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Do Zombies have to die? Analysing the role of the Zombie as a liminal figure dismantling dichotomous categories and indicator for societal challenges and desires

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Do Zombies have to die? Analysing the role of the Zombie as a liminal figure dismantling dichotomous categories and indicator for societal challenges and desires

Abstract

The growing fascination with Zombies is beyond visible when regarding the frequent inclusion of the Zombie into current forms of media. Most contemporary accounts portray Zombies as monsters that lack feelings, consciousness, or morality, and have only one desire: to eat, and therefore kill, humans. Consequently, the correct response to this threat is presented to be killing them too. Nonetheless, comparing different fates of the Zombie reveals that these monsters might not always die, and that their destiny reflects the fears and desires of the society and time period in which they were born. In Haiti, where Zombies originated, they were mainly required to perform physical labour instead of harming other humans, to help certain individuals gain wealth and power. Due to fluid conceptualisations of life, death, and the self, none of the ways to deal with a Zombie in Haitian mythology entails a finite death as it is understood to be in Anglo-American society. However, when looking closer, many contemporary Zombie films raise similar questions about the validity of dichotomous categories such as life and death, and who controls these categories. By regarding Haitian mythology, analysing multiple Zombie films such as *White Zombie* (Halperin, 1932), *28 Days Later* (Boyle et al., 2003) or *Warm Bodies* (Levine, 2013), and drawing upon theories such as the Freudian death drive and Agamben's *homo sacer*, this essay argues that the 'Western' Zombie has to die because it dismantles dichotomous categories and represents societal fears that must disappear. However, the Zombie never actually dies because its existence is tied to that of its master, society itself.

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Introduction

Most contemporary accounts of the Zombie figure portray Zombies as monsters that lack feelings, consciousness, or morality, and have only one desire: to eat, and therefore kill, humans. Consequently, the seemingly correct response to this threat is presented to be killing them too, just as is the case in multiple Zombie films. Nonetheless, comparing different fates of the Zombie reveals that the monster might possibly not have to always die, and that its destiny reflects the fears and desires of the society and time period in which it was born. One of the first feature-length Zombie films, Halperin's 'White Zombie' from 1932, reflects this observation. Madeleine, one of the main characters, is a Zombie that appears lifeless but poses no threat to other humans and goes on to be revived once the voodoo master Legendre dies, directly contrasting the character and fate of the cannibalistic 'modern Zombie' that must usually be killed by a shot to the head. The reasons for these different ways of dealing with Zombies can be traced back to varying understandings of two main concepts – that of *death* and that of the *Zombie* itself, which are culturally constructed and historically specific. By providing examples from multiple Zombie films and drawing on concepts such as those derived from Freudian theories, I will argue that the 'Western' Zombie has to die because it represents societal fears that *must* disappear. However, the Zombie never actually dies.

Zombies and the Self in Haitian Mythology

To answer the question whether the Zombie must die, one should look at the way the Zombie is treated where it was first created, in Haiti. Haiti was a French colony in which slaves were made into commodities who were alienated from every aspect of social life, hence experienced social death. A successful slave revolution freed the nation, however, the USA invaded Haiti in 1905, created the Haitian American Sugar Company, and re-implemented slavery on sugar

plantations (Bourguignon, 1959). Therefore, the Haitian Zombie is a critique of US occupation, which serves as a reminder of the degrading practices of slavery (Hurstun, 1990). As Desmangles (1992) explains, it is the *bocor*, the voodoo master that practices dark magic, who traditionally turns people into Zombies. They do so upon requests from citizens who wish to gain power and wealth but cannot achieve this aim without Zombies. In this Haitian mythology, the Zombie *can* be threatening, as they might be used to steal or sometimes even kill. However, the Zombie is mainly required for physical labour, such as plantation work (Desmangles, 1992). Moreover, Haitian mythology considers the universe to inhabit over 1000 spirits which are constantly in contact with the human world. Life and death are opposite points on the exact same spectrum, hence, not as rigid as in Western beliefs. This fluidity entails multiple consequences. Although one spirit might be considered 'evil' and another 'good', they can still share characteristics and are therefore never completely one or the other. Furthermore, a person's self is divided into four parts: the body, the *Met Tet*, the *Ti bonanj*, and the *Gwo bonanj*. To die a true death and be able to live on as a spirit, all these parts must be put into their rightful places (Desmangles, 1992).

