* tests my reasons for using a utopian conceit at all. This *original* zombie, now understood as a haptic figure, becomes an extra-diegetic grumbler (image 11) that questions the critical cogency of the *sublimated* zombie I have created. This haptic grumbler exists outside my conception of a zombie utopia and interrogates my efforts to formulate undead melancholia as a fictitious transgressive subjectivity.



Image 11

The main protagonist from *News from Nowhere* eventually steps back in time to his pre-revolutionary London; Morris leaves his utopia behind whilst retaining the integrity of his fiction overall. Within my thesis however, my attempt to generate a utopian fiction can no longer contain my most recent articulation of undead

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<sup>188</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.132

melancholia. The grumbler *within* my thesis – Romero’s original zombie – moves melancholia beyond a discussion of *sublimated* undeadliness (subjectivity) and into a new territory of *haptic* undeadliness (materiality).

My thesis so far has primarily focused on the zombie as it appears to other characters within a fictitious conceit. In an effort to further explore the haptic qualities of undeadliness I will now proceed to analyse the formal mechanics of Romero’s films in order to explore the impact that they have on the spectator. This will eventually lead me to propose a new role for the zombie as a methodological device for the spectator, *outside* the protocols of a hermetically coherent narrative.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Obsolete and Nostalgic

So far I have been primarily writing about the operations of undeadliness within its own fictitious conceit. In my previous chapter I formulated undead melancholia as a haptic materiality that explodes subjectivity and eviscerates Symbolic consistency. But this haptic quality depends on the other characters within the diegesis being totally bamboozled by the prospect of undeadliness, and in more recent zombie fiction this is no longer the case.<sup>189</sup> In the *Resident Evil* films for example, Alice – the main protagonist – is stoically accepting of undeadliness as the condition of her apocalypse. As the series progresses, Alice barely affords a second glance towards the millions of undead corpses stumbling through the scorched remains of civilisation.<sup>190</sup> The films thus contain none of the abject nonsense that is so particular to Romero's early work.

It is important to remember that Romero does not initially *name* the zombie as such; the undead body is a weird anomaly that cannot be classified within the diegesis of his films. However, Romero himself goes on to play with the way in which undeadliness is perceived by his protagonists. The zombies in *Land of the Dead* become a sub-class of pariahs who are taunted, teased and turned into caged attractions by the living human population. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the persecuted undead mob rises up against the tyranny of corporate capitalism and eventually unseats the corrupt oligarch. By the end of the film, the zombie throng is portrayed as a band of survivors who are trying to eek out an autonomous existence. They are still dangerous of course, but they do not *traumatise* meaning itself in the way that they used to in Romero's earlier films. The lurching corpse in the graveyard that sends Barbara into paroxysms of hysterical fear is now an obsolete and nostalgic figure. Instead, the zombie has become normalised within its own diegesis; it has become assimilated and recognisable within the very symbolic order that it must collapse if it is to function as a transgressive haptic texture.

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<sup>189</sup> Throughout this chapter I make occasional references to zombie fiction *not* authored by Romero in an effort to contextualise the particularities of Romero's films within a broader cultural climate.

<sup>190</sup> Paul W. S. Anderson, *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (Screen Gems, 2010)

## The Analogue Zombie vs. The Digital Zombie

But this notion of normalisation does not account for how zombie fiction operates on the spectator outside of the fictitious conceit of undeadliness. Much of the pleasure generated by Romero's early films – particularly *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead* – resides in the improvised and playful approach to gore-making that is deployed throughout. In a behind-the-scenes short film on the *Dawn of the Dead* DVD, Romero's special make-up effects supervisor Tom Savini fondly describes the ingenious devices he engineered in order to depict the exploding heads and torn up bodies that Romero demanded. Furthermore, the materiality of these analogue inventions can be seen on screen, and Steven Shaviro draws attention to this point in his essay *Contagious Allegories*.

Romero turns the constraints of his low budget – crudeness of presentation, minimal acting, and tacky special effects – into a powerful means of expression: he foregrounds and hyperbolizes these aspects of his production in order to depsychologize the drama and emphasise the artificiality and gruesome arbitrariness of spectacle. ... Our anxieties are focused upon events rather than characters, upon the violent fragmentation of cinematic process...  
...rather than the supposed integrity of any single protagonist's subjectivity.<sup>191</sup>

The singularity of Romero's early films owes a lot to his ability to create these riotous and frenzied set pieces – these gory tableaux of artificial excess – that privilege visceral thrill over narrative cohesion and the protagonists' subjective integrity. Romero invites the spectator to revel in this fakery – in the oozing orange blood, the rubber limbs and the patchy grey zombie make-up that appears to be turquoise on the cheap film stock. In these moments Romero does not try to evoke a hermetically sealed fictitious conceit in which a drama can unfold; rather, he displays the materiality of an explicitly artificial diegesis. I understand materiality here as a term that pinpoints the formal surfaces that constitute the onscreen image, as opposed to the *representational* function of these surfaces within the cinematic Symbolic.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p.88

<sup>192</sup> I use the term 'cinematic Symbolic' to describe the dominant visual language – the prevailing codes of formal representation – that author and sustain the diegesis of narrative cinema.

In one particular feeding frenzy from *Dawn of the Dead*, we see a close-up of zombies toying with a pile of freshly exposed human innards. However, the zombies do not shovel the flesh immediately into their mouths. They rummage through the fake entrails and prod the miscellaneous viscera. These are only fleeting shots, but Romero is proudly asking us to enjoy the gory set piece as a self-contained phenomenon in its own right (image 12). The probing hands that we see cease to be those of a ravenous undead mob; they become instead the hands of Romero's extras who have obviously been asked to show off the oozi-ness of the props as much as possible. These brief moments become a spectacle of material surfaces that are temporarily divorced from their representational function within the narrative. Romero is not bothered here with maintaining the illusion of a self-contained fictitious world; he wants us to revel in the playful artifice of his invention.

