

Zombies and the End of Society

Written by James Berger

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JAMES BERGER, FEB 15 2013

*"O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken...
Is not every continent worked over and over with sour dead?"*
–Walt Whitman

Where are the Dead?

What exhilaration when the dead walk out of the earth or get up off the street where they died, and go looking for take-out. I wondered where they were when the world ended – and I'm always imagining it ending. What else is there to think about? It's our most urgent topic, and never out-of-date even though it never quite arrives. Or did it arrive and I didn't recognize it? What are all these symptoms and portents? The melting glaciers and northeast hurricanes; the burning suburbs of the mountain states; the collapse and zombie-like reanimation of the financial system; the decade-long wars, and the eternal war on Terror; the fall of the towers; the gluttonous rearing-up of corporocracy; the shutdown of democracy in 2000. And all this in the first dozen years of the new millennium!

But where are the dead? That's the question apocalyptic scenarios usually forget. Look at the new NBC series *Revolution*. After the planet's electronic technology has permanently shut off, how many millions must have died of starvation, exposure, disease, or violence? But there are no bodies. Likewise, in the global warming/ice age apocalypse of *Day After Tomorrow* or the tectonic plate shift apocalypse of *2012*, or just about any popular end-of-the-world spectacle you can name, after the end, as the dauntless band of survivors survey their future world, where are the dead? Or jump back a generation: in the nuclear apocalypse classic *On the Beach*, when the American submarine reaches the dead city of San Francisco –annihilated by radiation but physically undamaged–the streets are empty. The dead have been forgotten. The apocalypse somehow is clean, as if everyone was vaporized by Star Trek phasers.

Mark Twain did not forget. In the apocalyptic climax to his *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the ambitious, idealistic modernizers (*qua* imperial administrators) are finally suffocated by fumes of decaying bodies of the 30,000 knights they'd slaughtered with their modern weapons.

And the zombie genre doesn't forget. No matter how technological, death still is biological, organic–only the first step in a long process of decomposition, the consumption of the body by microorganisms. The post-mortem is a world of predation and consumption, the blind urges of bacteria. This most preposterous biological fiction–the "living dead"–stands actually for a salient fact. In the wake of global catastrophes, the dead will be present and will be active. The biosphere will be transformed by them. And so the AMC series *Walking Dead*, now in its third season, gets it right. Where are the dead? They're right here, everywhere, relentless, decaying and consuming. *Walking Dead's* vision of the zombie world is intensely biological, full of blood, decay, flesh, the uncertain boundary between animate and inanimate, the utter horror and contempt that the living feel for the dead, that the subject feels for the object.

But the dead are present not just organically, but psychically and historically. This is true in any case. As Faulkner's famous pronouncement attests, "the past isn't dead, it isn't even past." But this is especially true in post-apocalyptic scenarios. Even as the slate is wiped clean and world "transformed utterly" (as Yeats put it), the ruined landscape is

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haunted both by personal losses and by the agonizing returns of all the crimes and stupidities that brought the world to its end—all of these now irrevocable and unable to be expiated. Or, as Theodor Adorno (Faulkner's contemporary and comrade-in-anamnesia) wrote, "We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken" (129).

The problem of the zombie, in these terms, is a problem of incomplete exorcism or unsuccessful burial, and the zombie becomes the incarnation of some deep unease about history. Robert Herz, the early twentieth-century sociologist, described this contemporary zombie problematic in his analysis of certain cultures' use of the "double burial." The initial burial of a corpse is insufficient, Herz argued. As long as the dead body possesses flesh and the processes of decomposition are evident and ongoing, the dead remains a threat to the living. "Death," he writes, "is consummated only when decomposition has ended: only then does the deceased cease to belong to this world so as to enter another life" (47). The first, or "wet," burial must be followed, after a year or so, by a second, "dry," one in which the bones are dis- and then reinterred. And the biological fact of death in itself is not enough to remove a person from the social order; that removal requires a further social-biological event combining dessication and ritual. Only after the second burial does the dead person become "a true spirit," at which time "the separation between the deceased and this world becomes final. It is so true that natural death is not sufficient to sever the ties binding the deceased to this world that in order to become a legitimate and authentic inhabitant of the land of the dead, he must first be killed" (73)—that is, killed again.

The logic of the second burial is the logic of the zombie, and is also the logic of Žižek's gloss of Lacan's notion of the "second death"; i.e. the *symbolic* death that follows and completes the biological. As in Faulkner, Adorno, and, of course, all psychoanalytic directions of thought, the second death or second burial is the working-through (*aufarbeiten*, coming to terms with) the social, historical, and personal traumas that the dead continually revisit and reinflict on the living. The zombies cannot be eliminated until the causes that produced the zombies are no longer active.

