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Zombie as Victim in Film, TV Series, and Video Games

Abstract

The visual culture of the 21st century has reimagined the zombie. The zombie figure has started appearing in every corner of contemporary pop culture, particularly over the last two decades, captivating audiences with outbreak narratives on screens. The main point of my research is to elucidate how and why the zombie figure has transformed from a mindless, slowly-strolling monster in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) by George A. Romero to fast, re-introduced apocalyptic zombies in the newest *Resident Evil* (2023) or to the excluded, outcasted monster in TV Shows such as *iZombie* (2015) or *In the Flash* (2013–2014). My goal is to demonstrate that the figure of a zombie aligns with the concepts of “the Other” and “the Abject,” depicting monsters that are victims of human oppression, rather than perpetrators. On the literary level, the zombie apocalypse exposes a range of societal fears and traumas, not only related to death or epidemiological threats, but also fears associated with the economy, including corporate realms, capitalistic structures, economic crises, and political and social systems. They challenge the boundaries of submission and resistance, as well as those of race, sex, nation, and national identity. Following that, I aim to answer what a zombie is in modern texts, why we are afraid of it, and what we are so scared of outside the screen.

social sciences; monster theory; culture studies; film studies; the Other



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Received: 2025-02-25 | Revised: 2025-05-02 | Accepted: 2025-05-16



Modern Metaphor of the Undead: Who is a Zombie?

The zombie figure has become a ubiquitous symbol in contemporary popular culture, especially over the past few decades. After a period of relative dormancy, the zombie narrative re-emerged in the early 2000s in response to a hypermediated world marked by terrorism, paranoia, and widespread cultural anxieties concerning apocalypse and systemic collapse. This resurgence coincided with the rapid development of digital entertainment media, particularly video games, which redefined the nature of audience interaction with the undead. As Schmeink notes, the return of the zombie occurred with “impeccable, even if coincidental, timing” (2016: 204), reflecting global restlessness and systemic insecurity. A key moment in this revival was the release of *Resident Evil* in 1996, which transformed zombies into prominent antagonists within interactive media. As McIntosh states, “zombies were saved from triviality in popular culture and made frightening again, this time by video games” (2008: 11). He further observes that zombies were — and continue to be — ideally suited to the video game environment (McIntosh 2008: 11). The immersive quality of gaming altered how the undead were perceived and engaged with, making them central to new narrative and ludic experiences. Since then, zombies have infiltrated a wide array of genres and formats. From satirical comedies like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) to dramatic television series such as *The Last of Us* (2023)¹ and even reality TV parodies like *Dead Set* (2008), zombies have become a flexible metaphor for disruption and disorder. Their proliferation across media suggests more than mere popularity; as Allan Cameron points out, “any form of audiovisual mediation may be associated with the zombie film’s representations of physical, social, and hermeneutical disorder” (2012: 68). Peter Dendle’s *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* (2001) and Jamie Russell’s *The Book of the Dead* (2005) together document hundreds of zombie-related films, further illustrating the genre’s cultural saturation.

The zombie’s symbolic power is also evident in its evolution from its Haitian folkloric roots to the post-Romero figure familiar today. Often portrayed as violent and mindless, zombies are positioned as figures to be eliminated without remorse. However, the shift initiated by George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) redefined the zombie as a reflection of societal fear and trauma. As Stacey Abbott argues, the

¹ In the game (2013) and TV Show, the monsters are referred to not as zombies but “clickers” infected by a mutated strain of the *Cordyceps fungus*

popularity of Romero's zombies emerged from "a cumulative form of anxiety as a result of extreme social change and cultural trauma" (2016: 68). This interpretation gained renewed relevance following the events of 9/11, after which zombie narratives increasingly served as metaphors for global instability and the collapse of societal structures. Schweitzer suggests that the zombie became a vehicle for expressing fears of extinction-level events and modernity's downfall (2018: 64). Films such as *Land of the Dead* (2005) have even been read as critiques of the Bush administration and U.S. foreign policy, reinforcing the zombie's political charge (Abbott 2016: 68).

