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You Only Die Thrice: Zombies Revisited in *The Walking Dead*

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Introduction

AMC's ongoing series *The Walking Dead* (2010-) bring back to life a sub-genre that—like many of its characters—cannot seem to die, the zombie narrative. The TV show is based on the eponymous comic book series written by Robert Kirkman and illustrated by Charlie Aldard.¹ Rick Grimes, the show's protagonist, is a small town police deputy who goes into a coma after being shot on the job. He awakens post-outbreak in an abandoned hospital, and sets out to find his wife and son, Lori and Carl. He eventually finds them, forms an eclectic group, and together they must fight to stay alive. The focus of this article will not be primarily on the human characters, but rather on their presupposed counterparts, the walkers and their bodies. Conceptually, the walker provides us with numerous hypotheses concerning its ontology, *raison d'être*, and semiotic and ideological relevance. Through an exploration of the zombie as a concept, first as we have come to know them throughout the history of the sub-genre and secondly as we see them in *The Walking Dead*, we propose an update to the Lacan/Žižek psychoanalytical models for death and subjectivity. Furthermore, the body of the walker/zombie—presumably capable of limitless consumption without expulsion—

elicits intriguing speculations. For example, in its death, the body of the zombie lingers in the small gap or the overlapping wedge between the grotesque and the sublime, although it clearly leans toward the former. Therefore, the essay also explores the connections of this hollow body to the grotesque,² to the inhuman, to the *Muselmann* of the concentration camps, and ultimately proposes that it could be construed as an Anti-(Nietzschian)-Overman.

The Zombie Sub-genre³

It would be a massive undertaking to establish properly the historical context of the sub-genre of the horror, so we will limit ourselves to a few references. Steve Neale tracks the sub-genre back to the early 40s (2000: 95), but it was *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) that had the biggest impact, and became the grandfather of all subsequent zombie movies. The original zombie from this film (referred to as a “ghoul”) was radically different from the one in our show. It was afraid of fire, and it also exhibited traces of a thought process (grabbing tools, rocks etc.). Importantly, Romero’s film offers an explanation for the plague that beseeches humanity: the explosion of a satellite returning from Venus,⁴ and the radiation that ensued. This explanation is not always offered in the sub-genre (or in *The Walking Dead*), but we will return to that lack of agency later. Another example that explains the plague comes from the popular British film, *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002): it is chimpanzees infected by a virus⁵ that cause the rage and eventual destruction of London, and the world. The main character, Jim, like Rick, wakes up alone in a hospital. The relevance of the satellite (Sputnik!) in the original Romero comes from a political subtext. The film was made during a time of great political unrest, during the cold war and the not so hidden competition between the US and the USSR over the “control” of outer space. Partially because of this historical context, the zombie movie during this period could easily be read as an ideological and propagandist commentary that speculated on the connections between the mindless wondering ghouls and the communists.⁶ Genre, as a rule, serves an ideological function as Rick Altman notes (1999: 26-28) and zombies have made a similar ideological return in the recent Cuban movie, *Juan de los Muertos* (Alejandro Brugués, 2011). In it, the hero takes advantage of the situation and opens up a business for killing zombies or more exactly what he calls “dissidents.” We can see here not only the references to

Castro's brand of communism, but intriguingly, a not so subtle suggestion about the powerful reach of capitalism in a communist environment (in which the former must fail).⁷

The failures of capitalism are also hinted at in *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978) and its remake *Dawn of the Dead* (Zack Snyder, 2004). In both versions, the survivors gather in a mall—the symbol of capitalism par excellence—which now becomes the place where capitalism and consumerism have gone to die. Building on the reductive Marxian model of capitalism (the limit of capital is capital itself), Slavoj Žižek describes capitalism as capable of changing its limits, expanding them as needed into permanent development, because it is driven by an internal contradiction, a conflict between the relations of production and productive forces (Žižek 2008: 50-52). This is but one way of understanding capitalism; Capital, according to Marx, is also a kind of fantasmagoria (e.g. a vampire, a werewolf, or in our case, a zombie), an entity that eats sources of value (e.g. the Common—Labor and Nature) alive. It is fitting then that capitalism should come to a stop in a mall in these two versions. In other words, there are no more relations or forces at work, just consumerism; the survivors can use the resources of the mall to exhaustion and then there would be nothing, which uncovers the metaphor of zombie capitalism:⁸ consuming is both the end point and origin of capitalism. The subtext here is, of course, wage repression, and the emergence of credit mechanisms for the average American consumer; we may also speculate on the possibility that once capitalism does reach its limit and tipping point, it finally fulfills Marx's prerequisite for the creation of communist societies (i.e. one must go through capitalism to enter the "final" stage of communism). Furthermore, it is quite fitting that the act of eating or consuming should point to the end of capitalism, and of humanity, when it is exactly what happens with the bodies of the living—they are eaten.