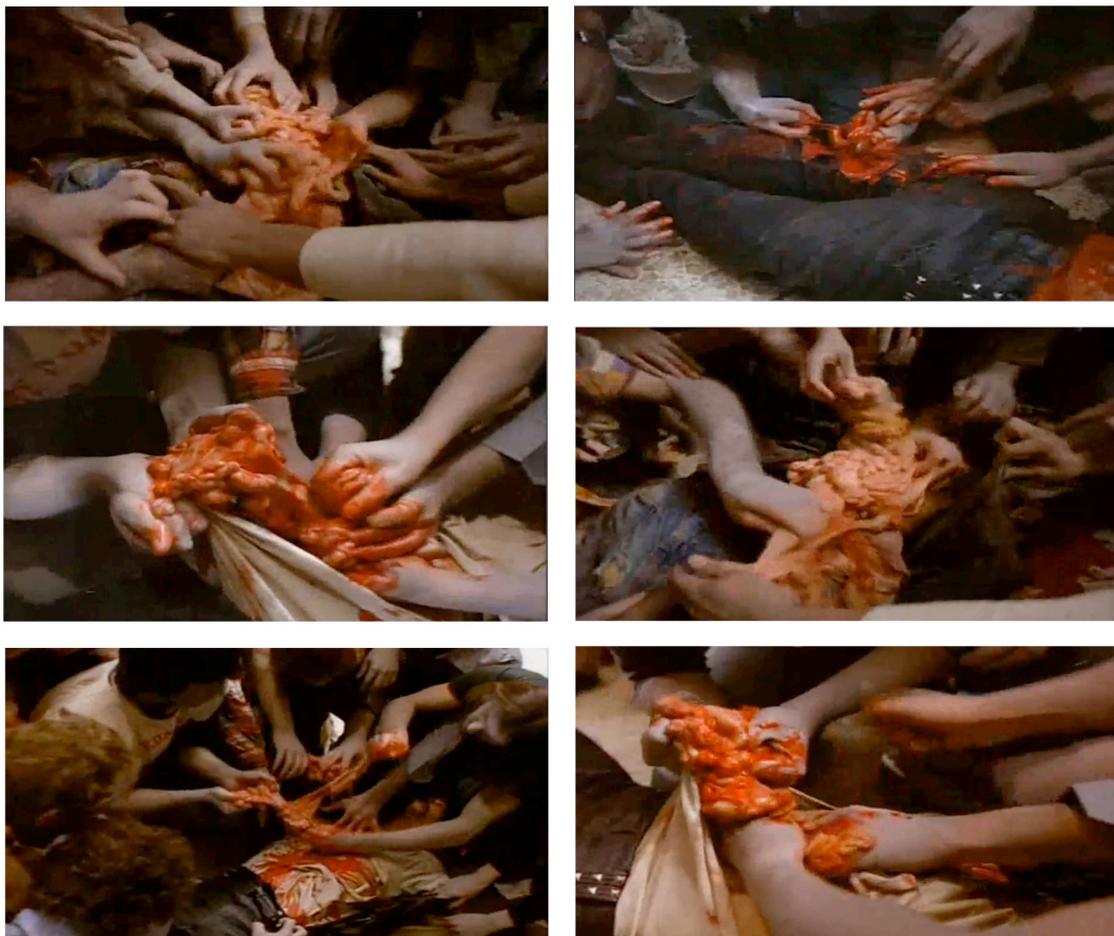


Image 12

In *Day of the Dead* a pack of zombies decapitates a screaming soldier. They carry out this procedure with a serene gracefulness and lightness of touch that is fascinatingly incongruous with the act itself (image 13). One particular zombie pulls the severed head away from the body in a very deliberate manner, then slowly backs away as if in awed reverence to the special effects. The other zombies fervently pat and push at the soldier's abdomen without exhibiting any real urge to plunder the newly exposed flesh. They add texture to the visceral scene and frame the gory manoeuvre; they become a stage-managed and static feature rather than a hungry hoard of zombies within a narrative trajectory. Again, this is a momentary and highly choreographed set piece that revels in, and invites us to enjoy, its own artifice.

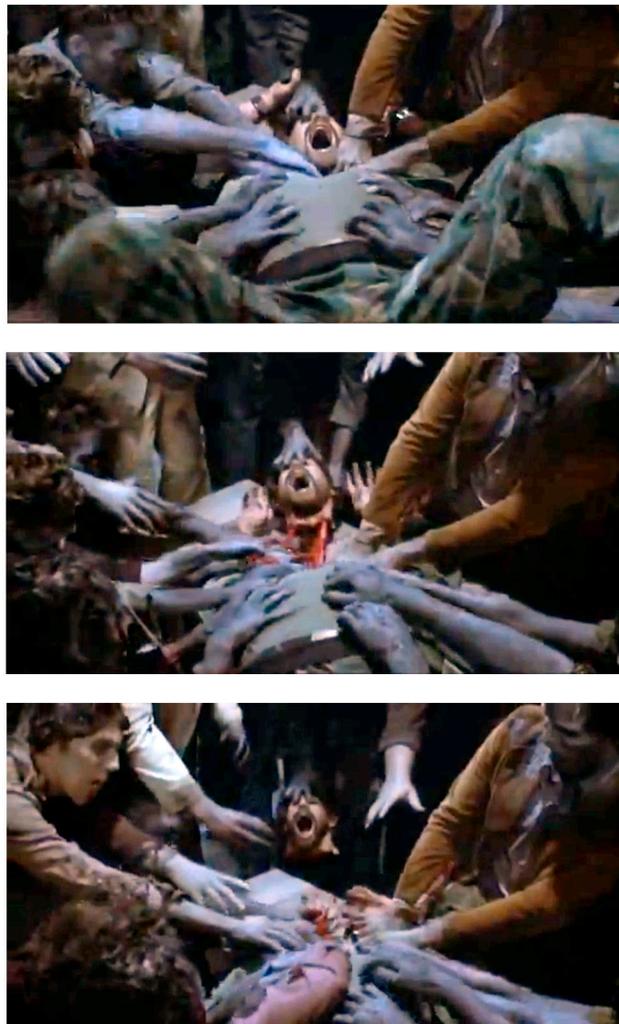


Image 13

We are thrilled by this anarchic irreverence towards the illusion of a hermetically sealed fictitious world that narrative cinema typically maintains. This playful subversion of filmic protocols might be understood as an eruption of thingness – a moment of haptic materiality – staged not between the zombie and the human *within* the diegesis but between the zombie and the spectator. We witness a glitch in the hegemonic language of the cinematic Symbolic – a moment of nonsense that upsets diegetic meaning with a material texture of artificial and gory excess. We are seduced by the *mechanics* of the moving image as opposed to the *meaning* of the moving image, and it is precisely the former that the cinematic Symbolic, concerned as it is with the illusion of a coherent narrative, attempts to hide. Shaviro goes on to say,

Just as the zombies cannot be categorized within the diegesis (they cannot be placed in terms of our usual binary oppositions of life and death, or nature and culture), so on the formal level of presentation they transgress, or simply ignore, the boundaries between humour and horror, between intense conviction and ludicrous exaggeration.

These films are wildly discontinuous, flamboyantly anti-naturalistic, and nonsensically grotesque. Yet the more ridiculously excessive and self-consciously artificial they are, the more literal is their visceral impact. They can't be kept at a distance, for they can't be referred to anything beyond themselves. Their simulations are radically immediate: they no longer pretend to stand in for, or to represent, a previously existing real. Horror thus destroys customary meanings and appearances, ruptures the surfaces of the flesh, and violates the organic integrity of the body. It puts the spectator in direct contact with intensive, unrepresentable fluxes of corporeal sensation.<sup>193</sup>

Steven Shaviro claims that these moments in Romero's oeuvre undo the process of figuration. The zombie – in these instances of affective excess – does not stand for anything other than itself; it does not stay faithful to the coherent meaning of the narrative and instead ruptures its own diegetic continuum by making direct and unmitigated overtures to the spectator's visual pleasures. Undeadliness bleeds beyond

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid. p.101

the constraints of the horror genre that contains it, becoming, for a moment at least, an affective, subversive, grotesque and slapstick hybrid instead. We do not revel in the representational language of the narrative; rather we respond to the gleeful and gory excessiveness – the haptic texture of artificiality – that refuses to coalesce to the celluloid illusion of hermetically sealed narrative coherence. The notion of a normalising cinematic Symbolic that demands representative consistency is undone by a fabric of formal surfaces that refuses to *make* sense. The haptic quality of undeadliness no longer articulates the encounter between the zombie and the subject *within* the diegesis; it describes the spectator's encounter with the disruptive materiality of Romero's cinematic artefacts that suspend their own symbolic function.