The historical context of the creation of the Zombie, paired with this worldview, influences how the Zombie and its fate. Haitians are aware that the *bocor* and the person that strived for wealth are responsible for the transformation. Therefore, there are two options to properly deal with Zombies according to Haitian mythology. Initially, one can wake up a Zombie through making them consume salt. On the one hand, they could then remember their entire life and realise they are dead, hence wilfully returning to their grave. On the other hand, one might need to make a true death happen if the person had not died a proper death beforehand (Bourguignon, 1959). This requires a ceremony which puts all four parts of the self into their proper places. The underlying Haitian goal reached through dealing with a Zombie is therefore to abolish the slavery-like conditions and be free once more. Hence, Zombies are woken up and the aggression

of the people is directed towards the authority figures, such as the evil spirits, voodoo masters, or the client instead, rather than the Zombies. Superficially it might seem as if both options still lead to the death of the Zombie and therefore only affirm this essay's initial question. Death in the Haitian worldview, however, is not separate from life. It is a threshold into a new lifeform that is still connected to the human realm. Instead of dying, the victim is reintegrated into the spirit world as a social being – being more alive again than after experiencing a social death.

Controlling the Death Drive

Apart from commenting on slavery and the US occupation, Zombies also reflect upon the role of the person who is responsible for the Zombification of others. It is when someone chooses material wealth or power over their loved ones that Zombie transformations occur. Freud (Lear, 2005) claims that society and every human being are in a constant struggle between life and death, as humans have an internal death drive which aims to destroy itself in order to return to inorganic life, a life form that was devoid of any tension. A certain type of love, sexual drive, and unifying power on the other hand is what Freud coins to be *eros*, the life drive (Lear, 2005). He explains that sexuality aims for unification, which should prolong life, in contrast to the death drive. In the earlier Zombie films, it was objectification and possessive love that turned the objects of desire into Zombies, but in fact made neither of the partners happy. In Tourneur's (1943) 'I walked with a Zombie', for example, multiple people claimed to have caused Jessica's condition, all of which were based on attempts to control her. Levine's 'Warm Bodies' (2013), on the other hand, portrays an opposite situation. It is love, not the control over women that are viewed as sexual objects, which turns Zombies back into humans. *Eros* hereby becomes the force that makes the Zombies redeemable, which is an interesting new insight into the character of the Zombie, challenging the question of whether Zombies need to be killed in all instances.

While *Warm Bodies* (2013) shows that Zombies do not have to be aggressively murdered, they still die in the end by being redeemed, as love kills the Zombie within the human. However, Freud (Lear, 2005) seems to portray the death drive as being the stronger one of the two, as it ultimately guides all human beings into destruction. Due to the tension between the two drives, a moral structure within society that limits the pleasures and needs of a person in order to avoid chaos, is needed. Society thereby channels the human desires in a way that make them productive for the commons, rather than destructive. To regulate this, morality is internalized into the three parts of the self, the *id*, the ego and, mainly, the *superego*, which personifies the social norms and acts as a limiting force for the desires and needs of the id (Lear, 2005). According to Freud (Lear, 2005), we show aggression towards others in an attempt to not destroy ourselves. The occurrences in Wright's (2004) 'Shaun of the Dead' are a perfect example for the internalized aggression and guilt that is unleashed upon the world. Strikingly, the Zombies do not die a conventional death at the end of this film. Instead, humans are forcing the Zombies to work. The Zombie's unregulated desires and aggression are made into socially acceptable forms of labour again, somewhat integrating the Zombie into society and therefore defying what the Zombie actually is. Being deprived of their 'Zombie identity', the ending could be considered as having killed the Zombies as well. These examples and Freud's analysis show very strict views and rigid categories within society considering life and death. However, these films raise questions about their validity.

