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# QUEER CROSSINGS: THEORIES, BODIES, TEXTS

Edited by Silvia Antosa



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ALESSANDRO GRILLI

## QUEERING THE DEAD: GAY ZOMBIES IN THE DARK ROOM<sup>1</sup>

From its first appearance in American mainstream cinema in 1932<sup>2</sup>, the zombie has grown more and more popular, becoming a staple of the American imagination and, as a consequence, of Western culture in the broadest sense. We can single out a number of landmarks in its evolution, where some structural traits change. In the first phase the zombie is still what it used to be in Haiti folklore, and the phrase ‘living dead’ is just a metaphor to describe a living body robbed of consciousness and personality by black magic rituals. Romero’s movie *Night of the Living Dead* (Usa, 1968) is the turning point where the metaphor is taken at its face value: the ‘living dead’ now becomes a corpse which retrieves a form of life without consciousness, marked by an indomitable impulse to cannibalism<sup>3</sup>. Romero’s creative deviation actually defined the zombie’s identity in the terms we now accept as canonical, and this definition provided the starting point for a wealth of subsequent allegorical interpretations. Already in 1985, however, a new variation on the type endows the living corpse with consciousness: *The Return of the Living Dead* (Usa, Dan O’Bannon) shows a third kind of zombie who, in addition to being conscious, is able to talk and has an individual personality. This is about as far as the zombie can get from its original type: instead of a living body devoid of consciousness we now have a conscious *dead* body; the only feature of continuity is the name<sup>4</sup>.

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1 This paper develops, and partly overlaps with, two of my recent studies: *Amare al di là: riflessioni queer su Gay Zombie di Michael Simon*, in *Contemporanea*, Vol. 7, 2009, 153-178, and *Ein Ungeheuer zum Quadrat*, in M. Fürst, F. Krautkrämer, S. Wiemer (Hg.), *Untot. Zombie, Film, Theorie*, Belleville, München, 2011, 121-134.

2 *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin; Usa).

3 In fact, there is an intermediate stage, witnessed for instance in *The Plague of the Zombies* (John Gilling; GB, 1966), where the zombie, still conceived of as the submissive instrument of a wicked will, is already a corpse brought back to life by voodoo magic.

4 The most extensive and systematic treatment of zombies in popular culture I know of is K.W. Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise)*

The huge queer potential of this monstrous figure is not difficult to fathom; already from its oxymoronic definition as a 'living dead' the zombie invites a critical deconstruction of the parameters defining identity, and questions clear-cut and one-sided distinctions. Unlike garden-variety monsters, presenting themselves as the 'completely other' with respect to the shared notion of humanity, the zombie is at the same time equal and different. As a consequence, the common denominator of death (a direct experience for the zombie, a certain expectation for the living), foregrounds and makes visible not so much the alien character of the monstrous, as the monstrous streak lurking in all of us.

This explains why comic-parodic fantasies about the zombie sometimes deploy its form, which bridges the gap between human and antihuman, to undercut the anthropocentric delirium of culture. The reason the image in fig. 1 is funny is the delegitimization of the food chain as a criterion of ontological superiority: even if man wanted to stick to that criterion, he would have to renounce his dreams of cosmic centrality. The zombie may thus be understood as a queer reflection on the idealization of humanity: like a funhouse mirror, it yields an X-ray reflection of the limits and aberrations of the projective will which continuously leads man to construct ideal models of his own humanity. The zombie foregrounds the culturally artificial, occasional and ultimately superficial and peripheral nature of humanity, whose confrontation with this human-inhuman figure acts as a mirror of truth. The zombie is what is left of the idealizing projection of humanity after the *perte d'auréole* which is the hallmark of contemporary culture.

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*of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, McFarland & Co, Jefferson (NC), 2010. A typological classification of zombies in film history is also in F. Krautkrämer, *A Matter of Life and Death. Leben und Tod im Zombiefilm*, in *Untot*, qtd., 19-36, especially 24, which refers to, and develops, a taxonomy suggested by M. Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2003. In both cases, however, the classification is not centered on the trait absence/presence of consciousness. A more systematic review, ordered chronologically, is offered by P. Dendle, *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, McFarland & Co, Jefferson (NC), 2001, particularly 2-10; J. Russell, *Book of the Dead. The Complete History of Zombie Cinema*, FAB, Godalming (UK), 2005 and by G. Kay, *Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide*, Chicago Review Press, Chicago (IL), 2008.