In order to increase spectatorship consumption, Hollywood has also turned to comedy, which in essence covers up the already-existing apocalyptic fantasy with a secondary Žižekian veil, humor or "ironic distance" (2008: 24). Oddly, this forced distance in fact brings the dead and the living closer together. In *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009), one of the main characters, Columbus, philosophizes, "I used to avoid people like they were zombies *before* they were zombies. Now that they are all zombies, I kinda miss people." This is an important quote for us because it signals quite clearly that the death of humanity comes from within (i.e. people have always been zombie-like), and that the line between the living and the walking dead is not that wide. The only change that occurs in the current scenario is a physical one, meaning we can recognize

the death of humanity more easily. Tallahassee, the tough guy in *Zombieland*, is not too concerned about the end of the world. Instead, he is on a constant quest for a Twinkie, which here represents the quintessential Lacanian *objet petit a*, the object-desire. Famously, the Twinkie is a food that never disintegrates, never disappears, just like the *objet petit a*.

Similarly, the characters of *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004) are sidetracked easily from dealing with the impending death of humanity. For long periods, the characters do not even notice the zombies. At the end of this movie, the zombies are turned into slaves, which represents an important departure (and yet a return to the classic symbolic value of the Haitian zombie) from the Romero film, to which *Shaun of the Dead* harbors many inter-textual references. Shaun repeats ad nauseam, in the first part of the movie, that “Ed, this is serious,” as his friends still resist the change. The fantasy has to be forced upon the diegetic characters! However, the exact opposite occurs in the recent *Warm Bodies* (Jonathan Levine, 2013): it is the spectators that (should) resist the fantasy. In this case, we have an “emancipated” walker who can speak, “feel,” and who goes through an existential crisis (he admits to being conflicted about eating people and declares that “At some point you lose hope”). This version of the zombie, along with the sappy “love conquers all” message of the film, miss the entire point of the walker, and the film falls flat on its narrative face.⁹

However, the idea that zombies can evolve is not new. In *Land of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2005), which is not a comedy, zombies actually communicate, protect each other, and seem to have rational thoughts. This type of evolution changes the complexity of the zombie, and renders it more “human,” more acceptable, and therefore less frightening. Similarly aware, but yet quite different from zombies, are the vampiric creatures of *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007). Regardless, the introduction of awareness misses out on the essence of the zombie. We, as an audience have certain expectations built into our system. For example, Steve Neale’s study of genre elicits the following statement: “Genres do not consist solely of films. They consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis [...] these systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding” (2000: 31). We recognize the zombies in all of these versions, because ultimately the system does not allow for wild variations. There is a sense of repetition at work in all these films, and that is also at the core of Steve Neale’s argument about genre, which to him takes shape through “repetition and difference” (2000: 48). For example, the texts in the media (film or

television) have to be similar enough in order for the public to recognize them, but different enough so that they become more interesting than others.

It is important to note that *The Walking Dead* is a television series and thus some of the narrative elements are drastically altered from the medium of cinema. Among these we can note the longer exposition, the repetition of themes at diegetic level (not simply as a genre), or the invasion of the private space of one's home (rendering thus perhaps more effective in its affect toward the viewer). The show began very strongly, and one of the differences, as meant by Neale above, that it included in the first two seasons was that it killed off several seemingly important characters. This choice helped the show become much more intense and "realistic," in spite of its unrealistic setting. However, during Season 3, and since the audience had already built strong identifications with the main characters, the killings tempered off, and during Season 4 there is only one death of a major character, Hershel. Throughout all these changes and repetitions, one thing has remained constant, though: the depiction of the walker, and its gruesome, dead body that appears to have no limits. This last observation prompts us to situate the walker in the middle of an old debate between the grotesque and the sublime.

Grotesque Zombie Sublime

Wolfgang Kayser, the highly insightful theorist of the grotesque, credits Victor Hugo as one of the first authors to begin the discussion on the grotesque/sublime contiguous relationship, and he also commends him for describing Shakespeare as the only writer to successfully blend the sublime and the grotesque (1981: 58). He builds on this observation by declaring, "The true depth of the grotesque is revealed only by its confrontation with its opposite, the sublime. For just as the sublime (in contrast with the beautiful) guides our view toward a loftier, supernatural world, the ridiculously distorted and monstrously horrible ingredients of the grotesque point to an inhuman, nocturnal, and abysmal realm" (Kayser 1981: 58). In the world of the zombie, we have both the elements of a supernatural world and the grotesque distortion of the human body that heads toward the inhuman—that which threatens to engulf and consume the subject. Let us attempt to explain better the two opposing, or compatible terms, the grotesque and the sublime.

Wolfgang Kayser defines the grotesque as "a mixture of heterogeneous elements, the confusion, the fantastic quality, and even a kind of alienation of the world" (1981: 51).

The alienation of and from the world is most evident in the TV series when the survivors retreat to the inside of a prison. In fact their odyssey appears to take them to places that are less and less open. They move from a camp outside of Atlanta to a farm, only to eventually realize that their best option for survival is behind the walls of a prison.¹⁰ Their world is shrinking, almost as if trying to suffocate them. In such a world, the sublime is increasingly more difficult to encounter, and when it does, horrible things happen. At the beginning of Season 2, Rick allows his son Carl to approach a deer in the woods. It is a tender moment of unification between human and nature, something rare, unlikely, and incomprehensible in this particular context. Right on cue, a bullet meant for the deer injures Carl in a traumatic event reminiscent of the death of Bambi's mother. Richard Corliss of *Time Magazine* ranks *Bambi* (1942) as one of the top 25 horror films of all time, and it is widely considered to be a film that has traumatized several generations. *The Walking Dead* returns to this original traumatic scene to revise the presence of the human element, Carl, who would normally be the traumatized boy in front of the television. However, in this case, he is twice traumatized, once by the death of the deer, and a second time by his own injury. In one swoop, both man and nature are shot down, and we turn again toward the grotesque.