In contrast to this analogue and haptic rendition of undeadliness, contemporary zombie fiction now uses a lot of digital imagery as its prevailing means of representation. In series 2 episode 9 of *The Walking Dead*<sup>194</sup> we see a car crash victim lying unconscious in her upturned vehicle as a zombie tries to gnaw its way through the cracked windscreen. As the undead corpse strives to push its head through the window, the skin on its face is increasingly lacerated by shards of broken glass until bloody patches of its skull starts to become visible beneath its shredded features. The effect is impressive, but at the same time the gore remains faithful to the diegesis; by looking so 'realistic' the effect heightens the integrity of the hermetically sealed narrative. But because of this, the cinematic Symbolic retains a prevailing consistency at the expense of the playful irreverence that Romero brings to the genre. This *digital* attempt to masterfully represent the zombie as a symbolically stable figure destroys the affective materiality of Romero's *analogue* zombie.

Accordingly, the digital effects in Romero's fourth zombie film *Land of the Dead* separate it from its predecessors. In the early scenes we see Cholo throw a sack of refuse onto a landfill site. The bag breaks open to reveal an emaciated undead body lying amidst the waste. Cholo shoots the zombie with a crossbow. The undead body collapses as the bolt smashes through its head, but its pathetic slump is unmistakably *digital*. This particular zombie death is rendered insipid and translucent as a result. There is no gory weightiness to this demise – no makeshift artefact or fake physicality

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<sup>194</sup> Frank Darabont, *The Walking Dead* (AMC Studios, 2010)

to it. It is merely a digital effect, but it alerts the spectator to the troubling fact that Romero has begun to assimilate the logic of the cinematic Symbolic in the fabric of his work. At this point Romero's zombie stops being an artificial excess of materiality that violates the integrity of the diegesis. The fully integrated digital zombie is symptomatic of a larger stagnation within the genre. Generic zombie fiction now reproduces a range of over saturated tropes: the ostensibly isolated attacks that soon proliferate into a full blown zombie holocaust; the media descending into anarchy as chaos takes hold; the coma patient waking up to a scene of undead desolation; the character who must slay the undead corpse of a loved one; these scenarios have now become over-saturated motifs within the highly-commodified and ubiquitous brand of zombie fiction. Undeadliness no longer makes nonsense; it has spawned a series of instantly familiar celluloid tableaux that make total sense commercially. Undeadliness has lost its weird haptic closeness and become part of the normative language of cinema.

### **Evacuated Meanings**

Without these affective and excessive analogue interruptions to the diegesis that I have been exploring, Romero's zombie fiction would remain faithful to the notion of a hermetically sealed narrative. Furthermore, Shaviro claims that Romero's narratives have the capacity to function on an allegorical level. By way of a brief consultation of Walter Benjamin, Shaviro understands allegory as a means of making meaning that maintains an unbridgeable gap between the signifier and the signified. Within the rubric of the allegory, the signifier is an empty and fragmented husk that has no immanent or equivalent discourse attached to it. Shaviro argues that allegory functions non-representationally in that it relies on decoding and interpretation in order for its meaning(s) to emerge. He then introduces the zombie into this allegorical model by understanding it as an example of a material form – the undead husk with no interiority – that points towards, but does not straightforwardly represent, a particular set of political ideas.

The “living dead” emerge out of the deathly distance of allegory; their fictive presence allows Romero to anatomise and criticise American society, not by

portraying it naturalistically, but by evacuating and eviscerating it. Allegory is then not just a mode of depiction, but an active means of subversive transformation.<sup>195</sup>

In this passage Shaviro outlines the critical potential of constructing the zombie as an allegorical figure. The ‘subversive transformation’ he talks of can be understood as a visual language that does not simply *show* that which it wishes to criticise; instead the zombie genre stages a critical dissection of ‘American society’ by casting it as a bloodied walking corpse. The zombie transmogrifies into a graphic and terrifying tableau of the de-humanising affects of late capitalism – an allegorical image that is all the more critical precisely because it is able to summon forth a level of visceral and abject horror that is invisible to conventional protocols of hegemonic representation.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin uses allegory to criticise the romantic use of the symbol in which a harmonised unity is purported to exist between the object and its meaning.<sup>196</sup> For Benjamin this has ideological ramifications because that which is historically contingent and subject to the passing of time can – through the symbol – be rarefied as an eternal and naturalised truth. The material object, such as the cross for example, becomes totally conflated with and inseparable from the meaning it stands for. But if the symbol is the coalescence of form and idea – a union that exalts the material world and totalises the physical signifier – then allegory tears this union asunder. Benjamin claims that the allegorical object is a lifeless fragment – an ossified husk – with no intrinsic kernel of meaning. It is indelibly marked with, and articulates, an evacuated interiority. Allegory congeals around this absence, so there is always a deathly void at its core. It is through this introjection of loss that allegory plays out a melancholic identification with death. So within the mechanics of zombie fiction dwells a trace of melancholia. The zombie’s allegorical refusal of Symbolic consistency, and its subsequent status as a fragment that is bereft of meaning, makes it *structurally* melancholic outside of the fictitious conceit, as well as *thematically* melancholic within it.

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. p.86

<sup>196</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998) p.160

However I am suspicious of applying the allegorical mode of representation to the zombie. Allegory contains hues of sublimation as I discussed in my earlier section on Kristeva:

[allegory] endows the lost signifier with a signifying pleasure, a resurrectional jubilation even to the stone and the corpse...<sup>197</sup>

Shaviro does indeed endow the zombie with “a signifying pleasure” as I described above, but this pulls the zombie back into the service of meaning once more. Allegory sublimates zombie fiction, drawing it back into symbolic consistency. Of course, I carried out this manoeuvre myself in Chapter Two when I attempted to understand sublimated undead melancholia as an allegory for a lost modernism, but I am now trying to articulate a different manoeuvre. Throughout my project I have consistently found that the zombie resists existing paradigms of thinking precisely because the fiction of undeadliness has no equivalence outside of its diegesis. This has allowed me to write undead melancholia as a hybrid of zombie fiction and psychoanalysis that is faithful to the conceit of neither. As such, I have attempted to show that the zombie invokes *original* meanings as opposed to being a figure for *existing* meanings. It could be argued that the former is precisely what allegorical meaning *is* for Benjamin. But even so, within allegory the evacuated sign is recouped in some way so that it moves away from a collapse of meaning, and becomes a poetic and ‘expressive’ tool instead.

My formulation of haptic undeadliness is dependent on the zombie’s ability to retain a materiality that doesn’t calibrate with the cinematic Symbolic, and functions instead for the viewer as a purely formal surface that cannot be conventionally ‘read’. Like the allegorical object, the haptic zombie is still a fragment – an evacuated signifier devoid of interiority – but unlike the allegorical object, it does not need to be redeemed or sublimated in some way in order to function. The zombie-as-allegory is now the normative position taken by the vast majority of theorists; this line of thinking has become as ubiquitous as the zombie itself. It is precisely through my

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<sup>197</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun; Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.102

rejection of zombie-as-allegory that I hope to prise open a new position for undeadness that might reanimate its tired and commercialised ubiquity.