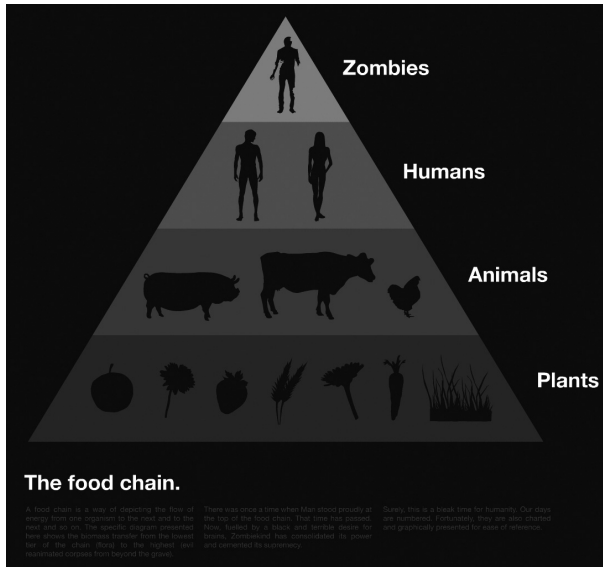


Fig. 1

On a more general level, the zombie's surprising popularity in mass culture can perhaps be ascribed to the extraordinary consonance between its essential properties and some peculiarities of postmodern identity. First-generation zombies, used as docile slaves on plantations in their trancelike stupor, were easily readable in their socioeconomic context as a metaphor for the alienation of the working class through exploitation. However, the contemporary imagination has been colonized not by them but by the living corpses introduced by Romero in the momentous year 1968: this new kind of zombie allows some of the structural paradoxes and contradictions of contemporary alienation to emerge and turns them into a perfectly readable structure. The reason for its exceptional mirroring potential is to be found, in my opinion, in its paradoxical definition as 'living dead'; Romero's innovation is that this definition is no longer a metaphor but is to be understood literally. In the Haitian zombie, 'living' is literally true; 'dead' is therefore only a metaphor describing a particular human condition, that of the mortifying experience of capitalist exploitation. Romero's creative leap is the literalization of this metaphor: the 'dead' are now technically such; at the same time, 'living' too is to be understood not as a metaphor but in its denotative sense, since zombies possess most traits which characterize life. This oxymoronic definition (a dead body which is at the same time a

living one) can be logically transformed into an equality which is, by definition, reversible: if dead = living, then living = dead. Thus, a consequence of the definition of ‘zombie’, is that not only can the dead be understood to be living, but, conversely, *the living can be understood to be dead*. The historical context of *Night of the Living Dead* leads to surmise that, from its very first appearance, the zombie is ultimately a mirror of the emptied-out and alienated humanity of the American dream, a dream consisting of the apparent satisfaction of desires (the prosperity of economic growth) but also of the ultimate annihilation of consciousness and personality (the McCarthy era and the Korea and Vietnam wars). This is confirmed by the setting of Romero’s second, and even more popular, zombie movie: a department store, which further emphasizes the zombie as a metaphor for the alienation induced by consumerism<sup>5</sup>.

The zombie’s queer potential is first and foremost a consequence of its ability to both mirror and demystify humanity – at least what passes for humanity in normative-hegemonic discourse. This is already evident in the close of *Night of the Living Dead*, when the only human survivor in the house besieged by zombies is paradoxically killed by the police who come to his rescue. Seeing him, an African American, from their helicopter, they mistake him for one of the monsters – and by so doing they retrospectively reinterpret the zombies as a metaphor of stigmatized otherness<sup>6</sup>. Despite the constraints of the horror genre, which dictate that the human protagonists must necessarily be the object of positive identification and at the end escape, more or less permanently, the monster’s fury, the presence and characterization of the zombie are nevertheless able to question by contrast the very idea of humanity. The zombie reminds man not only that the living is mortal, which is obvious although never taken seriously enough; but