The balancing study on the grotesque (to Kayser's) is Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Rabelais' writings. His treatment of the grotesque takes the form of the "carnavalesque," which is an inversion of reality, of the social order, that in itself is, grotesque. He defines the grotesque as having the following important characteristics: exaggeration, hyperbole, abundance, and excess (Bakhtin 1970: 302). What interests me the most from Bakhtin's research on Rabelais is the association of the grotesque with the body and with the latter's physical limits. According to Bakhtin these classical limits are transgressed by the grotesque image. As a result the grotesque body is always in a state of change, it constructs itself constantly, and in doing so, it challenges not just its own sense of spatiality, but that of the world itself (Bakhtin 1970: 314-316). From an old body, a new one emerges. In the case of the zombie, the body goes through one radical change, but the new body is not an upgrade. Instead it is a regression toward the inhuman. The inhuman aspect of the zombie is most clear in its mouth. In Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais, "The mouth is the open door that leads to the bottom, to the hell of the body. The image of absorption and of swallowing, a very ambivalent, old image of death and destruction, is connected to the wide open mouth" (1970: 323).¹¹ Not only is the zombie's mouth usually open, it swallows real life, the living humans. Interestingly, in

their death by mastication and through the zombie's wide-open mouth, the humans are sent into a black hole of sorts—we do not have any supporting evidence that the zombie has bowel movements—into hell. The lack of bowel movement is the characteristic that separates the zombie most clearly from other carnivores, from other "mouths." They erase humans but their consumption is for naught; they continue to consume without "producing," which, through a return to the zombie capitalism reference from above, underlines the fact that the death of capitalism is fast approaching.

So how can we shrink the distance between these grotesque images and the idea of the sublime? Sublimity concerns terrifying phenomena that have no boundaries, so we can already begin to see its connection to the limitless and ever-expanding grotesque. Mary Russo actually understands the grotesque as an essential part of the sublime (1994: 33). Kant's sublime is both a feeling of displeasure and of pleasure (1964: 106), and in Žižek's interpretation "it is a paradoxical pleasure procured by displeasure itself," which happens to be Lacan's definition of *jouissance* (2008: 229). Isn't the sanctioned, brutal killing of zombies a close approximation of this paradoxical pleasure, a pleasure that explains the commercial and cultural durability of the zombie narrative in films, television, video games etc.? The confusing mixture of pleasure and displeasure may come from our awareness that we are physically dwarfed and thus powerless in the front of nature's potency. Sublimity thus can also carry a factor of incomprehensibility. Initially, Rick on *The Walking Dead* goes through a denial phase—he simply cannot wrap his mind around the concept of the dead returning. However, quite soon, he does. His hesitation is so short-lived that it almost eliminates sublimity, and instead leaves us only with the option of equating the apocalyptic world with the grotesque.

The grotesque can also rely on an ambivalence spawning from a conflict between the tragic and the comedic. A situation may appear as tragic and funny simultaneously, as in all the examples from the zombie-comedies. There are not many amusing moments in the TV show, although an occasional character will provide the survivors and us with some comedic relief (like Axel, the prisoner, who hits on Carol the moment he figures out she is not a lesbian). Kayser's connection between terror and humor may find its best embodiment in this type of scene. According to him, "In the genuine grotesque the spectator becomes directly involved at some point where a specific meaning is attached to the events. In the humorous context, on the other hand, a certain distance is maintained throughout and, with it, a feeling of security and

indifference” (1981: 118). Later in his study, though, Kayser aligns terror and humor to provide us with yet another contradicting, and somehow congruent pair (1981: 139). If humor can indeed emerge from terror, then this new opposing pair constitutes another embodiment of the grotesque/sublime relationship. It is philosopher Edmund Burke who sheds more light on all these connections: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible things, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (2008: 36). Yet, Burke sees plenty of ambivalence, too, and the sublime that emerges from terror can be a possible producer of pleasure. Still according to Burke, it is in this oxymoronic¹² alliance, between terror and pleasure that we find “the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime” (2008: 123).

We encounter in terror and violence a similar distance between spectators and the events of the film, as the one created by humor or ironic distance. In other words, the violence too can have a distancing effect of the viewers who might refuse to be placed in a masochistic or sadistic position of identification. This viewing distance would once again link terror and violence with humor. The interpretation of the distance also returns us to Kayser’s thoughts on the ambivalence of the grotesque, which can generate a divergent feeling, a liberation from the emotional hold of regular horror images, or films: “In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation” (1981: 188). The estranged world of the grotesque is relentless in *The Walking Dead* (a feeling exacerbated by the length and cycle-quality of the multiple episodes and seasons) and that leaves very little room for the spectators’ hesitation between the real and the imagined.