### A Contemporary Problem

The highly derivative, over-familiar and saturated tropes that have colonised recent zombie fiction are symptomatic of the contemporary condition. The homogeneity of late capitalism collapses radical opposition from the *outside* by assimilating dissent *within* its own operations. Mark Fisher claims that the ‘success’ of the current status quo stems from its ability to present its own highly ideological systems and processes as the inevitable mechanisms of a ubiquitous reality to which no alternative exists.<sup>198</sup> Fisher self-consciously positions his diagnosis of the contemporary condition as a development of Fredric Jameson’s argument in the 1991 text *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson claims that a “fundamental mutation of the sphere of culture”<sup>199</sup> has taken place whereby “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production.”<sup>200</sup> He continues,

...some of our most cherished and time-honoured radical conceptions about the nature of cultural politics may thereby find themselves outmoded. However distinct those conceptions – which range from slogans of negativity, opposition, and subversion to critique and reflexivity – may have been, they all shared a single, fundamentally spatial, presupposition, which may be resumed in the equally time-honoured formula of “critical distance.”<sup>201</sup>

He uses the term “critical distance” to evoke the notion of an oppositional and counter-cultural space from which autonomous critical arguments might be formulated in response to a hegemonic status quo. He then claims that “the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital... has very

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<sup>198</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Ropley; 0 Books, 2009) p.16

<sup>199</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, in: Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism; A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) p.86

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. p.65

<sup>201</sup> Ibid. p.87

precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism.”<sup>202</sup> However contested the term postmodernism has become in the intervening two decades since Jameson made this claim, the proposition that we have witnessed the erasure of oppositional cultural spaces that might resist their own assimilation into capital concerns remains continually pertinent. Benjamin Buchloh offers a more recent articulation of this very point when he claims that “spaces of subversion, resistance, critique, utopian aspiration”<sup>203</sup> have been “eroded, assimilated, or simply annihilated”<sup>204</sup> by the “homogenizing apparatus”<sup>205</sup> of contemporaneity, and that this “necessitates a rethinking of what cultural practice can be under the totalizing conditions of fully advanced capitalist organization.”<sup>206</sup> And Fisher brings us up to date with his notion of “precorporation” – a process that pre-formats practice to the point where it is contained within the dominant mode of culture from its very conception:

What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.<sup>207</sup>

The notion of an exterior critical space that can operate as a counterpoint to dominant culture, even if it later becomes assimilated into the mainstream (like punk for example), has been eradicated. Instead, Fisher claims that contemporary cultural productivity – and indeed human life itself – is already contained within, and internal to, the logic of capital. 50 Cent captures this pre-existing co-option of human life in the title of his album *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*.<sup>208</sup> Life is measured solely on a continuum of financial solvency and commercial success; life is wealth, and death becomes inseparable from the absence of it.

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid. p.87

<sup>203</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh et al., *The Predicament of Contemporary Art*, in: Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, David Joselit, *Art Since 1900; Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2004) p.673

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. p.676

<sup>207</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Ropley; 0 Books, 2009) p.9

<sup>208</sup> 50 Cent, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (Aftermath Entertainment, 2003)

## The Depressed Practitioner

During a performance by The Vines on the Late Show with David Letterman, the lead singer Craig Nicholls gives an impressively off-piste rendition of the hit single *Get Free*.<sup>209</sup> Large sections of the catchy song are rendered unrecognisable by Nicholls' howling vocals and squawking guitar; he ends up prostrate and writhing on the studio floor while his bandmates desperately try to maintain some semblance of the song. Nicholls eventually destroys the drum kit in a blaze of rock'n'roll cliché, and then the camera cuts back to a grinning Letterman. The unruffled host shares a bemused joke with his sycophantic musical director before announcing the advertisement break. Despite Nicholls' nihilistic and raging self-sabotage, his protest becomes exactly what he is protesting against, namely his own assimilation within the commercial mainstream. His is a perfectly hollow rebellion packaged into three minutes – a purely stylistic spectacle of dissent that dovetails seamlessly with the TV schedule, raising the stock of The Vines immeasurably. I recognise in Nicholls' behaviour the symptoms of a particular desire to inhabit a cultural position deemed impossible by the homogenous machinations of contemporaneity. There is a futility to Nicholls' actions of which he is only too painfully aware.

Martin Seligman formulates the notion of “learned helplessness”<sup>210</sup> to describe a situation in which, due to difficult environmental conditions (as opposed to *internal* or *biological* conditions) the subject is unable to recognise any meaningful purpose to her actions. She develops a depressive position in response to the realisation that the tasks she carries out, and the intentions embedded within them, fail to have a corresponding consequence. She comes to recognise a prevailing futility to all her actions. And this is not negative thinking; within her situation there *is* a prevailing futility to the choices she is making.

We can use this idea of learned helplessness to formulate the notion of a depressed practitioner, exemplified by Craig Nicholls, who yearns to inhabit the alternative and counter-cultural position that has been rendered obsolete by the homogenous

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<sup>209</sup>The Vines, *Get Free*, on: *The Late Show with David Letterman* (Worldwide Pants Incorporated, 2002)

<sup>210</sup> Martin Seligman, *The Learned Helplessness Model of Depression*, in: Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.312

machinations of contemporaneity. But as I have established through Fisher and Jameson, there is a futility to this intension to want to be outside the hegemonic status quo. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Christine Ross claims that the contemporary political condition sets up “norms of independence based on generalised individual initiative (personified by the model of the entrepreneur).”<sup>211</sup> We might then say that the depressed practitioner refuses to assimilate these normative values of economic productivity. But within the prevailing cultural climate there is no *critical space* for her refusal to manifest oppositionally. Instead her position can only be understood as depressive, triggered by her failure to integrate the figure of the entrepreneur within her role as a practitioner. Her learned helplessness – her depression – grows from the schism between her critical intentions as an artist and the lack of opportunity for these intentions to have any oxygen within the stifling homogeneity of the contemporary climate.

### **The Zombie Spectator**

If we go back to the example of The Vines and analyse it again, an interesting detail emerges. As the camera cuts back to Letterman, Nicholls’ guitar amp continues to emit a high-pitched drone of feedback. Whilst his performance is an inevitably futile cliché, it produces a moment of unintentional excess that does, for a moment at least, interfere within the technical protocols of the show. The feedback bleeds outside of its allotted sequential segment, and its presence as an out-of-place sonic texture is more disruptive to the seamless spectacle of TV than Nicholls’ display of subjective rebellion. The single high-pitched note is not an external disruption; it grows from within the mechanical materiality of the studio, and yet it does not behave according to the protocols of that location.