5 This interpretation (now a commonplace) appeared in the very first entries for the movie in film encyclopedias (such as Phil Hardy, ed., *Science Fiction*, Aurum Press, The Aurum Film Encyclopedia, London, 1984, 340) and was later subsumed as a fact in monographs about the genre (see for example N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Routledge, New York-London, 1990, 198). See lately K.W. Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, qtd., 129 sgg., and M. Walker, *When There’s No More Room in Hell, the Dead Will Shop the Earth: Romero and Aristotle on Zombies, Happiness and Consumption*, in R. Greene and K. Silem Mohammad (eds), *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*, Open Court, Popular Culture and Philosophy, Chicago (IL), Vol. 49, 2010, 81-89.

6 So, in the context of a Marxist reading of *Night of the Living Dead*, T. Williams, *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead*, Wallflower, London, 2003, 21.

above all that the living can actually be considered *already dead* when, as happens in the society of consumption and spectacle<sup>7</sup>, critical consciousness is completely and irreversibly atrophied.

However, this is not the only way the issue can be framed: the subliminal, disturbing equivalence between the zombie and the socio-compatible individual can be further specified in ways that are far from obvious. From a comparison with the zombie ‘normal’ human life emerges as a mere husk left over from a substantial hollowing out: if a life made up of inauthentic impulses leading individuals to conform and blend with the mass is not really life, then the zombie, with its fierce, immediate and unconditional impulses, shows a paradoxical vestige of that very authenticity which “normal” humanity lacks. This far from obvious feature is in my opinion the key to the transition from Romero’s zombie (a mechanically animated but unconscious corpse) to its subsequent avatar, the living corpse to which a further paradoxical switch once again grants consciousness and personality; it is far from coincidental that this third incarnation of the zombie is often the focus of comic-parodic revisitations of the horror genre, where the monster is no longer a source of horror but an object of more or less strong empathy.

This tacit empathy is perhaps the reason why over the last few years the zombie has become ubiquitous in the diverse landscape of North American pop culture: beyond the cultural artefact of the philosophical zombie (a creation of academia, with hardly any intersections with the phenomenology of the movie zombie)<sup>8</sup>, zombies now star not only in

7 I am obviously using the word in the sense given to it by G. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Buchet-Chastel, Paris, 1967.

8 This is an *exemplum fictum* introduced by two articles by R. Kirk (*Sentience and behaviour*, in *Mind*, Vol. 4, 1974, 1-22, and *Zombies vs. Materialists*, in *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Suppl., Vol. 48, 1974, 135-152) as a development of K. Campbell’s “imitation man” (*Body and Mind*, Macmillan, London, 1970); it is the complement to another popular philosophical fiction, the so-called “conscious machine”. The philosophical zombie has been popularized first between the Seventies and Eighties in relation to the debate on *qualia* (N. Block, *Psychologism and Behaviorism*, in *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 90, 1981, 5-43), then as a consequence of D.J. Chalmers’s theory (*The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996), which opened up a popular avenue of criticism to mechanism centred on the so-called “zombie argument”: if we imagine a living body identical in every infinitesimal part to another living body but lacking consciousness, as a zombie lacks consciousness compared to a living person, we will have to postulate that consciousness does not arise from a purely mechanic combination of material elements, but occupies an intermediate level between matter and abstraction. The debate continues to

movies but in novels<sup>9</sup>, or in parodies of literary classics<sup>10</sup>, and provide a sort of “gnoseological filter” which can be applied to the most diverse fields of reality. It is far from coincidental that the zombie is a central focus of a certain brand of humour, often in the form of self-help books<sup>11</sup>, and that it also appears in attempts to cross academic forms with more popular writing<sup>12</sup>. It should however be kept in mind that the semantics of the zombie in US culture often meshes with specifically American myths which, unlike the zombie itself, have not been exported to other parts of the Western world<sup>13</sup>.