Because of this hesitation we can eliminate Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of the fantastic genre from the equation (“the Fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty,” 1975: 25). But, we cannot ignore one of its closely related aesthetics, the uncanny, which represents a new (Freudian) direction. The uncanny is born out of fear, so it is closely linked to feelings or sensations and it triggers an emotional response. In Freud’s explanation the uncanny is a return to something strangely familiar that was repressed, because it was a frightening experience (2003: 147-153), which, yet again, brings us back to the idea of the grotesque and the sublime. This return to (or of) something repressed represents our best option to explain the existence of the zombies. It means that there is something within ourselves, an inherent grotesque, that comes

back to life in the form of a dead living. While death and dead bodies might be placed in the realm of the grotesque, the several deaths endured by the body of the zombie borders on the definition of the sublime. In its death, the zombie brings us also to Kayser's last interpretation of the grotesque: "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (1981: 188). The zombie sub-genre certainly invokes the demonic aspects of the world, but it can never fully subdue them. Like death and the Twinkie, they must always be present (through absence).

Death ad nauseam

To Žižek, the return of the dead represents the fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture (1992: 22). However, he does not explain why our contemporaries have chosen this specific fantasy over another. In a later study, *You Only Die Twice*, and once again via Lacan and the idea of an indestructible body, Žižek hypothesizes that the subject incurs two separate deaths: one real (biological), and one that comes from the symbolization of death. Between the two, a gap is formed: "This gap can be filled in various ways; it can contain either sublime beauty or fearsome monsters," which essentially means that the two deaths can occur in two distinct orders (i.e. physically die and then appear as a ghost, like Hamlet's father, or first reach sublime beauty, and then die like Antigone, Žižek 2008: 150¹³). This does not happen in the case of the zombie that must actually go through three different deaths because it comes back to life following the first two deaths marked by Žižek.

But how does one explain the return of the dead? Žižek offers the following explanation: "The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debts [...] persisting beyond physical expiration" (1992: 23). Moreover,

'the return of the dead is' [...] 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. The two great traumatic events of the holocaust and the gulag are, of course, exemplary cases of the return of the dead in the twentieth century. The shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as 'living dead' until we give them a

decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory (1992: 23).

We will return to this alternate¹⁴ historical explanation for the fundamental fantasy of our current mass culture in the last part of the essay, but for now it suffices to reiterate that Žižek suggests the fantasy is born out of the traumatic event of the Holocaust. We dare not revisit the Holocaust, the place of the Real, and instead we provide ourselves with a protective screen, a fantasy. However, in a Žižekian twist, this fantasy meant to protect us also makes us aware of the real kernel at the core of the Real. The trauma of the camp deaths will not go away, and we can easily see the parallels here with the zombie that must die three times over before it quiets forever.¹⁵

The zombie goes through three different levels of death regardless of how one becomes a zombie. There are indeed two venues: to be bit by a zombie and then slowly turn into one, or to die and then return to life as a zombie. In the former case, the moment when one is bit becomes the first realization of death, the symbolic one. Then there is a progression of events that leads to the person actually dying, physically. A few moments later, the zombie emerges, and eventually it will die a third death through trauma to the head. In the other case it is a little more complicated, because the symbolic death is not quite as obvious. However, in the case of our show, the characters are told by Rick (who had found out about it at a CDC facility) that the virus, the incurable disease, lives within them. This is the moment when death takes place symbolically. Their (first) physical death then is to be followed by a third, final death. But what to call this death?

The zombie “wakes up” in a reality of which it is not conscious. It awakes to drive, rather than desire, which is perhaps why language is missing. Essentially, the zombie comes to life in an inexistent domain, which is exactly the reason we must call it the Real in the Lacanian sense. Naturally, it is the Real only from its perspective, which, of course, is no perspective at all. When the people who are still “alive” fight the zombies, they do not do it just to stay alive, but also to avoid accessing the Real. The presence in the Real for the zombie is only in physical terms, though. In terms of subjectivity, the zombie finds itself actually in between the Real and the Imaginary—it could be on its way back to a pre-Imaginary state, but it is stuck, and it cannot proceed toward the Imaginary. If we take Žižek’s triangle that explains the Lacanian logic of subject formation, Imaginary→Symbolic→Real→ (back to) Imaginary, then the Zombie sits just outside the axis Real→Imaginary, and certainly in between the two states. It cannot be

on the actual vector of the triangle because that would imply progression toward the Imaginary. The reason for this odd, out of place, positioning comes from its relationship with language.

One of the many definitions or examples rather of the Real is the interruptive: it is the residue of nonsense in the most rudimentary sense within our language systems. It then seems rather relevant on this level that the zombies have no language, but are actually on the side of what falls into the Real, into the ontic (e.g. grunts, groans, mastication, sucking, crunching, etc.). They blunder about in uncannily human ways, but do not speak, which is important because it will help us transition shortly into Primo Levi's descriptions of *der Muselmann* in the Nazi camps. The zombies are at once in a pre-Imaginary, non-language state, and within the Real. Their last death, the third one puts an end to this state of limbo. To answer my earlier question, it is a *benevolent* death, in the Real.