When I was looking for the example of the car crash zombie on YouTube I found a low-resolution clip in which the surface artefacts of the image – the glitchy and grainy pixels – interfere with our ability to read and decipher the content (image 14). The

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<sup>211</sup> Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p.xxiii

illusion of filmic space is flattened in places by abstract visual noise. The moving image, that, in the original footage, supports a hermetically sealed diegesis, now appears as a haptic surface. The flatness of the glitch collides a smooth and affective texture with the striated space of the cinematic Symbolic. This image effectively becomes more zombie-like than the zombie figure itself. It bears the trace of signification, but is emptied of its associated meanings. The image therefore appears to the spectator in the same way that the zombie initially appeared to its victims in Romero's early films; it evacuates the sign of its content, leaving a haptic material trace – a surface without symbolic substance.

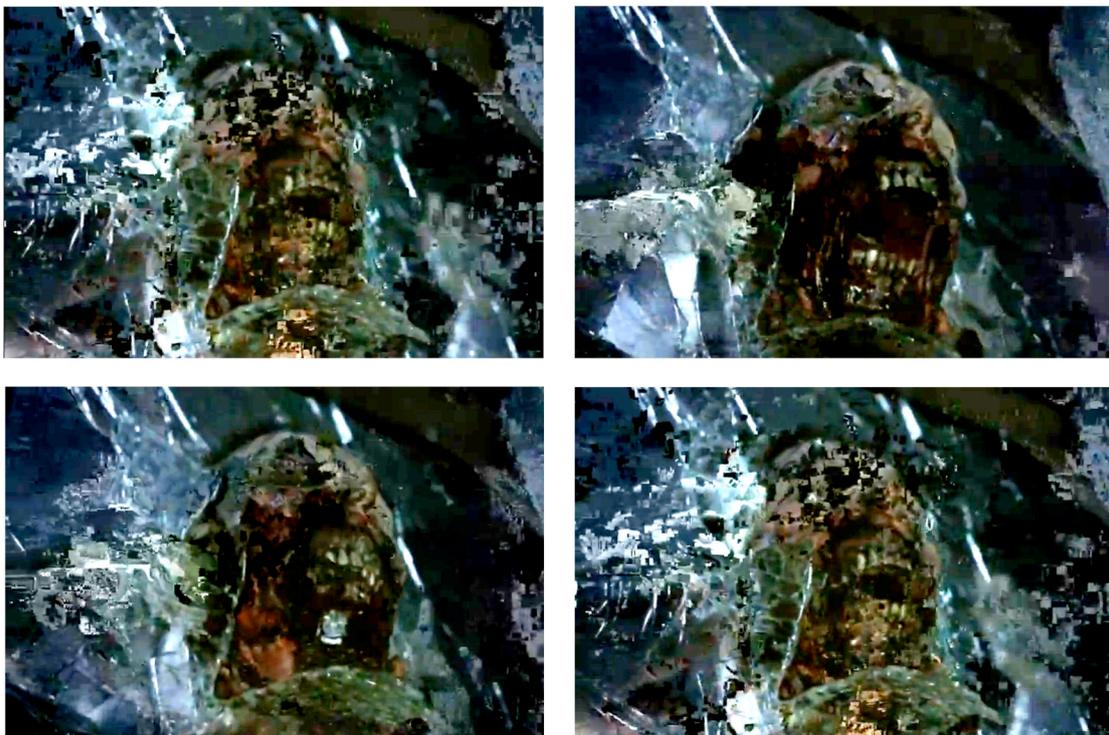


Image 14

This example further illustrates how the haptic qualities of undead fiction (in this case an accidental glitch produced by compression) formally interrupt the integrity of the cinematic Symbolic. To understand how this quality might then contribute to the construction of a particular zombie spectator I will briefly consult Laura Mulvey's famous essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey details the formal filmic conventions that sustain the illusion of a fictitious diegesis.

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the profilmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve... ..the unity of diegesis... the world of illusion.<sup>212</sup>

Mulvey goes on to say that these conventions would be undone if a filmmaker were to “free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment.”<sup>213</sup> Romero’s analogue set pieces can be understood as an instance that privileges the materiality of the filmic image in that we can explicitly see how the diegesis has been constructed. As I’ve already discussed, the “look of the camera” is freed from the service of narrative and shows us instead an unmediated tableau of affective viscera that, in that moment, is not operating within the narrative. Similarly, the glitchy YouTube video renders the materiality of the screen as a flattened surface of artefacts that no longer describes the illusion of a self-contained diegesis.

So these haptic moments within the formal presentation of zombie fiction undo the conventions of the cinematic image by exposing its “materiality in time and space”, but I will now explore how these instances might open up in the spectator what Mulvey calls a “distancing awareness” and “detachment.” One of the devices deployed by narrative cinema is the visual process of identification, whereby the spectator effectively inhabits the fictitious conceit through the gaze of the main protagonist.<sup>214</sup> However, in Romero’s films there is a consistent absence of shots that enable the spectator to firmly identify with any one character within the diegesis. Instead Romero constructs a range of gazes that emanate from many different points of view. When Roger and Peter execute the zombies in the basement of the tenement

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<sup>212</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in: Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000; An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) p.988

<sup>213</sup> Ibid. 988-989

<sup>214</sup> Ibid. 986

building in *Dawn of the Dead*, the camera looks directly into the barrel of their guns, offering us a zombie's-eye-view of imminent annihilation (image 15).



Image 15

Alternatively, when Stephen is attacked in the elevator towards the end of the same film, we see from his point of view what it looks like to be pounced upon and devoured by a ravenous undead mob (image 16).



Image 16

Romero deliberately plays with these camera positions to prevent us from identifying with any one protagonist within the film. As such, we do not *lose* our sense of ourselves as spectators by connecting with the characters within the illusion of the diegesis; rather we watch from a self-reflexive distance and acknowledge that we are consciously witnessing the very formal operations that Mulvey says must be hidden if narrative cinema is to function effectively.

At the beginning of *Day of the Dead*, we see a woman sitting alone in an unfurnished breezeblock room. She stands up and approaches the wall, upon which hangs a calendar depicting an image of a pumpkin field. Suddenly, countless zombie hands burst through the wall and try to grab her (image 17). The woman spins around in terror, and then Romero cuts to a shot of the same character waking up in the back of a helicopter. We realise that the previous image was the climax to her dream.



Image 17

But as the woman spins away from the zombie hands in the dream sequence, she strikes a pose that is overtly stylised and theatrical. Instead of running away – an act that the fictitious conceit surely demands – she holds her hammy stance in front of the camera long enough for us to notice its kitsch artifice. If Romero had cut away from this shot a second earlier we would not notice the acting straying beyond the limits of what we might call naturalistic, but the image remains on screen long enough for us to register its explicitly artificial staging. Romero invites us to recognise this set piece as a hyperbolic spectacle deliberately played to the camera, as opposed to an image that faithfully conforms to the illusion of a self-contained diegesis. This scene is another example of the way in which Romero’s films do not attempt to sustain the illusion of a hermetically sealed reality; by revealing – and revelling in – their own artifice, they playfully subvert the “conventions of narrative film” as identified by Mulvey.