This thematic evolution is echoed in the realm of video games, where zombies have become staple antagonists across genres. As Tanya Krzywinska notes, zombies appear not only in survival horror franchises like *Resident Evil* (1996–) and *Silent Hill* (1999–) but also in first-person shooters such as *House of the Dead* (1998) and action-adventure games like *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* (1999) (see Krzywinska 2002). Their adaptability and recognizability make them ideal adversaries — perceived as dangerous yet uncomplicated targets for elimination. While traditionally framed as mindless aggressors, zombies could be reinterpreted in recent academic discourse and cultural products as figures of vulnerability and symbolic victimhood. To explore this transformation, it is necessary to engage with the concept of trauma and reconsider whether violence against zombies is as morally unambiguous as it appears. If zombies lack autonomy and consciousness, can they be understood as victims of dehumanization and systemic violence? Moreover, the zombie figure aligns with the cultural concept of "the Other" — a representation of what is alien, unknown, or threatening to a stable identity. In this sense, zombies function as metaphors for fear of transformation, contagion, and societal collapse. Their vulnerability to violence, paired with their depiction as monstrous, positions them at a complex intersection of victim and villain. This article traces a specific shift in the representation of zombies in contemporary media: from aggressors to victims of violence. To interrogate this reversal, I examine how moral responsibility and agency are distributed within these narratives. Drawing on monster theory and Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection (see 1982), this study investigates the cultural mechanisms behind humanity's simultaneous repulsion from and attraction to the undead. In doing so, it asks what it means to kill a zombie — and whether such acts can truly be considered free of ethical consequence.

Questioning the Status of Oppressor and Victim in Zombie Narratives

Interpreting the zombie figure as a metaphor for modern societal anxieties is essential to grasping the politics of fear, violence, and victimhood. This analysis unfolds on five levels: (1) zombies' affinity with trauma and their relation to victimhood, (2) their status as the Other, connected to queer narratives challenging boundaries of race, sex, and nation, (3) their social exclusion as a manifestation of societal fears, (4) their portrayal as mindless, dehumanized beings that justify violence against them, and (5) their reduction to a faceless mass devoid of individual agency. Through an analysis structured into five distinct elements, I intend to elucidate how the status of zombies should be redefined sequentially. This premise finds its reflection not only within the narrative on the screen but also, more significantly, underscores the human status in society, offering a reflection on various extratextual social phenomena.

Zombies are primarily depicted as enemies rather than victims, especially in video games, where their representation is shaped both by narrative content and the aesthetic conventions of the medium. In first- or third-person shooters, zombies operate based on pre-programmed behaviour rather than intelligence. For instance, in *Resident Evil*, they move toward the player with murderous intent, characterised as “malevolently evil, having a non-instrumental desire to damage the welfare of others” (Fischer-Hornung, Mueller 2017: 237). This framing encourages players to treat zombies purely as threats, eliminating moral concerns about their destruction but encouraging violent behaviour for entertainment purposes. However, the nature of video games does not automatically render players oppressors, as they are still operating within the pre-designed frames of the medium. Oppression, as defined by Ann Cudd, requires systemic or psychological force to impose unjust constraints, “using direct and indirect material and psychological forces that violate justice” (2006: 26).

Defining oppression requires both agency and intent, complicating the idea that zombies oppress humans. The moral question of justice in first- or third-person shooters most frequently refers to the player’s urge to save humanity from the zombie apocalypse. Hence, zombies are considered a mere inhuman threat, and the narrative most often does not implicitly question the morality of violent killing — it is otherwise. This aligns with Noel Carroll’s framework of horror narratives, where the monster disrupts the protagonists’ world, posing an existential threat that justifies its elimination. The genre conventions of survival horror also reinforce vulnerability, rejecting the traditional power fantasies that many games offer, which centre on dominant heroes overpowering weaker foes (Weise 2011: 157). The implication is that the hero saves the human population. Following that, other scholars define an oppressor as one who:

Imposes unjust constraints on the freedom of individuals or groups² and/or inflicts unjust suffering on them. *The oppressor* in a situation is not necessarily an individual person. Sometimes, it is a group of people, a system of organisation, or even an abstraction, such as the concept of a cruel and vengeful God who must be appeased. The oppressor may also be an aspect of a person’s psyche.

(Wendell 1990: 23)

The cultural or media-driven framing of zombies as indisputable villains can itself be seen as a form of imposed restriction — one that limits alternative interpretations of their moral status. It would be difficult to accept that zombies can oppress humans if the premise is that they are mindless creatures without personality and, hence, unable to enforce conscious violent action. Do zombies impose unjust suffering on the individuals in zombie narratives? In video games, they function most often as creatures imposing suffering on humans, though the aspect of deliberation of these actions has to be excluded. In fact, zombies, as figures of systemic breakdown, embody the breakdown of stability as they emerge “to release chaos from within the logic of society itself”

² Referring to Jaggar 1983.