Revelations and Deferrals

And here we arrive at the curious fact that the origin of any zombie apocalypse is always vague and unsatisfying: some virus, military research perhaps? The origin is never germane, and yet, because we lack it, the dead continue to return. The gap in reality through which the dead enter opens also to evasion and amnesia. We don't know why they're here and so we can't help but claim our innocence. But we still must surmise a few things, as long as our consciousness persists, as long as we can distinguish *us* from *them*: the opening of graves should, after all, have some revelatory aspect. Nature has reversed itself to reveal the truth about our mortal selves; *and* that the criminal stupidity of the existing order has engendered the most terrible, fantasmatic ending that can be imagined. It is the end that is really the end, down to the decomposition of the final living molecule. At the same time, surprisingly, finality is not generally a feature of zombie and other apocalyptic portrayals. Some consciousness, voice, and at least the possibility of a refashioned community find themselves still present on the other side of the cataclysm. Or the catastrophic end marks out a revelatory avenue toward deeper truths. Once we step past that terminal boundary—and find ourselves, amazingly, still conscious and possessing language—the dimensions of the old world become apparent in ways we never grasped when we were its inhabitants.

Only a few apocalyptic stories—Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Gore Vidal's *Kalki*, and the novel and film *On the Beach* come to mind—end with the extinguishing of the last human consciousness. And Lars von Trier's recent film *Melancholia* is magnificent in portraying the weeks, then hours, then moments prior to the world's absolute obliteration, as a wandering planet, gorgeous, filling the whole sky meets us—a thing without thought ending all our thoughts. Zach Snyder's 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* captures the problem of ending quite cannily. He gives us two endings. First, as per the standard pop apocalyptic finale, a small band of survivors escape, a safe place appears attainable, there is hope, humanity may still endure. After the credits, however, the film continues, but the perspective shifts to a hand-held camera, and the home video of the journey to the safe haven soon devolves into a renewed and terminal zombie horror. The last human subject is devoured as the camera continues recording—a mechanical process now beyond the end of subjectivity.

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But to what end are these endings – deferred endings, repeated endings, endings that refuse to end; we might call them zombie endings? There is always a meaning in repetition, just as there is always a meaning in apocalypse. Meaning is indicated in its definition: an apocalypse is not just a catastrophe, it is a catastrophe that reveals, unveils. And to do so over and over suggests some intractable disorder that narrative lacks the power to set right—and yet possesses the power to give pleasure in its failures.

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The problem is social life itself. Is it possible to live in some reasonably harmonious and just society? In apocalyptic thought, this is a shaky proposition. In most contemporary apocalyptic scenarios, the apocalyptic event itself is a pretext for the social breakdown that follows. All political, social, economic institutions are eliminated, and life devolves to the actions of individuals, families, and small groups. In this post-apocalyptic quasi-“state of nature” we see the real imaginative and political investment of the zombie scenario, as well as other apocalyptic narratives like *Revolution* and the fantasies assembled in *Doomsday Preppers*. What becomes of social bonds and institutions during times of peril? And if we regard crisis as the new normative condition, is society as such possible?

The prevalent theories of zombies all in some way address this question. The zombie is that which puts the contemporary social order radically in question. It represents what fundamentally *cannot* be dealt with. In that fact lies the comedy of Daniel Drezner’s speculations regarding how various schools of thought in International Relations would respond to the transnational threat of a zombie outbreak. The neocons would try to shock and awe the undead with military force; liberals would convene a new International Agency for Zombie Affairs (complete, of course, with acronym, IAZA, or, for the French, AIAZ) to try to contain the problem through skillful administration and international cooperation; realpolitikers would try to create alliances with dissident factions within the zombie movement and supply them with body parts, prosthetics, and advanced Z-weaponry. The joke, of course, is that – in being dead, without consciousness and language, possessing only appetite – the zombie is necessarily outside of all discourse and social relation, antithetical to any theoretical or symbolic approach.¹

The imaginative construction of the zombie is such that it cannot be addressed or reasoned with. When it is said that the terrorist or Palestinian or communist or Israeli, or gangster, or North Korean, or mindless fanatic of any denomination is not open to rational negotiation and only understands force, it is a zombie that is being described. There is only one thing you can do with a zombie, and that is kill it. And yet, there are too many of them, there is no containing them; once the dead have been raised, eventually they will overwhelm us. There is nothing worse, and now it is coming true. It’s all falling apart, everywhere, there is no refuge.²