I propose that Romero’s films combine an overt theatricality, a visceral excess and an absence of a stable protagonist’s gaze in order to construct a particular zombie spectator who is aware of her own distance and detachment from the fictitious conceit of undeadness. She relishes instead the *affective materiality* of undeadness that has been prised away from the illusory protocols of narrative cinema. This zombie spectator is interested not in the ostensible unity and symbolic consistency of undead fiction, bound up as it is in tired genre conventions, but in the haptic fragments of undead fiction – the irreverent, playful and unruly spectacles – that interrupt their own fictitious conceit.

### **Haptic Undeadliness as a Melancholic Methodology**

So this haptic undeadliness, recognisable in analogue fragments of zombie fiction, harnesses a materiality that infects the weave and the fabric of the cinematic Symbolic. This manoeuvre would appeal to the depressed practitioner who yearns to make a cultural intervention, but refuses to consent absolutely to the operations of the ubiquitous homogeneity she inevitably inhabits. I now suggest that haptic undeadliness performs on the surface of the screen a procedure that the depressed practitioner aspires to in her own practice. But why would the practitioner be drawn to the formal procedures of Romero’s films in particular? Early Structuralist film, for

example, completely shatters the normative language of cinematic representation. However, the depressed practitioner cannot replicate this critical strategy in her work because, as I've already established, there is no longer any critical space within contemporary culture to play out such a radical break with the status quo. Romero's zombie films, on the other hand, irreverently play with the conventions of narrative cinema whilst remaining *within* that particular category. And this notion of triggering an antagonistic critical movement, albeit one contained by a larger homogenous structure, is a strategy that the depressed practitioner might yet hope to activate in her own work. The haptic excess and the rush of artefacts that cloud meaning in Romero's films might now be understood as a prescription for how the practitioner might engineer a material interruption to the homogeneity she exists within.

When attempting to imagine a means of contesting the ubiquity of contemporaneity, Mark Fisher claims that, "Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible realism turns out to be nothing of the sort."<sup>215</sup> This strategy would involve asserting that "capitalist realism" is a contingent ideology as opposed to a naturalised fact. Fisher goes on to suggest that, "One strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us."<sup>216</sup>

In the spirit of Fisher's proposition I claim that haptic undeadliness allows the depressed practitioner to conceive of a material practice of glitchy artefacts that might flatten the illusion of normalisation specific to late capitalism. This proliferation of haptic materiality would not be *outside* the structural mechanisms that support the ideological conceit of the prevailing symbolic reality; rather it would play across the surfaces of these mechanisms as an affective texture that infects the dominant status quo with a dose of Real thingness.

But if the depressed practitioner recognises in haptic undeadliness a methodology for making work without *precorporating* the condition of contemporary homogeneity, how might she then reproduce this methodology in her own practice? Mimesis will not suffice; she cannot simply *pretend* to be a zombie, because the image of

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<sup>215</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Ropley: 0 Books, 2009) p.16

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.* p.18

undeadliness has already been lost to the spectacle of capitalist homogenisation. Sarah Juliet Lauro explores this very point in her essay *Zombies Invade Performance Art*. She attempts a political reading of the recent phenomena of zombie walks and flash mobs, in which the public assemble en masse in full undead regalia, and then proceed to stumble unannounced through high streets and city centres. These events have inevitably been hijacked by commercial zombie conventions to the extent that “the zombie walks that began as a playful resistance to consumer culture are becoming the very thing they set out to mock.”<sup>217</sup> However, Lauro insists that there remains in these public gatherings the germ of political praxis.

The zombie gatherings that most interest me are those that are neither organised fund-raisers nor overt protests, but rather demonstrations that communicate nothing but the participants’ embrace of the zombie as a legible cultural signifier; the signified is up for grabs.<sup>218</sup>

This assertion returns the zombie to being no more than a highly saturated figure within popular culture that stands *allegorically* for all manner of “signified” content. Lauro’s public zombie gatherings simply reproduce a highly commodified image that tessellates seamlessly with the dominant symbolic language of contemporary culture. This is antithetical to my own claim that the image of undeadliness must retain a haptic quality – a measure of unreadability – if it is to antagonise the hegemonic status quo. However, Lauro goes on to assert the political potential of the zombie walk phenomenon.

The mute staggering zombies that are coming soon to a city near you... attest to the possibility of organised rebellion, giving us the form but not the substance of insurrection.<sup>219</sup>

Lauro claims that the collective nature of the zombie walk amounts to a “form” of “insurrection”, yet this fails to contend with the fact that this “form” – the communal

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<sup>217</sup> Sarah Juliet Lauro, *Playing Dead; Zombies Invade Performance Art*, in: Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (eds.), *Better Off Dead; The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) p.228

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. p.227

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

gathering – is inseparable from and precorporated within, the dominant contemporary hegemony. The idea that collective public action alone might amount to a form of insurrection ignores the exhausted and predominantly ineffective status of protest that currently prevails within Western culture. By proposing a vague and naïve form of oppositional insurrection, Lauro’s argument fails to acknowledge the widespread diagnosis of the contemporary status quo as a system that forever precorporates dissent within its own operations to the point where the prevailing and historical model of protest within liberal democracy has become part of the mainstream political discourse. Contemporary protest might well raise awareness, such as the actions of UK Uncut and the resulting spotlight that has been shone on the tax avoidance schemes of large multinational companies. But this does not amount to an “insurrection” as Lauro suggests. Quite the opposite in fact; the companies concerned either justify their actions or make small adjustments to their tax arrangements so that business might continue as usual. The wider hegemony remains undisturbed by this modulation. Whatever self-organised groups manage to accomplish, whether dressed as zombies or not, it is surely problematic to claim that these accomplishments are formally *outside*, and in opposition to, the prevailing status quo.

So in opposition to Lauro’s argument, I propose that the depressed practitioner might treat the zombie in a very different manner. She needs to understand haptic undeadliness as a methodology that she can *replicate* in her own practice without literally copying the image of the zombie on a visual level. Haptic undeadliness invites the practitioner to activate in her work a material interruption – a glitch of affect – that might break the ubiquitous seamlessness of contemporaneity without claiming to be outside its operations. This practice would not *resemble* undeadliness, but would function *like* undeadliness in its efforts to flatten the ostensible realism of the ideological status quo with an array of disruptive artefacts.

### **A Haptic Antagonism**

In my previous chapter I understood undead melancholia as a collapse of meaning that traumatises the fabric of symbolic consistency. I now claim that the methodology learned from haptic undeadliness might be understood as melancholic precisely

because it refuses the symbolic protocols of the status quo. The practitioner's depressive failure – her inability to open up an oppositional space for her work – can be superseded by a wilful melancholic productivity. I will now explore how this latest and final account of melancholia in my thesis is no longer a transgressive subject position but a *haptic antagonism* to contemporary culture. Once again there is a political dimension embedded in this shift from depression back to melancholia. If depression is an anomaly that can be medically rectified according to a model of normalised behaviour, then contemporary melancholia might be understood as an interruption to this procedure of normalisation. To play out this argument I now need to modify my understanding of melancholia itself.

In her historical account of the vicissitudes of melancholy, melancholia and depression, Jennifer Radden articulates the difference between subjective and behavioural states within clinical medicine.