(McAlister 2012: 475). Rather, instead of inflicting deliberate suffering, they represent the fear and threat of losing control over established systems. Instead of being “direct and indirect material and psychological forces that violate justice;” referring back to Cudd’s definition of “oppressor,” zombies would be described by Agamben’s term of *homo sacer*: “[...] the abandoned [human] who lives outside the law and who can be killed without fear of consequence.” *Homo sacer* would be the one that represents power over life and death — a life worth neither saving nor killing, which is the exact parallel to the general image of a zombie, which worth is assumed by the cultural and systematic construct. Then, as the notion of oppression is interwoven with power, zombies would be “bare lives”, as called by Agamben, that are deprived of any right and function in the outbreak narratives, specifically in their representation in video games.

Philosopher Felix O’Murchadha reflected on violence and victims, “anyone who can be violated is a potential victim of violence.” Are zombies — contrary to the general perception — objects of violation? How do they manifest what O’Murchadha calls the “vulnerability to violation” (2006: 10)? Paradoxically, these are human characters who violate and kill zombies on the screen, assuming that they are the oppressors and the embodiment of evil. These are human audiences who support their heroes fighting against zombies in film and TV Shows or video game players impersonating the killers themselves. The monstrous creatures are the target of annihilation on each occasion. *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death*, a book of essays on Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, edited by Andrew Norris, has a tendency to see all violence in terms of sacrifice, as James Martel notices (2006: 2). As Martel continues, “the heart of the logic of sacrifice is the notion of the scapegoat, a victim slain in order to contain an otherwise potentially limitless violence.” In this reading of Agamben, zombies are assumed to be mindless and conscious-less, which automatically makes the factor of mortality of killing irrelevant. Depriving them of the status of an object of sacrifice allows players to treat them outside of any moral, human or divine law.

So, vulnerable zombies would be a tool to empower the players who, during the gameplay, need to be concerned about their own morality and face their fear of zombies being in line with the humane Vietnam War, “the inherent racism of society, or the loss of individuality in consumerism” (see Schmeink 2016: 70). The premise is that if they do not have personality and agency, killing them is virtuous. Following that, they lack agency during the act of violence, which makes them an object of violation. All of these fit the definition of trauma and traumatised given below, as O’Murchadha enumerates the lack of agency, self, and unpredictability as their determiners. He supports this theory, referring to Susan Brison’s conception of trauma:

[T]here’s no more reason to think that tomorrow will bring agony than to think that it won’t [...] so one makes a wager, in which nothing is certain and the odds change daily, and sets about willing to believe that life, for all its unfathomable horror, still holds some undiscovered pleasures.

(O’Murchadha 2006: 164, citing Brison 2002: 66)

He further summarises: “the experience of trauma, while necessitating the struggle for remaking a self, enables Brison to acknowledge and accept the almost unbearable unpredictability of life, and of a self which can never construct a complete narrative (O’Murchadha 2006: 164). People, as a society, are the victims of trauma on various levels. The undead is the sheer representation of joint trauma, so that the fascination with what is familiar to us is what we fear. According to Martina Witt-Jauch, trauma is particularly evident and powerful in the relation between life and death, body and spirit, as well as the patterns of memory (2015: 228). Therefore, the undead represent humans as victims, even on the level of unity. If, due to the trauma and fear, we can’t live anymore, we start to be zombies, in-between, the undead. In the article, Witt-Jauch explains the relationship between the undead and the victims of trauma, referring to body trauma, grief, pain, madness, and depravity, which are “inflicted” on victims, as the viruses in the outbreak narratives. As she claims, a zombie’s bodily form is an indirect rendition of the grief and pain that was inflicted on the body. She continues that in reference to the notion of memory and trauma influencing the body, literary criticism can attempt to “disclose the myriad ways in which change is either internal, such as madness, depravity, and enchantment, or external, as constructed through performance” (2015: 227). Similarly, Kristeva notices that the representations of monsters and the violence towards them derive from inherent human internal uneasiness: “But when I seek (myself), lose (myself), or experience *jouissance* — then “I” is heterogeneous. Discomfort, unease, and dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt against, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. Thus braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as alter ego, points it out to me through loathing” (1982: 10). Kristeva uses the distinction of internal/external and ego/other to show that the line between both is shaken in horror narratives. She demonstrates how these narratives blur the boundaries between the internal self and the external other, revealing the deep-seated anxieties and ambivalences within the human psyche.