More generally, however, the deeper meaning of this cultural zombie invasion can be detected in the particular brand of monstrosity which is

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engender lively replies from mechanists (J. Hawthorne, *Advice for Physicalists*, in *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 109, 2002, 17–52; D. Braddon-Mitchell, *Qualia and Analytical Conditionals*, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 100, 2003, 111–135) or other critics of the “zombie argument” (T. Alter, *On the Conditional Analysis of Phenomenal Concepts*, in *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 134, 2007, 235–253; R. Kirk, *The Inconceivability of Zombies*, in *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 139, 2008, 73–89). The most recent I know about (once again critical of Chalmers) is B.J. Garrett, *Causal Essentialism versus the Zombie Worlds*, in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 39, Issue 1, 2009, 93–112. For an overview of the issues see G. Güzeldere, *Varieties of Zombiehood*, in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 2, 1995, 326–333 and T.W. Polger, *Zombies explained*, in D. Ross, A. Brook, D. Thompson (eds), *Dennett’s Philosophy: A Comprehensive Assessment*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 2000, 259–286.

- 9 The most popular among which are comic novels, like Max Brooks’ best seller *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, Random House, New York, 2006 (currently being turned into a movie starring Brad Pitt).
- 10 For instance of Jane Austen’s masterpiece: cf. S. Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Quirk Books, Philadelphia, 2009, which, after having been a New York Times best seller in 2009 has already spawned a sequel: S. Hockensmith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies. Dreadfully Ever After*, Quirk Books, Philadelphia, 2011.
- 11 One example among many: J. Austin, *So Now You’re a Zombie: A Handbook for the Newly Undead*, Review Press, Chicago, 2010.
- 12 D.W. Drezner, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011, is an illustration of theories of international politics through a fictional case study of what the reaction would be to a world invasion by zombies in various political contexts.
- 13 This is emphasized, among others, by K.W. Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, qtd., 158–160; cf. also C. Maier, *Festschmaus für Fans. Der italienische Zombiefilm*, in Fürst-Krautkrämer-Wiemer, *Untot*, qtd., 85–96, especially 91–95. However, Maier completely ignores the abundant literature on the topic, which comprises at least one important contribution: J. Slater, *Eaten Alive! Italian Cannibal and Zombie Movies*, Plexus, London, 2002.

their trademark: together with very few other monsters (basically vampires and werewolves) zombies are essentially ‘non-foreign aliens’. Unlike most creatures of myth and science fiction, whose nature makes them a completely foreign term of comparison for humans, zombies are nothing but a version of humankind ‘under particular circumstances’: while none of us will ever be an alien from outer space or a winged dragon, zombies are actually the objectivation of a potentiality which can be assumed to be present in every human. This is also partly true of vampires; however, these are still removed from normal humans by their being part of an aristocratic élite, while the zombie is the everyman among monsters, just like any of us is among the mass of our fellow humans. I believe that the zombie’s shift from an unambiguously fearsome and horrible creature to an alien not totally devoid of sympathetic traits is driven by the acknowledgement of its potential to represent not the essence of pure negativity, like so many horror-movie monsters, from the protagonist of *Halloween* (Usa, John Carpenter, 1978) to the little girl in *The Ring* (Usa-Japan, Gore Verbinski, 2002, remake of *Ringu*, Japan, Hideo Nakata, 1998), but a wounded, but still somehow potentially *positive* vision of humanity. This also explains why zombies, werewolves and vampires, unlike more radical aliens, can bend to sympathetic and comic treatments<sup>14</sup>: as we already know from Freud<sup>15</sup>, the best object of laughter confronts us with a degraded version of our own identity, from which the mechanism of laughter allows us to disassociate. Zombies are nothing but an unveiled representation of humanity reduced (literally) to its bare bones, and therefore can credibly be burdened with the task of representing humanity in its various manifestations, from forms of social organization to sexual identity issues.

The diverse forms of the gay zombie, which lately has become more and more visible within contexts which are just as diverse<sup>16</sup>, are to be subsumed within this framework. While its aesthetic and stylistic manifestations are unpredictably various, the only meaningful trait they have in common is their undertone of empathy, which makes the horrible and

14 Also abundantly treated in movies, starting at least from R. Polanski’s *Dance of the Vampires* (Usa/UK, 1967) to A. Currie’s *Fido* (Canada, 2006).

15 S. Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, in S. Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 6, Frankfurt a/M, Fischer, 1978 (1905).