The distinction between subjective and behavioural is reflected in the contrast between a symptom-based and a sign-based diagnostic emphasis in clinical medicine. The *symptom* is a patient's complaint, a description of inner states; a *sign*, in contrast, is an outwardly observable feature of behaviour or bodily condition.<sup>220</sup>

If melancholia is understood across this schism between the subjective and the behavioural – between internal states on one hand and external signs on the other – then the semiotic collapse engendered by melancholia is no longer an inner experience of subjective dissolution; it manifests visually on the surfaces of the body instead. If melancholia previously antagonised the internal psychological state of the subject, it might now be understood as a behavioural surface that undoes the visual homogeneity of the Symbolic. Clinical medicine uses notions of the behavioural to classify and fix mental illness as a stable set of observable signs, but I am formulating here a contemporary haptic melancholia that interferes with the ability of these signs to make sense. I claim that haptic melancholia uses the *form* of the behavioural diagnosis – the observed body – to resist the fixed *content* of the behavioural

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<sup>220</sup> Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy; From Aristotle to Kristeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.33

diagnosis. Melancholia's haptic evisceration of the sign would assert the body as a material texture that refuses to be read as a classifiable condition. Melancholia still articulates a loss, but this loss no longer manifests subjectively; it resides instead on the surface of the haptic body that evacuates the normative protocols of contemporaneity. This body – as a material artefact – refuses pre-existing classifications and exhaustive readings; instead it invites the spectator into a proximity of surfaces that do not yield to symbolic consistency. This echoes the understanding of a material and illegible melancholia that I formulated in Chapter Three, but the state of haptic melancholia is now engendered by the performativity of the artist instead of the undeadliness of the zombie.

So I propose that the practitioner might adopt this haptic melancholia as a performative artefact within her practice that interrupts the homogenous protocols of her immediate environment. Haptic melancholia becomes a methodology, learnt from the ways in which undeadliness undoes its own fictitious conceit, that teaches the practitioner how to swamp the protocols of the live occasion with an unruly dose of excessive and nonsensical affect. This melancholic performance, as a haptic texture, might be apprehended by the spectator as a cringe-worthy, awkward, joyous, humorous or embarrassing moment; the practitioner would decide on the intervention that most effectively derails the formal appropriateness of a given situation.

Of course there are all manner of unexpected and inauspicious scenarios not allied to art practice that have the potential to author a haptic disturbance to normalised protocols. Awkward greetings, misfiring jokes, ill-judged wedding speeches, insufficient funds, inopportune accidents, miscommunication, enforced intimacies; these all have the ability to create in us a giddy vertigo – an excess of affective white noise that momentarily clouds our ability to read and rationalise our everyday exchanges. The haptic antagonism that I am attempting to formulate would, however, be a more premeditated and calculated occurrence that specifically targets the authoritative and prevailing operations of contemporary cultural production. Whilst the result of this antagonism might well be impossible to predict in terms of its affective impact, it would nonetheless be a strategic procedure as opposed to a random, chaotic or fortuitous occurrence – a volatile happening set in motion due to a process of focused and critical thinking as opposed to the surrendering of critical

thought altogether. So whilst the result itself might be volatile and mercurial, the methodology that triggers it constitutes a distinct and discerning practice. This practice would manifest through performative interruptions to the formal procedural norms that determine the production of cultural discourse.

So the practitioner's melancholic performance, devised from watching zombie films as a self-reflexive spectator, would eviscerate the normalised event, collapsing its prevailing protocols with a sudden texture of affective proximity and haptic unfamiliarity. This tactic would not amount to a cultural insurrection or an oppositional *détournement*. However, it might manifest as an unwillingness to coalesce absolutely with the status quo, and remind us that the ubiquitous procedures that determine our socio-political behaviour are contingent negotiations rather than essential conditions. And so it is that the depressed practitioner might discover a means of being melancholically active *within* the stifling climate of contemporaneity.

## CONCLUSION

### (Post)Undead Melancholia

The term ‘zombie’ has been expanded to evoke such a myriad, yet fragmented, spectrum of characteristics, traits and tropes – both within and without fiction – that it has become irreparably prised away from, perhaps even antonymous to, what it previously described. Unsurprisingly therefore, some critics have enjoyed hailing the era of the post zombie.<sup>221</sup> In my own project, the figure of undeadliness migrated from an absence of subjectivity, into the formation of transgressive subjectivity, into a haptic texture beyond subjectivity, into a methodology for art practice that avoids subjectivity... becoming unrecognisable as a zombie along the way. Perhaps the understanding of undeadliness I have arrived at, as a haptic strategy for making work, is necessarily (post)undead.

In this conclusion I speculate as to how the expansion of undeadliness from a fictitious conceit into a (post)undead performance methodology might continue to push upon the term melancholia with which it has been antagonistically coupled throughout my project. (Post)undeadliness has certainly prompted me to consider melancholia in relation to materialist discourses. The *movement* that melancholia engenders, previously understood as a desire to be reunited with death – the act of subjective self-annihilation – might now be described as a shift from the symbolic to the material. This chimes with current debates in materialism that attempt to look away from death for that which determines an ontology of life.

I find the metaphysics of finitude a myopic way of putting the limits of what we call “life.” It is not because Thanatos always wins out in the end that it should enjoy such conceptual high status. Death is overrated.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (eds.), *Better Off Dead; The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) p.2

<sup>222</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Politics of “Life Itself” and New Ways of Dying*, in: Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms; Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010) p.212

Rosi Braidotti, in this quote taken from her essay *The Politics of Life Itself and New Ways of Dying*, articulates precisely the point that death is a short-sighted and inadequate means for apprehending what life might *be*. She explores how the concept of *zoë* – animal life – has historically been seen in opposition to *bios* – the notion of discursive, rational, controlled and intellectual life. This distinction informs the mind-body dualism that has perpetually cast *zoë* as secondary and subservient to *bios*. Zombie fiction endorses the same split; the original undead melancholic in my project effectively asserts that the material body – *zoë* – is no more than a bereft shell unless it is allied with something *more than* and *other to* the body, and so supports the old Cartesian dualism model; to be human is to be more than *only* matter. Braidotti claims that Agamben’s treatment of *zoë* performs a similar manoeuvre:

*Zoë* – like the prediscursive in Lacan, the *chora* of Kristeva, and the material feminine of Irigaray – becomes for Agamben the ever-receding horizon of an alterity which has to be included as necessarily excluded in order to sustain the framing of the subject in the first place. This introduces finitude as a constitutive element within the framework of subjectivity, which also fuels an affective political economy of loss and melancholia at the heart of the subject.<sup>223</sup>

And so melancholia is understood here to be in cahoots with this dualism that recognises a certain bodily materiality that must be kept at bay if the subject is to maintain her *bios* – her integrity as a self-reflexive human. Death is the threshold to this *other* and *alienating* material self, and so whilst it protects the subject from this otherness, it simultaneously fragments her, prohibiting her from being connected to a more immersive and integrated sense of *zoë*. Again, this tessellates with my reading of melancholia at the beginning of Chapter Three in which subjectivity itself is the very thing that blocks the melancholic from being reunited with her Thing. Death presents itself as the passage through which the subjective self must pass if she is to access her *material* self.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid. p.211

Braidotti passionately argues against this dualism, insisting that *zoë* is a radical position *within* human life as opposed to being an alterity that is necessarily exterior to it.