Biopolitics and the State of Exception

In many Western societies, death is commonly regarded to occur when all the biological functions within the body fail. What happens afterwards - whether the soul moving to heaven or a complete erasure of a person's existence from the universe - depends on that person's

beliefs. However, the topic is more complicated after all, with rising questions about the time of death and who would have the right to decide whether a human is in fact alive or dead. Once, death was defined by the stopping of the heart and lung functions. When the idea of the overcoma was raised, however, a new definition of death was established. The new criteria became the subject's 'brain death' (Agamben, 1998).

Such complicated definitions, which demonstrate that the meanings of death can change over time, pose the possibilities for legal and medical battles. These battles emphasize that life and death depend on a decision. This is what Agamben (1998) describes as biopolitics, a person's natural life being included into political mechanisms. Involving a person into political life enables the creation of sovereign power, a power that dominates its subjects and has the ability to take someone's political life away. Hobbes (Agamben, 1998) hereby distinguishes between the political and the biological body. The political life is what can be considered the normal life property owners have, and the biological life is what can be called 'bare life'. Bare life, experienced by the *homo sacer*, who is the banned outlaw, is a condition in which someone is biologically human but socially not, as everyone can murder them without incriminating themselves. The outlaws were often identified as werewolves, and these hybrid creatures perfectly describe what their existence entails: being human *and* animal, being excluded *and* included into society, neither being a full citizen nor a beast. Sovereign power, in the form of a government, consequently, has the right to kill its own citizens or strip people of their rights, such as through banning them. The *homo sacer* therefore represents a state of exception or emergency, a grey zone, which only the state has the power to create, and which is inhabited by monsters (Agamben, 1998).

Dismantling of Categories: Liminal Figures and a Third Category

As aforementioned, society creates rigid categories that subjects are supposed to internalise and follow, however, it is precisely the fact that these categories exist which creates the possibility for a state of exception and the space for monsters to evolve, a space in between categories. This grey zone is inhabited by monsters, such as the Zombie, because monsters demonstrate that some categories are not fixed, that maybe life and death are not quite that rigid and simple to conceptualise as well as in the hands of the sovereign to decide upon. The distinction between a political citizen and an outlaw highlights that everyone might biologically be a human, however, not everyone is a political citizen with rights. The Zombie apocalypse represents a state of exception in which every individual that is not a Zombie becomes a sovereign power, meaning they have the right to kill any Zombie without feeling guilt, as these Zombies are merely bare life and no political citizens anymore. Thus, it happens that in many cases, the only moments in which film characters feel guilty are when they are confronted with killing their loved ones, such as when Shaun is facing his Zombie-turned mother in ‘Shaun of the Dead’ (2004). Nevertheless, every encounter with Zombies points out that family members are not the same anymore after transformation – they are now banned, so they can be killed. In Romero’s (2004) ‘Dawn of the Dead’ they make this extremely explicit and dichotomous by stating that the Zombies are not cannibals because they do not eat other Zombies, their own kind, which categorises them into an own species, completely depriving them of any connection to humans. In Boyle’s (2003) film ‘28 Days Later’, the Zombies quite literally represent the death drive by being infected with a virus called ‘rage’. The film is especially enlightening, however, when looking at the dismantling of categories. The Zombies in the film are not dead. Nonetheless, as infected individuals they have lost their status as political citizens and can therefore be killed. Consequently, most survivors feel like extermination is the appropriate form of action, instead of trying to find a cure. The fact that ‘there is no government’, as stated in the film, gives every

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survivor the right to be a sovereign power. One group of survivors even tries to starve all of them to death, which happens at the end of the movie. This strongly argues for the fact that the Zombie must die. However, what makes the analysis of this film more interesting is the fact that there is a sequel, '28 Weeks Later' (López Lavigne et al., 2007), which shows that England has in fact become a quarantine zone and outside that quarantine zone, people are trying to find a cure. That provides different vantage points for analysis. Firstly, again, it seems to be possible to redeem the Zombies. Secondly, it shows that somehow, the survivors in the quarantine zone have become, in the eyes of the true survivors, equal to the Zombies – they are left there to die, uninformed about the actual situation, but simultaneously given the right to kill the Zombies. This reflects upon the status of the quarantine zone as a state of exception where anything is permitted and, no matter what the survivors are doing - even if it is developing a cure - the ultimate goal is still the death of the Zombies, as a cure would kill the rage virus.