16 Not surprisingly, very few studies exist apart from my works quoted in Note 1. In addition to contribution on individual movies, one can refer to M. Fürst’s overview, *Zombies over the Rainbow. Konstruktionen von Geschlechtsidentität im schwulen Zombiefilm*, in *Untot*, qtd., 99-120.

completely alien monster a thoughtful or sweet or at least problematic embodiment of otherness<sup>17</sup>.

The birth of explicitly gay zombies is in all likelihood a polygenetic phenomenon, since both the overall semantics and the distribution of this kind of zombie are extremely uneven. This new twist on the zombie theme emerged in three main venues: amateur video<sup>18</sup>, independent<sup>19</sup> and mainstream cinema<sup>20</sup>. In its semantics three main directions can be traced: in the first case, the gay zombie is a parody (and, beyond the merrily paradoxical tone, a rather homophobic one) of the homosexual as a compulsive consumer of “meat” and of the homosexual impulse as a contagious pathology. In the short amateur video *Gay Zombie*, by the “collaborative sketch

17 M. Fürst, *Zombies over the Rainbow*, qtd., 101, points out that the appearance of an openly homosexual monster such as the gay zombie deeply transformed the perspective of H.M. Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997, according to which homosexuality can basically be recognized as the main hidden meaning (allusive and metaphorical) of the monstrosity theme of most horror movies.

18 A quick youtube search leads to a high number of hits, very diverse in kind and importance. The data cannot be analyzed here, since this would imply a detailed consideration of the intersection (once subliminal, now more and more broad and marked) between the homosexual subculture and that of horror fans (about which at least <http://www.queerhorror.com>; <http://www.campblood.org> and <http://doorq.com> should be consulted; accessed June 2011). In this perspective the gay zombie can be thought of as an inevitable combination; however this is not a sufficient explanation of its growing popularity, dating at least from Michael Jackson's video *Thriller* (1982, about which see K. Mercer, *Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's 'Thriller'*, in *Screen*, Vol. 27, 1986, 26-43).

19 Basically the work of B. LaBruce, about which see under n. 21.

20 The list of mainstream movies about one or more gay zombies is, to my knowledge, very short: A. Dove's *Zombies* (Usa 2003; *tagline*: “The man you love is the monster you fear...”); C. Diani's *Creatures from the Pink Lagoon* (Usa 2007) and M. Simon's *Gay Zombie*, (Usa 2007); E.A. Reyes, *Notes on Philippine Cinema*, De La Salle University Press, Manila, 1989, 63, mentions a gay zombie among the secondary characters of a 1987 Filipino horror movie, *Takbo, bilis... takbooo! (Knock! Knock! Who's There?)*, by C.J. Caparas, which, like many Eastern horror movies is a hybrid of different genres which are much more distinct in the Western tradition. D.C. Willis, *Horror and Science Fiction Films*, vol. 4, Scarecrow Press, Lanham (MD), 1997, 275, for instance, emphasizes its contamination between fantasy and “standard Filipino ghost comedy” (on this topic see S. Jones, F. Ackerman, *The Essential Monster Movie Guide: A Century of Creature Features on Film, Tv and Video*, Titan, London, 1999, 214). *Knock! Knock!...*'s heritage has little in common with Hollywood; however it is interesting to note that here too the convergence between undead status and sexual deviance occupies a space contiguous with parody.

comedy group” directed by Aaron Fronk and Vinny DeGaetano<sup>21</sup>, the traditional process of zombie contagion is the model for an implicit theory of homosexuality as a contagious disease, which is after all one of the most widespread stereotypes of homophobic discrimination<sup>22</sup>.

The meaning of the gay zombie in Bruce LaBruce’s work is considerably more complex. This metamonster is a concrete embodiment of the problematic character of homosexual identity in terms of subjective and ultimately political consciousness. LaBruce has tackled the issue of the zombie’s (homo)sexual identity several times<sup>23</sup>; in keeping with his queer poetics, he conceptualizes it as an ideal form of identity, emancipated from some of the traditional binds on the definition of the subject. For LaBruce the zombie is not only an ideal model of the object of desire (“Zombie porn is practical: you can create your own orifice!”<sup>24</sup>) but also of the subject, similar to the object because of his lack of inhibitions and false consciousness.