On the literary ground, the zombie apocalypse exposes plenty of societal fears and traumas, not only related to death and the inability to tame it or epidemiological threats but also fears related to the economy, such as corporate realms and subjectivity of workers related to capitalistic structures, economic crisis, fear against the disruption of economic, political and social structures, as Ksenia Olkusz points out (2019: 190). Nevertheless, the researchers mainly refer to collective rather than individual trauma, so zombies are used as a tool to signify the crisis and sources of angst. As Abbott argues, zombie narratives offer a space to experience a collective historical trauma, especially from *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), “that position the genre as expressing a cumulative form of anxiety as a result of extreme social change and cultural trauma taking place in the US, as well as later, globally”, after 9/11 (2016: 68). Then, according to the definition of trauma and a victim, a society that survived the trauma of 9/11 can be labelled as a victim, and zombies, parallelly, can be interpreted as lifeless victims suffering from trauma. O’Murchadha reflects on terrorism, arguing that terrorism victim is reduced to a suffering or lifeless mass of flesh and that it aims to “reduce often a whole people to something close to the state of the actual victims:

dismembered, confused, disorientated, unfit for any relations of human solidarity or the pursuit of the good” (O’Murchadha 2006: 221). Taking all of these, the conclusion is that the definitions of trauma and violence fit the zombie narratives used as a representation of humans-victims experiencing trauma on various levels. At the same time, these are zombies that represent the trauma and the undead, in-between, unfitted creatures, *homo sacer* that can be killed without consequences within the narratives. So, even though these are humans that could be categorised as victims in terms of trauma in the extratextual contexts, these are zombies that undergo the category of victims due to the status of an object that cannot have any agency or impact on the act of violence imposed by humans in the narratives.

The Other, Queer and Zombie

A zombie is “the Other”, an individual who does not belong and is excluded by a social group due to their differences. Zombies’ status as “other” — specific deviance, departure from the norm—fits perfectly into these frames, especially in reference to the above definition of traumatised as “unfit for any relations of human solidarity or the pursuit of the good” (O’Murchadha 2006: 221). For Fischer-Hornung and Mueller, zombie narratives challenge boundaries of submission and resistance, race and sex, nation and national identity — life and death itself (2017: 3). Challenging these boundaries intersectionally on various levels makes zombies outcasts condemned to exclusion and violent hatred due to any deviation from Western norms, which is fearful for many humans who do not fit into these norms accordingly. In her essay *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva redefines the status of the Undead as an “abject,” underlining the systematic reasoning for the disdain of a zombie:

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior.

(Kristeva 1982: 4)

Still, as zombie narratives are fear narratives, one of the fears against the monster must be that a human would become one, which motif, again, is used to criticise social exclusions. For instance, in the TV series *In the Flesh* (2013–2014), a zombie is used as a focaliser to criticise homophobia and the masquerade of gender, sexuality, and identity. Moreover, this TV Show, again, explores multiple perspectives. In the show, zombies experience a sense of guilt for being unable to stop the behaviours of “the Other.” It opens the genre to new readings, representing a zombie as an excluded outcast — a victim of social distancing. The series uses zombies to explore sexual identity, a subject

that bridges the personal and the political in terms of identity politics. According to Abbott's analysis of this narrative, "with the signs of horrific difference displayed on the surface of the monster's skin, the difference can be acted upon (by avoidance or destruction). The zombie is a visibly outed monster forced to inhabit its decaying flesh for eternity" (2016: 173).

Another TV show portraying the nature of zombies' otherness is *iZombie* (2015), which tried to change the notion of zombies, but it is even more associated with illness and the inability to be part of the world. Contagion is equal to isolation in the series; it touches upon the motif of exclusion due to gender and sexuality. The Other, Queer and zombie, are here equated, and all are put outside of normative discourses. The figure represents the disruption of norms and structures, and, as Julia Kristeva states in the essay *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, "the zombie is already queer, and the queer is already zombie; they share a metonymic relation, defying cultural normativity equal which disturbs identity, system, order" (1982: 4). The motif of zombies is used inherently with the motif of exclusion. It mirrors the issues that we face globally, that is, homophobia, racism, classism, and all intolerance towards the differences expressed by some of the members of society. As can be noticed, since the beginning of the emergence of zombie narratives, their popularity has only grown and embraced more complex and progressing societal problems regarding "otherness." Moreover, balancing on the boundaries enumerated by Fischer-Hornung and Mueller makes monsters simultaneously attractive and repulsive, according to the authors (2017: 3). Zombies are victims, gathering audiences fascinated with their ambiguous nature and their representation in extratextual contexts. They can be analysed within the frames of vulnerability and violence and existential fears against social isolation or anxieties related to belonging to a social group.