In this film, another category was also added to the dualistic concept of political and biological life. There are not just survivors and Zombies, but also survivors that are none of the two, neither the beast, which is the Zombie, or the political citizen, which are the survivors outside of England. Instead, they are inhabiting a grey zone, just as the *homo sacer*. Consequently, the Zombie apocalypse created a third category that blurred the line between the other two, with the threshold becoming completely fluid. The Zombies could be cured and the survivors within the quarantine zone could be taken back into society, but only if they kill the Zombies.

In 'Warm Bodies' (2013), turning the Zombies back into humans is also made possible by including a third figure, the 'boneys', as the ultimate Zombie which cannot be redeemed. That film underlines that individuals will choose to be a political citizen over giving in to the death drive if they feel love, which is unique in comparison to any of the other films.

Killing the Master

One of the few films that show absolutely no sign of possible redemption is Fleischer's (2010) *Zombieland*. Being a more recent film, it can be interpreted to reflect upon the fears of modern-day society and the political climate that is ongoing, focusing on environmental disasters or an escalating refugee crisis that dismantles borders – one of those fixed categorisations that would destruct societal order if it was truly threatened. Already in Haiti, migrants and Zombies were partially seen as similar, both being considered 'unusual workers' who are inevitably part of the economy but simultaneously destroy it (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002). Many of these fears are intrinsically linked to dichotomies within Western thinking, such as the idea of 'us' and the 'other', or nature and culture.

The examples and analyses have shown that, in most cases, the Zombies must die one way or the other – if not through killing, through redemption or cure. This must happen to detain humanity from realising the contradictions within its own existence and societal structure that Zombies reveal. It appears as if killing the Zombie acts as a symbol for killing society's fears and challenges and taking control once again. Furthermore, Zombies are depicted to automatically belong to one homogenous community, despite any categorisations that exist in the real world, such as age, gender, or race. They are just 'the Zombies', which threaten the divided, contemporary, Anglo-American society. Moreover, Freud (Fromm, 1962) mentioned that society decides upon what its citizens are aware of and what remains unconscious. That is why the Zombie needs to be killed: to continue exclusively seeing the dominant narratives that a certain society requires its people to believe. Furthermore, killing the Zombie channels the intrinsic human aggression towards something outside ourselves, thus keeping the death drive from reaching its aim. However, the aggression is, indirectly, still pointed at us, as humans play an essential role in the creation of these monsters. A thought that, if followed through, implies that a monster can only be truly destroyed alongside the death of its master.

Conclusion

As Cohen (1996) highlights, the Zombie is in fact never properly killed. The monster always manages to escape or come back in some other shape or form, or within a new historical and cultural context, just as the image of the Zombie has been changing over time. This is possible because the monster is created by society. As long as our struggles, fears and desires change, so do the monsters that will keep coming back. In 'I walked with a Zombie' (1943), it seems like the threshold to be turned back into a human has been surpassed by far, and the main character dies at the end. However, this indirectly happens by the hands of the voodoo master, which shows that the master is still in control. In other films that turned away from the initial focus on voodoo, the master of the Zombie is society itself, which kills the Zombie but equally revives it.

To conclude, In Haitian folklore, the Zombie must usually be woken up, because the aim is to free the people from slavery and alienation. In Western society, however, the Zombie needs to die because it represents the death drive that must be repressed, or other fears and faults of society that should not become part of a collective consciousness. Hence, the fate of the Zombie depends on what the perception of death and Zombies is in the culture in which the monster is created. Nonetheless, it is ultimately never achieved to properly kill the Zombie, as it would only die if society, it's master, died too.

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