The blundering, awkward and yet "driven" movement of zombies can first be read metaphorically as pure trauma or a repetition-compulsion of one traumatic, quintessentially grotesque, event—death. Žižek's distinction between drive and desire is explained through one radical difference. Desire implies an ulterior motive—I want this, but to what end, what do I really want?—"Drive, on the contrary, persists in a certain demand, it is a 'mechanical' insistence that cannot be caught up in dialectical trickery: I demand something and I persist in it to the end" (Žižek 1992: 21). For the zombies, Lacanian/Žižekian desire is impossible, but drive remains. They are pure Freudian Id, but further reduced to one component only: hunger. In the space created in between the two/three deaths from above, there is no desire, and that space is constructed only by drive. The zombies cannot remember anything from the previous life because then they would gradually shift into beings of desire. This brings us back to the order of discourse in some way, to the degree that in the Lacanian account the Real is the "primordial gash" from which we are torn loose from nature. From this gash (after all, the word "trauma" comes from the Greek and it means "wound") we ooze out of the primal, fusional paradise of the Real and we descend into the decentering (and yet identity-conferring) order of the symbolic. In the case of the zombies, in spite of the several gory wounds, cuts, scratches, gashes, and other splits, they cannot go anywhere else. They are stuck and they must die three times.

The three deaths represent the new order of the world and when someone is not allowed for this "natural" progression, things can go horribly wrong. This is the case for

Lori, Rick's wife who must give birth by cesarean in the episode titled aptly, "Killer Within." She dies following the trauma of birth, and her son, Carl, shoots¹⁶ her in the head so to avoid her transformation. In the following episode, Rick searches for her body, only to find her eaten by a walker. In a gruesome scene, Rick "unearths" her from the stomach of the zombie—he administers his own C-section as it were. So, the killer from the ambiguous title could refer to the baby, to Lori, or to the zombie, in a moment when the human and the inhuman are perfectly overlapped. Also, could we possibly talk here about a "further" death by mastication?¹⁷ Or about Rick forcing an expulsion, defecation (and in this case, a perfect example of Kristeva's abject)? This scene perversely blurs the lines between three Subjects. Rick is the possessor of agency, but it is slipping away from him. Lori is the mother reduced to the abject as punishment for her transgression with Rick's best friend Shane when she thought her husband dead. The mother-abject is born out of the zombie "chora," which means that the Zombie in fact manages to be "more" than Lori, more than the abject—a grotesque manifestation of a new subjectivity. From these complicated relations, it results that Lori should be allowed to fully go through the cycle of three deaths. She is brought back to life physically as the abject and she also re-appears as a ghost in Rick's imagination. Rick first imagines talking to her on the phone and then he sees her, dressed in white, in the fields across from the prison. In the last two episodes of Season 3 he sees her again. It is Rick's all-consuming guilt (oddly, then, guilt is "zombified") that makes her linger in his memory and that keeps her alive. However, like Hamlet's father, Lori may have a score to settle herself and it is uncertain whether she will be able to do so. More importantly, though, the score we have to settle, as humanity, returns us to Žižek's observation from above about the Holocaust and the lack of integration of that trauma in our historical memory.

Holocaust Shades

It is Žižek once again who provides us with the necessary and problematic transition to the Holocaust. Through Lacan, Žižek comes up with the term *over-rapid historicization*, which in short, attempts to conceal ideological apparatuses by rendering them in fact even larger. Concerning the concentration camps, he wonders rhetorically, "all the different attempts to attach this phenomenon to a concrete image ('Holocaust', 'Gulag'...), to reduce it to a product of a concrete social order (Fascism, Stalinism...)—what are they if not so many attempts to elude the fact that we are dealing here with the

'real' of our civilization which returns as the same traumatic kernel in all social systems?" (2008: 51). As already suggested, perhaps the explanation behind the pervasiveness of the sub-genre in popular culture comes exactly from this point—that it is an unconscious decision to make ourselves face over and over again one of the most gruesome and benign event of our entire historical existence. We return to the original site of this particular trauma of humanity repeatedly. As we do that, though, we also create a fantasy (in this case, the apocalyptic zombie world), a veil, as Žižek would call it (1997: 1), meant to shield us from the horrors of our historical Real. For a fantasy to remain just that, pure fantasy, it is not supposed to happen in "reality," to come to life. On the contrary, it must remain unsatisfied. Naturally, we are not trying to equate the concept of the zombie with the survivors of concentration camps at a simplistic comparative level (i.e. one is like the other). Instead, we will offer some parallels meant to solidify Žižek's observation about the return of the dead, both as a fantasy and as part of our collective memory. These parallels should also strengthen the idea that our current mass culture fantasy stems from an inherent fear about the Holocaust that still chases our collective subjectivity.