Gender Inequality in the World of the Undead

Establishing the zombie's status as the queer Other, the corresponding narratives engage with gender and the disruption of heteronormative structures. The zombie —as an animated "corpse that is no longer an I" (Laverette 2021: 187) seems to correspond to Phillip A. Bernhardt-House's definition of queerness as "anything which actively disrupts normativity, transgresses the boundaries of propriety, and interferes with the status quo in closed social and sexual systems" (2008: 159). However, according to Schweitzer, in American zombie-centric narratives, gender matters less than patriotism, the matter of "other" and "hero" (2018: 77). Definitely, the emphasis is put on being an (American) hero, but as the narratives prove, while analysing the otherness of zombies, queering zombies cannot be omitted. Despite the initial impression that queer narratives have to be related to sexual relations, Rasmussen R. Simnsen notices that zombie narratives can have plenty of readings in which heterosexuality is perceived as one of the queered features to which zombie apocalypses can be referred. He states that he reads the emergence of zombies in Romero's series as "an instance of queer interference in the heteronormative institutions of society" (2016: 86). In *Night of the Living Dead*, there are possible readings allowing recipients to notice the queering sexual orientation of a child who does not want to grow up straight; therefore, various critics read the film as a criticism of the nuclear family, and "logical outgrowth of, or

response to, patriarchal norms” (Wood 1986: 29). So, if post-apocalyptic narratives mostly revolve around heroes trying to recreate society as it used to be, the texts offer reading, as Shaka McGlotten and Sarah VanGundy suggest, that “the only survivors [in zombie texts] are brave, pioneering heterosexuals who must fight off the threatening (homosexual?) menace” (2013: 113).

To start with, Rasmussen R. Simonsen, in the article *The cinematic zombie and queer theory*, notes that despite the deceased body being undefined, zombie creatures can be sexualised:

At the moment of zombification, the gender of the newly deceased body is inevitably undefined, thereby interfering with the status quo and the established sexual order. The dead parade around in the uncanny guise of the living — mercilessly intervening in the performative structure of heterosexuality.

(Simonsen 2016: 10)

Zombies do not fit any frames, boundaries, or even sex, which makes them non-normative beings. Scholarly texts explain the relation between a monster and gender or sexuality, proving that otherness is anything that disrupts normatively. Harry Benshoff provides his understanding of the monster as a metaphor for homosexuals in horror films: “To create a broad analogy, the monster is to ‘normality’ as homosexual is to heterosexual” (1997: 2). Additionally, gender theory covered in *Gender Trouble* can be the basis of the conclusion that the fear of queerness in zombie narrative readings relates to “nongendered” death and disruption of the progression of homosexuality. Following Simonsen, zombies answer Butler’s question of what gender performance can be ultimately effective for (1990: 177). The answer would be zombie’s nonperformance (1990: 94). As a result, the zombie is doomed to (un) live forever in an abject, “uninhabitable” zone (Butler 1993: 3); here, we encounter a great irony: Simonsen notices that “the zone of the outside is recognised as the land of the dead, but this, in turn, will encroach on the inside, human society, repudiating the living as the excess of the new “norm”: nongendered (un)death (2016: 92). Then, zombies created a new gender category that disrupts the preconceived binary: the undead, similarly, to breaking the category of dead/alive. Still, non-heteronormative, excluded, and discriminated against.

The features of otherness, undefinedness, and in-betweenness offer queer readings to zombie narratives, which, aside from the criticism of the nuclear family as in *Night of the Living Dead*, can function as a commentary on the social exclusion of non-heteronormative sexual orientations as in the film *Otto*; or, *Up with Dead People*, directed by Bruce La Bruce (2008). The film depicts a young gay man who has turned into a zombie and tries to adapt to the new, unfamiliar conditions. Otto, the main character, is “blatantly and uncompromisingly sexualised” in Simonsen’s reading (2016: 10), and he engages in non-heteronormative sexual intercourse with a man who, moreover, is alive. The sex scene in which Otto fights with the urge to bite his partner reflects the social fear of the HIV virus and is an introduction to play with the traditional representation of the homosexual man as a diseased subject. As an

individualised zombie, the main character lacks his position in society and undergoes severe mental illness — which is a metaphor for outcasts outside of a normative discourse due to their sexual preferences. Here, a zombie is figured as queer, or rather queer as a zombie. Ann Cvetkovich's claim in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) is that trauma can serve as a type of non-normative affective experience that leads to alternative communities or “public culture[s].” Cvetkovich's research is focused mainly on trauma within lesbian communities, arguing that trauma, whether sexual, transnational, or based on illness and AIDS activism, can be an essential bridge between queer studies and affect theory³. She argues that trauma and toxic forms of affect can be productive for creating new types of queer communities, in the case of this study, a zombie.