There are obvious political and economic referents for the zombie. They can be read in terms of post-9/11 anxieties about terrorism, as in Anna Froula’s interpretation of *28 Days Later*. Lauro and Embry’s “Zombie Manifesto” takes them both as a theoretical epitome of posthumanism (that is, the posthuman would resemble the zombie and not, say, Haraway’s depiction of the cyborg) and as a “stand-in for our current moment, and specifically for America in the global economy, where we feed off the products of the rest of the planet, and, alienated from our humanity, stumble forward, groping for immortality even as we decompose” (93). J. Jesse Ramirez reads the zombie ingeniously as a negative version of Hardt and Negri’s “multitude”—that is, as a reversal of the utopian potentials seen by those writers in some yet-undefinable movement that crosses boundaries of nation, class, gender, race, educational status, etc. The multitude’s goal is to restore the common—what is or ought to be materially, intellectually, and morally common to humanity—and to drive back the privatizing forces of global capital. Seen from the perspective of the capitalist order, this inchoate, anarchic, infinitely numerous entity can well be understood as zombie-like.

These and other theories of the zombie are quite plausible. It was, after all, George Romero himself who introduced zombies to the American shopping mall. The zombie’s essential blankness makes it available for a vast range of imaginative projection. But what all theories of the zombie enunciate is a fascination with the breakdown of social order and thus with the place of violence in the post-apocalyptic aftermath. The zombie apocalypse is an occasion for imaging a condition of social chaos so radical that it sweeps even biology along with it. This is, of course, terrifying. But there is also an appeal. Someone is attacking your home, threatening you and your family. You have no choice. You blow his brains out. Violence against the undead is always justified violence, and so serves as a

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model for all violence that seeks justification. The zombie apocalypse (like all apocalyptic visions, but perhaps more purely) is an instance of Giorgio Agamben's "state of exception," that period of crisis when legality and constitutionality must be suspended. Agamben invokes the state of exception to refer to instances when *the state* annuls its own constitution in the face of some real or invented threat. But the actual dissolution of the state creates a more fitting instance since, as Agamben argues, the state of exception is essentially a response to anarchy and a justification of force in place of law. When the dead walk and devour, the most basic *nomos* has been violated and so any use of violence is just.

In these fictions of social chaos, often two forms of emerging social reorganization are portrayed. Generally one band of survivors tries to govern itself by consensus, and the other follows a charismatic leader under a quasi-fascist model. But both ultimately survive through violence. The liberal band uses violence with regret, the fascist band uses it with delight. But in both cases, the rules of the fiction make violence inescapable.

There is a politics to such apocalyptic scenarios—in general, a conservative, almost tea party politics of every man (and his family) for himself, distrust or contempt for social institutions, rejection of the possibility of social reform, ultimate belief in "2nd Amendment solutions" to complex social problems. These, finally, are fantasies of an imagined Truth—that genuine, just, democratic, caring social life on a large scale is impossible; that the *real* human reality is violent struggle and the survival of those who know how to use violence.

The fantasy of the zombie helps make this fantasy of just violence possible.

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Notes

1. For this reason, all attempts to humanize the zombie, give it some proto-consciousness or agency—the new zombie movie *Warm Bodies*; the children's book, *Zombie in Love*; even the most recent Romero film, *Land of the Dead*—however entertaining or otherwise enlightening, miss the point of the zombie. Admittedly, I'm a zombie fundamentalist in this regard. One might well argue, conversely, that the zombie is, after all, a generic fiction, and so its emotional, formal, and ideological imperatives will change. To imagine the absolute other gradually transform into a being with whom we can communicate and feel empathy—and who might begin to feel empathy toward us—seems a salutary ethical and political move. The vampire has already traveled this route; why not the zombie? But once that humanizing move is made, some other creature will step into the place of the utterly inhuman, for that place is, apparently, ideologically necessary.

2. On this point, again Zach Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* is perceptive. The protagonists, living in a shopping mall, establish a friendship with another survivor who defends himself in a high rise a half mile or so away. They communicate from their roof tops by means of writing on whiteboards and reading the messages through binoculars. At last, zombies break into the friend's building. The man kills the zombies, but is bitten and we see, through the protagonists' binoculars, his transformation. The crucial moment comes when he rushes to the roof, frantically writes on his whiteboard—but when he turns the board toward us, the "message" is nothing but streaks of blood. Becoming a zombie means leaving the semantic world for the purely somatic.

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