One of the primary texts about the Holocaust experience from the perspective of the prisoner comes from Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine* (1947). We will not dwell on the vast conversations surrounding this text, the Nazi agency, the power and the dialectics of gaze, and Blanchot's and Duras' written reactions and subsequent debates. Instead, we will use the text as a springboard into a conversation about the eradication of the human, or the erasure of the human that leads to the metamorphosis into the inhuman. There are several passages worth noting, but we will content ourselves with creating a progression toward the aforementioned eradication of man. We begin with the universalization of the prisoners' bodies, as they all slowly head toward the same awful conclusion: "Bientôt je serai comme lui" (soon I will be like him,¹⁸ Antelme 1957: 71). They are all becoming similar and unified as their bodies can no longer be recognizable. The individual traits disappear as to make room for a common (un)face of suffering. The lack of food and the terrors of the camp make Antelme notice the following: "Son corps commence à se manger" (his body begins to eat itself, 1957: 96), which eventually leads to "Le corps est vide" (the body is empty, 1957: 97). Most Holocaust testimonies mention the lack of food and the hunger—a hunger that never stops. As they are dying, the prisoners are reduced to one desire, similar to that of the zombies: the desire to eat something, anything.¹⁹ The slow process of dying while still alive culminates with,

“J’oublie, j’oublie tous les jours un peu plus. On s’éloigne, on dérive” (I forget, I forget every day a little more. We stray, we drift, 1957: 119). The camp prisoners waste away and they disappear physically, reduced to skin and bones. The zombie does not offer us the same dimension of pain and suffering, but in its physical incarnation we can see similar traits of the camp prisoner: the drifting and the eradication of their bodies as they are reduced to one recognizable common aspect (always thin!) that is essentially the same for everyone. Another very important connecting aspect comes from the references to the face in Antelme’s testimony. The face, like the body, is disappearing, as it moves back toward the inside of the head. Bruno Chaouat argues, “in ‘disturbing the logic of the face,’ in disfiguring the human face or in de-humanizing it, the experience of extreme suffering as witnessed by Robert Antelme has altogether shattered the certainties of a humanism grounded upon human likeness and the stability of the human face” (2000: 94). The extreme manifestation of this is, of course, the destruction of the face and/or head of the zombie. The zombies from *The Walking Dead* have a similar fate and we can also see the erasure of the human in the blank looks and the emotionless faces. However, if there were an emotion attached to these faces, it would be sadness. Žižek observed that in the original Romero film, the undead are portrayed as “sufferers, pursuing their victims with an awkward persistence, colored by a kind of infinite sadness” (1992: 22). It is also this sadness that further cements the connections between camp prisoners and zombies.

Sadness and suffering are also central to Primo Levi’s description of *der Muselmann*. Chaouat describes the nickname in this manner: “According to concordant testimonies of survivors, *der Muselmann*, in camp slang, was the name given to inmates who had reached a stage of complete passivity and who, in a state of absolute resignation, awaited their death” (2000: 94). The image of the *Muselmann* brings to light the closeness between the human and the inhuman in the concentration camps. However, the transformation is never complete, as there is always a remnant, as Giorgio Agamben notices (2005: 134)—the witness. Agamben also declares, “the place of the human is divided because human being exists in the fracture between the living being and the speaking being, the inhuman and the human” (2005: 134). The zombie can only exist on the side of the inhuman, though.

In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot’s reaction to Antelme’s book, the former declares, “man is the indestructible that can be infinitely destroyed” (1993: 130). This would suggest a power that transcends the human. But Agamben does not look at the

Muselmann as an example of someone or something beyond the human. Instead, his persona and that of the camp prisoner's existence in general is reduced to almost a kind of death (44, 48), but not quite the literal death. Theorist Malcolm Bull takes Agamben's observations about the infinitely awaiting death and the inability of the Muselmann to speak and he proposes that the latter is characterized in fact by "an inability to die" (2014: 121). So, the Muselmann hovers in a gray area where it is impossible to distinguish life and death. Agamben returns to the same image in *Homo Sacer*, in which he describes the Muselmann as "apathetic," and "nothing 'natural' or 'common,' however, is left in him: nothing animal or instinctual remains in his life. All his instincts are cancelled along with his reason" (1998: 185). This harsher definition and the inability to speak or die push the image of the Muselmann even closer to that of the zombie.

One last citation from Antelme gives us an important link to the zombies of *The Walking Dead*: "To have eyes is for each one of us to be in danger" (1957: 231). The episode "Seed," the first one of Season 3, begins in the literal eye of the walker. The camera rotates and, as it tracks back, it reveals the face of the walker. The shot comes from nothingness, from an eye that does not move. This is almost the very same shot from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), a film influential in shaping the horror genre. Steven Neale actually refers to *Psycho* as a "turning point" in his study of the horror genre (2000: 96). After Marion is stabbed in the shower, she falls and is sprawled on the bathroom floor. The camera transitions from a close-up of the bathroom drain (blood, water, and life draining away) to a close-up of Marion's still eye and then it tracks back. The importance of the eye becomes even more evident because the same shot is repeated in the beginning of the Season 3 finale, thus beautifully closing down the narrative cycle of the season. This once, the camera backtracks away from the Governor's eye, which equates him to the dead eye of the zombie from "Seed:" we have been moving from human to inhuman, but in this instance it is the opposite. We go from the eye of the zombie to that of the Governor, although cinematic distance (this is an exceptionally delayed shot-reverse shot) is shortened by the Governor's inhuman qualities. In all three cases from above, the separation between the camera and its subject suggests more than a simple physical distance. It is also the necessary distance that we must take from a diseased body (zombie), dead body (Marion and the living who have not turned yet), or the body of the negative character (Governor). The necessary distance from the bodies of the zombies is further emphasized in the episode entitled "Prey," Season 3. The site where the Governor's people normally catch zombies for