*Zoë*, this obscenity, this life in me, is intrinsic to my being and yet so much “itself” that it is independent of the will, the demands and expectations of the sovereign consciousness. [...] It thus ends up being experienced as an alien other. [...] Are we not baffled by this scandal, this wonder, this *zoë*, that is to say, by an idea of life that exuberantly exceeds *bios* and supremely ignores logos? Are we not in awe of this piece of flesh we call our “body,” of this aching meat called our “self” expressing the abject and simultaneously divine potency of life?<sup>224</sup>

I find this passage striking because it describes a state within life that explodes subjective consistency – a state of abject materiality that exceeds the *symbolic* self – that I could only recognise as being *without* life in the fictional realms of undeadliness. I understand the “divine potency” that Braidotti mentions as an immersive and vital state of being that is typically muted by the “stultifying inertia of the status quo.”<sup>225</sup> Once again, she treats the state of *zoë* like I treated undeadliness – as being counter to the homogenising operations of contemporaneity. Braidotti uses *zoë* to perform political manoeuvres that I could only carry out within the conceit of undeadliness.

But when I pushed my thesis into the realms of (post)undeadliness in Chapter Four, its haptic materiality pulled away from a dualistic relationship with death; its thingness – what Braidotti might call its vitality – was displaced from the spectrum of finitude. But I still called this a melancholic procedure because it involved a fragmentation and a loss of symbolic integrity. The haptic properties of this melancholia that I proposed certainly tally with the visceral, grainy and entangled qualities of Braidotti’s “life”; she claims that “*zoë* is certainly gritty.”<sup>226</sup> Then again, Braidotti asserts that *zoë* is not an evisceration, a fragmentation or an emptying out of *bios* – of meaning – rather it is a radically immanent and immersive presence. *Zoë* is

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid. p.208

<sup>225</sup> Ibid. p.209

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. p.207

the experience of “life itself”<sup>227</sup> as opposed to the cognitive conception of life. So Braidotti is able to articulate a hapticity that is not dependent on melancholic notions of loss and absence.

I wrote about haptic melancholia in relation to making work. I understood it as a strategy – articulated in response to watching zombie films – that involved a performative flattening of the prevailing protocols that afford a given situation its normative familiarity. As I mentioned above, I recognised this as a melancholic procedure because it involved splintering the whole into fragmented parts that are no longer capable of serving Symbolic consistency.

But there is another sense in which this procedure is melancholic. It is born out of a notion of limits – of a pessimistic sense of ossification and stasis within contemporaneity that prohibits and denies a more oppositional or transgressive practice. It still holds on to some other but impossible beyond – a more ideal practice that is at the same time forever going to be an unobtainable alterity. And so this melancholic practice still bears the traces of duality – of an idealised and *immaterial* otherness that exists as a dialectical *counterpoint* to its own materiality. *Zoë*, however, embraces the vital materiality of “life itself” without recourse to the metaphysical; it does the work that haptic melancholia aspires to without *othering* an aspect of itself – without falling back on an oppositional alterity. Braidotti goes on to claim that a state of *zoë* is difficult to inhabit.

“The limits are those of one’s endurance – in the double sense of lasting in time and bearing the pain of confronting “Life” as *zoë*.”<sup>228</sup>

The suffering engendered by this intense mode of living that rejects normalised and habitual patterns of life, is fundamentally attributed to being *present* – being immanent – despite the prospect of death, whilst melancholia is forever haunted by an *absence* of that which has already been lost.

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid. p.204

<sup>228</sup> Ibid. p.210

So my final formulation of a (post)undead melancholia, as a haptic evisceration of *bios*, hails a materialism that, in turn, rejects the notion of undeadliness (either “post” or otherwise) altogether. *Zoë*, as a materiality that refuses finitude as an oppositional other, rejects the dualism still implied by the zombie in favour of “life itself.” Braidotti’s account of materiality dissolves melancholia too, precisely because *zoë* is an affirmation of life instead of being pessimistic or idealistically opposed to it.

(Post)undead melancholia thus heralds its own demise; stumbling into the realm of *zoë* brings it back to life, and thus collapses the liminal dualism that is so particular to its status. We might say that the figure of the zombie is finally slain; not by a second symbolic death, but by life – “life itself.”

Whilst I am prepared to hail the demise of (post)undeadliness – to surrender the perpetual alterity of zombie discourse to “life itself” – I cannot let go of melancholia quite so easily. Braidotti ends her essay with a call for hope that is, among other things, set up in opposition to “the dominant ideology of the melancholic lament.”<sup>229</sup> In my own project I have attempted to reject an *ideology* of melancholia – a politics of loss and utopian idealism that in the end can only assert, through its plaintive pessimism, the dominance of the status quo that it seeks to oppose. Instead I have attempted to re-conceptualise melancholia, not as a dissenting subjectivity that is *impossible* to activate, but as a haptic antagonism to the status quo. Whilst there is still a sense of loss associated with this haptic melancholia – an evisceration and an emptying out of Symbolic consistency – I claim that it might yet function critically as a performative practice, and, as a result operate *within* life instead of yearning to be *without* it. But still, when Braidotti finishes her text with an affirmative trumpeting of life that is clearly attempting to rouse me on an affective level, I can only be suspicious of her call for optimism:

Reason has nothing to do with this. Let’s just do it for the hell of it and for the love of the world.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p.217

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

Like Braidotti, I have sought to think beyond a melancholic *ideology* that passively laments the lack of radical potentiality in the contemporary climate. However, I find it hard to vaporise melancholia entirely; as such, Braidotti's clarion call, though theoretically cogent and certainly persuasive, leaves me cold. Her words do not chime, resonate or compel me to embrace her political invitation to dream from our "collective imaginings".<sup>231</sup> I understand what she is asking of me, but I do not care to join in. Her hope does not *feel* like a feasible response to the contemporary problem. And that is the melancholia in me – the void, the "black sun"<sup>232</sup>, the moment of collapse – that, against all evidence, remains on some level affectively opposed to a wholesale embrace of "life itself."

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun; Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.3

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### Images

Image 1: film still; ROMERO George A., *Day of the Dead* (United Distribution Film Company, 1985)

Image 2: *The Freudian Zombie*, Simon Clark (2011)

Image 3: collection of film stills; ROMERO George A., *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

Image 4: film still; ROMERO George A., *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

Image 5: film still; ROMERO George A., *Day of the Dead* (United Distribution Film Company, 1985)

Image 6: film still; ROMERO George A., *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

Image 7: collection of film stills; ROMERO George A., *Land of the Dead* (Universal Pictures, 2005)

Image 8: collection of film stills; ROMERO George A., *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

Image 9: collection of film stills; ROMERO George A., *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

Image 10: collection of film stills; ROMERO George A., *Night of the Living Dead* (Pickwick Group Ltd., 1968)

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Image 12: collection of film stills; ROMERO George A., *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

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Image 14: collection of film stills; DARABONT Frank, *The Walking Dead* (AMC Studios, 2010)

Image 15: film still; ROMERO George A., *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

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Image 17: collection of film stills; ROMERO George A., *Day of the Dead* (United Distribution Film Company, 1985)

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