Otto is not the only narrative depicting the sexual intercourse between the living and the undead. In their examination of popular culture, Matt Coward-Gibbs and Bethan Michael-Fox discuss the growing visibility of intimate interactions between humans and undead beings. They note that while vampires are frequently depicted as alluring and engaging in consensual relationships in series like *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *True Blood*, zombies are often portrayed differently. For instance, in the film *Deadgirl* (2008), the narrative centers on the undead being subjected to sexual violence by the living. This contrast highlights differing societal perceptions and stigmas associated with various undead entities (see Coward-Gibbs, Michael-Fox 2021: 125). In the TV Show *iZombie*, the contagious virus of “zombism” is transmitted via sexual intercourse, so it is more associated with the HIV virus, putting zombies, again, in the category of excluded, infected “others”. As Simonsen mentioned: “The zombie virus is transported from wound to wound, and the visceral instantiation of the queer zombies [...] reaches an apex when the cinematic wound of zombie cinema intersects-flows into the traumatic reality of the AIDS epidemic” (2016: 87).

Agency and Consciousness

The omnipresent violence towards zombies seems to be justified as, despite the outward appearance of humans, in societal awareness, zombies are mindless, dehumanised, cannibalistic creatures driven only by the appetite for flesh. It makes them a ‘perfect’ subject to be excluded, offended, or, as in plenty of narratives, killed without a sign of guilt or remorse. So, in first-person or third-person shooters, zombies are rarely victims but oppressors with destructive forces. *Resident Evil* produced an image of zombies that are “creatures of instinct, rules, procedures, and code rather than intelligence, [...] zombies automatically move toward the avatar with murderous intent; they seem to be malevolently evil, having a non-instrumental desire to damage the welfare of others” (Fischer-Hornung and Mueller 2017: 237). The lack of consciousness and agency establishes the monster's status as a target for killing. Hence, when the perspective in video games is that of a hero fighting evil, one can indulge in guilt-

³ According to Marta Figlerowicz, in *Affect Theory Dossier: An Introduction* (2012), affect theory is a compound phrase for “theories of the self-running ahead of itself: of how much more quickly (fMRIs tell us) our brains might work than we consciously know them to; of how often we start acting on emotions before we recognise what they are; of how rapidly our boundaries and intimacies change with our evolving relationships and settings” (2012: 3).

free shooting, where an entertained player-killer aims at the monsters. As a persistent motif in video-game culture, from the 1980s onward, zombies have been featured in video games of various genres. David Flint enumerated examples, including the samurai bikini series *Onechanbara*, as well as shooting, pinball, beat-'em-up, and typing games (see 2009: 171). While exploring the fit between the zombie and video game medium, Bishop observes that video-game zombies “do not think or speak—they simply act relying on purely physical manifestation of terror” (2006: 197), which makes them suitable to the nature of the medium, as it is about action, functionality, and the physical dynamic system (Kirkland 2009: 232). That, in turn, justifies the violence towards zombies, as if they have less of a right to life, being unreasonable, mindless, and having cannibalistic tendencies. Then, as the medium aims to satisfy the player who feels rewarded upon accomplishing the task (here, killing the zombies), video game zombies in their latest form are running, screaming, and behaving erratically, as seen in the cooperative shooter game *Left 4 Dead* (2008). The violence here, then, seems to be perpetuated by game-makers’ need to achieve the highest possible level of interactivity, and subsequently, consumers’ satisfaction. Then, ethical responsibility should not be placed entirely on the player, as these are the game mechanics that limit a player’s actions and encourage certain moves while playing. The game scholar Jesper Juul points out that “games contain a built-in contradiction,” referring to how we interpret the interactivity of videogames as “free-form” play devoid of constraints (2003). Yet, in playing videogames, “we choose to limit our options by playing with fixed rules” (Juul 2003). Still, the violence towards zombies in video games is spectacularised and inhumane. The video game zombies most often do not express any agency or psychological complexity, but the extent to which players engage in brutal killing, and the sheer apparatuses of the games can, and should, be questioned concerning ethics and elevation of aggressive behaviour or revelation of the frustration and, again, complex fears and anxieties.