games is burned down. The shots of the burned zombies, all in a common, grave-like hole, is reminiscent of the wall mural photograph from the Ohrdruf camp that begins the tour of the Holocaust museum in Washington DC. The photo, which shows the grotesque burned bodies of several prisoners in the foreground, is subtitled, "Americans view cremation pyre at Ohrdruf on April 13, 1945." The lines between the human and the inhuman are once more blurred.

The bodies of the zombies are indeed connected to a diseased type of space—this might be a social commentary about the downward direction of humanity in the last century, which brought upon us all kinds of the ailments, most notably HIV, as we noted above. The implication is that we, as humanity, slowly move toward the eradication of our kind. The zombie represents just a shortcut, a faster way to arrive to our doomed destination. This view of the zombie constitutes an opposing figure to Nietzsche's concept of the superman/overman, a being in becoming, a superior version of man capable to overcome and self-overcome in the face of the meaninglessness of life and to provide the world ultimately with a master race.²⁰ To Nietzsche, man is an in-between entity "stretched between the animal and the Superman" (1999: 5); he should aim to transform into an Overman because the latter will become to man, what man is to animal: "a painful embarrassment" (1999: 6). Malcolm Bull proposes the opposite, because moving toward this superior version of ourselves brings about fear and dread, which in turn leads to positioning ourselves "outside the human species altogether" (2000: 133). Bull's original argument, which he develops in *The Anti-Nietzsche* (2014), is to suggest that the solution is to attempt to become less than human, to associate ourselves with the herd animal (as opposed to the Nietzschean birds of prey), and to arrive at what he calls the subhuman.²¹ This process is exactly what seems to be happening in the apocalyptic world of the zombie, in which the man is pulled strongly toward the animal side, the herd (or horde!), toward the inhuman and the grotesque.

Opposing Nietzsche's vision of the Overman, Michel Foucault celebrates the man's death and famously wagers in the conclusion to *The Order of Things* that the ideal man would be effaced: "one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (1994: 387). We have already witnessed the effects of the effacement of the human face during the Holocaust. Now, we are moving into universalizing that fate. Bruno Chaouat also proceeds from focusing on the individual to proposing a defacing of the whole of humanity: "During the suspension between life and death, during the endless interval of undecidability between being still

alive and being already dead, the face is defaced or even effaced and becomes no one's face, pointing to the hidden, unknowable side of human life" (2000: 92). However, all these attempts at erasure may prove still futile in the face of the Real of the Holocaust. That Real will not go away. The third death, the death in the Real, cannot happen to *all* zombies. As evident from most zombie films, the task of the living to kill off all zombies is never finalized. As such, the eradication of the Real cannot occur. Only under those circumstances (killing off every single last bit that reminds us of the Holocaust) could we have "forgotten" about the camps. But that is impossible. The only solution is to make a better effort to appropriate it; or in the current analysis, what is at stake in our series is not survival, or escape, but internal healing. To that end, the conclusion of Season 3 offers a hint of optimism (Rick's people withstand the Governor's attack and retain control of the prison) unlike the previous two finales and in spite of the imminent threat to the human kind.²²

The erasure of the human is also evident in the living characters of *The Walking Dead*. So it is not just the body of the deceased that is decomposing. The living are slowly disintegrating, too: Merle loses a hand, Hershel loses a leg, the Governor an eye etc. They are all lumped in together in a world headed toward eradication. Nowhere is that clearer than at the end of Season 4 and the beginning of Season 5 that focus on Rick's group getting to a place pertinently called *Terminus* where they are almost eaten by other survivors. Cannibalism completely erases whatever fine lines separated the living and the dead. On several occasions, the characters of the series (and those from the comic) rhetorically wonder about being like zombies and can no longer see the separating lines. But, while the living are increasingly aware of their demise, for the zombies it is quite the contrary. They can get shot and they still keep going, interrupted only briefly by the whiplash of the bullet. They can lose an arm and they keep going. Often, the following occurs: an arm comes off, the zombie pauses and looks down, and then, unaffected, it keeps going. This is a very close approximation of Žižek's famous cartoon example. Žižek reminds us of the cartoon character (often a cat) that runs off a cliff but does not fall until it has realized that it is indeed off the cliff. In Žižek's words, "The point of this nonsense accident is that when the cat is walking slowly in the air, it is as if the Real has for a moment forgotten its knowledge²³" (2008: 148). I have already posited that the zombies "awake" into the Real, but they cannot possibly recognize it or be aware of it. This version of the Real is relentless and has forever forgotten its

knowledge. We cannot afford the same luxury with our historical knowledge and *The Walking Dead* will not let us.