However, as Fisher-Hornung and Mueller explain, in later texts, zombies happen to share similarities with humans (2017: 237), and the border between human and inhuman blurs. Then, the question arises whether the boundary between humans and the undead can be broken and whether zombies can also play a character that is not just a mindless monster with a non-instrumental desire to damage the welfare of others but can fit the definition of a victim. In the film *Shaun of the Dead* (2008), even though zombies are a horde of undead aiming to kill whoever is on their way, one can deduce that they are subject to societal and capitalistic violence. Not only does the film relate to the routine killing of the main character to the extent that he does not notice that everybody around him is a zombie, but it also poses a question of when we, as human beings, are dying. It raises the question of whether we oscillate between the crisis of life and death and questions the nature of a zombie and its similarity to human beings. The narratives repetitively underline that zombies are a representation of human beings being more zombified than zombies due to the everyday routine of killing them. Following Schweitzer’s analysis and taking into account O’Murchadha’s definition, zombies can be victims paralysed by the unpredictability of the future and lack of agency, as humans that are turning into zombies:

What is a zombie but a walking corpse determined to turn you into one, too? [...] death is especially disturbing to modern individuals because it represents “the precise point where human control ends in a world which is orientated to the successful achievement of control.” And zombies are, as the title goes, the walking dead. Simon Pegg, writer of *Shaun of the Dead*, explains that zombies embody our fear of our own death, personified. The physical manifestation of that thing we fear the most.

(Schweitzer 2018: 175)

As noted, zombies are on the verge of humanity and death; there is a question of when one becomes the undead. Consciousness and agency seem to determine the status of the zombie — victim. *Shaun of the Dead* blurs this boundary and opens to another interpretation: zombie narrative commenting on neoliberal capitalism fostering life in a direction that turns humans into mindless creatures, which consequently can be classified as victims of the system.

The change of perspective of zombie narratives can also be driven by making a zombie a focaliser. Once a zombie is a focaliser, we can acquire its perception and see humans as brutalists and oppressors. Chris Roberson’s comic *I-Zombie* (2010) is narrated by a sentient female zombie who works as a gravedigger and experiences the memories of the deceased by consuming their brains. Reflecting on the narrative implications of such a shift in perspective, Abbott notes that this point-of-view reorientation not only centres the story on the undead protagonist but also highlights processes of cognition and identity development (2016: 64). A comparable inversion occurs in the animated film *ParaNorman* (2012), although it is particularly evident in the independent British film *Colin* (2008), which likewise adopts a zombie’s perspective. In this case, the concept of humans as oppressors becomes especially salient, as the story unfolds through the experiences of Colin, a newly undead figure subjected to violence not only by humans but also by other zombies. His first interaction with survivors involves being assaulted and bound, his shoes taken. Subsequently, while imprisoned in a basement, he witnesses a disturbing scene in which a man exploits the undead to inflict harm upon young women. The narrative culminates in a viscerally intense confrontation between humans and zombies, characterised by graphic imagery: humans drive spikes through zombie skulls, and zombies retaliate with flesh-tearing aggression. As Abbott explains, the handheld camerawork and tight framing enhance the sequence’s immersive brutality (2016: 168). These perspective shifts invite viewers to reconsider the ethics of violence within apocalyptic narratives, prompting reflection on whether zombies are truly monstrous or positioned as victims in a world driven by fear and aggression.

Zombie as a Mass

Zombies are rarely depicted as individuals but rather as a faceless horde, a narrative strategy that reinforces their role as anonymous, dehumanised threats. It reflects fear of an unstoppable event, often mirrors fear against waves of immigrants, of which Donald Trump warns us. Zombie is “contagious”, “the Other”, and “intruder” and lacks personality or any features that would distinguish one from another. Despite the

lack of agency in this representation of the analysed monsters, their figure can still be considered victimised, especially since this mass can parallel fear against immigrants and Islamophobic tendencies expressed frequently by Americans. Schweitzer refers to this phenomenon, recalling the declaration of Donald Trump in 2015 that “tremendous infectious disease is pouring across the border” in the bodies of immigrants (Schweitzer 2018: 45). Outbreak narratives offer space for expressing hatred towards progressing globalisation and stigmatising individuals threatening the homogeneous society. As mentioned before, people fear the outside world, and these are the socio-logical and political changes that are the central point of panic in the fear narratives. One of the narrative techniques in post-apocalyptic texts is focusing on the detailed description of a setting that lacks “traditional boundaries”. According to Schweitzer, that device contributes to a lack of trust in who is suspicious and who we can trust as viewers/readers/players (see 2018: 46). The boundaries can reflect islamophobia, terrorism, government, corporations, race, language, and cultural differences. The central point of a narrative is not a zombie but the setting and fear itself. The sheer monster becomes a tool for authors to debate essential issues and mirror the disruptive public moods in post-apocalyptic settings.