Notes

¹ In spite of several similarities, during its four completed seasons the series has moved away from the comic books, but this essay is not concerned with the differences between the two. One note of interest that concerns both, though, is their continuing, relentless production. David Peisner's 2013 article for the *Rolling Stone*, "The Rise of the 'Walking Dead'" (<http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/the-rise-of-the-walking-dead-20131031>) documents Kirkman's displeasure with the typical ending of zombie films and indicates the creator's intent to keep the show and comic series going indefinitely: "What if one of those stories continued indefinitely?" Now in its fifth season, the show is already upped for a sixth year; the comic has run for over ten years—this truly may be the story that never dies.

² I prefer the grotesque to perhaps the more obvious link with Kristeva's abject, because the former brings the zombie closer to an animal form essential to the oscillation between the human and the inhuman.

³ Parts of this section have been expanded from a short essay published in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, issue 81, August 2013: "The Lore of the Running Undead (How *World War Z* Was Lost and Won)."

⁴ It is from the word "Venus" that we get "venereal," which would explain further the spreading of the zombie virus/disease: the zombie then becomes a critique of the free love concept of the 60s.

⁵ We can speculate that the virus is akin to the spreading of HIV given its original source from apes.

⁶ A very good, similar example in literature is Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, whose herd of animals is a metaphor for the Fascist movement.

⁷ Juan, the main character, does say at one point that "In the end capitalism is going to take its toll on us," but in the actual end of the film he chooses to stay on the infested island and not leave for Miami. He chooses to fight the dissidents, who are now the oppressors, and fulfills the central message of Castro's (misguided) version of Marxism that we see summarized on a huge billboard earlier in the film: Revolution or Death.

⁸ For more on the economic effects of the dead on the living, see Chris Harman's *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (2009).

⁹ It was interesting to see how well *World War Z* (2013), based on Max Brooks' novel, performed at the box office in spite of the negative reviews and disjointed narrative. This is another example of a movie that attempts to change the zombie lore by making them move really fast and by reducing drastically the transformation period (i.e. it will take twelve seconds for the full transformation). I guess, in the end, the drive and desire for zombie films, any zombie films, won over even the purists.

¹⁰ They bypass a sort of in-between space during the trip: the jammed highway is outside and yet it is quite limiting because of the abandoned car piles. There is also an interesting reversal at work here from the highways of Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-end* (1967) and Jacques Tati's *Trafic* (1971), which assault the spectator with obnoxious, Brechtian noise. In *The Walking Dead* complete silence is required so not to attract the attention of the zombies and that reduces space even further.

¹¹ My translation of: "la bouche est la porte ouverte qui conduit au bas, aux enfers corporels. L'image de l'absorption et de la déglutition, image ambivalente très ancienne de la mort et de la destruction, est liée à la bouche grande ouverte." Given the fact that Rabelais wrote in French, it seemed appropriate to use the French translation of Bakhtin's text.

¹² The oxymoron is the trope of the grotesque par excellence.

¹³ To Žižek's examples, we add Eurydice's double death. In this case, the second death is both symbolic and physical once more (Orpheus had managed to extricate her from the hells of Hades, physically).

¹⁴ I employ "alternate" here because the traditional, historical perspective should follow the slave routes from West Africa to the Caribbean and Haiti in particular where zombies and the fear of turning into a zombie have shaped the socio-cultural space. It is in this area of the world that the zombie begins to be associated with slavery. For more, see Wade Davis, *Passage to Darkness* (1988).

¹⁵ This interpretation may be problematic for two reasons. First, the dead return only to be brutally killed again, which poses a problem of repetition or reenactment of the Holocaust. Secondly, there are several other historical traumas to be considered as potential creators of this fundamental fantasy: slavery, the genocide of aboriginal

peoples, Vietnam (a key reference in *Night of the Living Dead*), current wars etc. A possible explanation for Žižek's focus here is his natural connection to European theory.

¹⁶ Given the context of gun violence in the American culture, the show clearly fuels the current gun debate raging on in this country.

¹⁷ No punishment appeared to suffice for Lori. In the Internet world she quickly became public enemy number one. For more on this and further proof that zombies have permeated deeply into our contemporary society's fabric (the show has been spoofed on *Saturday Night Live*, too) see Bill Simmons' column (ESPN and Grantland), "*The Walking Dead Gives 'Em What They Want*" (March 25, 2013).

¹⁸ All translations are mine.

¹⁹ The key difference is the evacuation (urine and feces) that Antelme refers to constantly.

²⁰ This term is one of the primary reasons for Nietzsche's "enthusiastic adoption by the Nazis" (Bull 2000: 121), which provides us with another connection to the concentration camps.

²¹ This downward trajectory echoes Vanessa Lemm's work on the civilization/culture split and the resulting antagonism between human life and animal life: "becoming overhuman is dependent upon one's openness to the animality of the human being. Animality is not overcome and sublimated, but resists in humans as much as in the overhumans. Indeed, one can understand what Nietzsche means by overhuman only as a function of such animal resistance" (2009: 5).

²² Season 4 erases much of that optimism.

²³ Žižek explains 'Knowledge in the Real' as "nature knows its own laws and behaves accordingly" (2008: 148).

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