World-centric narratives, which are not focused on a character but on the setting, are one of the characteristics of zombie narratives, according to Ksenia Olkusz’s theory. Olkusz points out that human survivors in the texts must redefine their worldview and follow the imperative of survival (2019: 67). Then, Matthew Gumpert also explains that world-centric narratives in which the new generation (Z, ironically as an acronym for Zombie) drives the creation of the post-apocalyptic setting: “The undead — Only in the zombie is there consumption without nutrition. By this measure, Z is not alive; it only mimics the attributes of life” (2020: 29). As shown in *Shaun of the Dead*, a mass of zombies can function as a representation of a mindless society compared to a mass without agency. Abbott argues that these masses can be parallel to blue-collar workers and supports this claim with Romero’s statement that “the zombie for [him] was always the blue-collar kind of monster and he was us” (2016: 2). On the contrary in his understanding, vampires are metaphorical aristocrats, and this class distinction is visible in his graphic novel *Empire of the Dead* (2014–2015). Taken all together, it can be seen that the line between a human and a zombie is blurred, and, as Romero expressed, zombies are us. Again, following Gumpert’s comparison to Generation Z and Olkusz’s understanding of world-centric zombie narratives, followed by Romero’s view, zombies can be used as a tool to show the atrocities of the contemporary world, and these are zombie-humans who are the victims forced to live within its frames and systems.

Conclusion: The (Un)Dead as Victim on the Screens

The modern metaphor of the living dead has spread into public discourse, reminding humans about systematic failure and threats in the contemporary world. Regardless of whether it is fear of becoming a zombie-like corporate worker, fear against ‘unwanted’ immigrants, terrorists, the inevitability of death, AIDS virus, or biological weapons, the emergence of a scary zombie figure is built on the societal crises and dangers imposed by other human beings. Since systematic failures and global anxieties are at the

heart of outbreak narratives, zombie-centre narratives gained immense popularity, resembling incremental global anxiety.

Zombies function as a tool for expressing threats on various levels, and therefore, their status needs to be redefined, the common perception of zombies as perpetrators of oppression should perhaps be more complex and nuanced — including an alternative view of them as victims of various kinds of violence, trauma and exclusion. Referring to the establishment of the status of oppressors, zombies need to be acknowledged as figures that do not impose deliberate injustice on human beings in fear narratives. To oppress and violate, one needs to perform a psychological action of imposing constraints on the individual or a group, as scholarly definitions of “oppression” provided by Cudd, Wendell, or Jaggar prove. It contradicts the assumption that these are victimised human beings, not otherwise. Zombies are a reflection of uncontrollable chaos and failure of systematic order, which needs to be fought against by human survivors, and lack of agency or psychological factors seem to be a justification for violence imposed on zombie figures by human protagonists. O’Murchadha’s theory of “vulnerability of violation” would be applied to zombies being vulnerable to human violence. The vulnerability manifests on plenty of levels, including zombie status as “the Other” or, consequently, “Queer.” If the Undead represents a disruption of constructed social boundaries and exclusion from normative narratives, zombies will reflect the Agamben’s *homo sacers*, the outlaws who can be killed due to their intersectional unfitness to the established societal norms of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation outside of the narratives.

Human morality and responsibility should be questioned in the analysed narratives, as violence towards the undead finds no justification in the analysed zombie narratives. As proved, the allegedly dehumanised and mindless mass mirrors the threats imposed by humans, and, on the other hand, once zombies gain consciousness in a narrative, their uncanny nature makes them even more resemblant to human beings. Then, they either represent fear against human actions on the collective level or discrimination against “the Other” on the individual level. The moral question of killing the monster would then be a question of human actions outside of the screen narratives. By bringing together the contexts in which zombies appear on the screen, it can be concluded that violence is imposed by human beings, not zombies. Culture lenses the public mood, and the horror genre has always been alluring due to the portrayal of global, often universal, fears. If so, these are people who are equally oppressors and victims of violence imposed by one another outside of the screen narratives.



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