21 Usa, FndFilms, 2008, <http://www.fronkndegofilms.com>; the video is in the page “2008 Sketches” (accessed July 2011).

22 The video is very funny, despite (that is, because of) its being “super politically incorrect”. This the opinion of Sean Abley, whose blog “Gay of the Dead” (<http://fangoria.com/blogs/gay-of-the-dead.html>, accessed June 2011), explores, as the Romero-based pun makes clear, the intersection between zombies and homosexual culture.

23 Basically in *Otto; or, Up with Dead People*, by B. LaBruce (D/Can, 2008). LaBruce’s gifts as a filmmaker are widely celebrated both in the queer community and beyond; on his poetics see at least E. Brinkema, *A Title Does Not Ask, but Demands That You Make a Choice: On the Otherwise Films of Bruce LaBruce*, in *Criticism*, Vol. 48, Issue 1, 2006, 95-126, as well as, of course, B. LaBruce, *The Reluctant Pornographer*, Gutter Press, Toronto, 1997. After finishing *Otto*, LaBruce has extended his work on the zombie gay theme to the domain of plastic arts. His latest feature film, *L.A. Zombie* (Usa/D/F, 2010), hinges on the same issue; see M. Simpson, *He Sees Dead People: Director Bruce LaBruce on His New Gay Zombie Film, the Corporate Takeover of Culture, and – of course – Sex*, in *The Advocate (The National Gay & Lesbian Newsmagazine)*, 18 November 2008, n. 1019, 54-55. Distinguishing *Otto* e *L.A. Zombie* from the rest of gay zombie movies may seem unwarranted, but is inevitable because of the incommensurability between LaBruce’s filmic language and that of commercial movies. In a letter to *The Stranger*’s website Chris Diani himself (the director of *Creatures from the Pink Lagoon*) complained that the Seattle International Film Festival (and the *Seattle Times* in relaying the festival’s press releases) had extolled *Otto* “calling it ‘the world’s first gay zombie movie’”, after having ignored (and excluded) from its 2006 edition his movie about the same theme: [http://slog.thestranger.com/2008/05/gay\\_zombies\\_were\\_here\\_before\\_you\\_bruce\\_1](http://slog.thestranger.com/2008/05/gay_zombies_were_here_before_you_bruce_1), (accessed July 2011).

24 LaBruce’s words, quoted in a press release for the “Untitled Hardcore Zombie Project” Exhibition: <http://www.peresprojects.com/exhibit-press/215/> (accessed July 2011).



I must forego a more in-depth consideration of LaBruce in favour of an analysis of a different text, the short *Gay Zombie* by the US director Michael Simon (Usa, 2007), where the gay zombie appears in his third avatar: that of a functional-symbolic equivalent of otherness. In this case too gay identity is part of a latently parodic discourse, insofar as the distinctive traits of the horror genre are marshalled into a satire of a metropolitan gay community.

The plot of the movie is very simple. Miles, a zombie, talks about his depressive symptoms to his psychotherapist, who suggests he should deal with his homosexuality and live it out in full awareness. When he first sets foot in a gay bar, Miles meets Todd, a handsome and disillusioned young man who is there with his friend Greg. After fleeing the bar to escape an attack by other patrons, Miles and his new friends take refuge at Todd's where Todd's landlord Dwayne, who is a professional make-up artist, helps the other two humans to minimize Miles' deviant appearance through an appropriate use of make-up. The liking between Miles and Todd is on the brink of turning into complicity and reciprocal attraction. In order to involve Miles in a common activity, Todd invites him to join his yoga class the following day; there the zombie will have to confront the homophobia of another person in the group, Scorpio, and will end up reacting violently. Todd is upset and wants nothing more to do with him, but a final dialogue seems on the way to leading to the achievement of their impossible love. This is when the therapist from the first scene makes her unexpected entrance, and with a shot in the head gets rid of Miles, nipping the anomalous love story in the bud.

As in every coming-out comedy, the issue from which the plot arises seems to be the fear which keeps the closet gay from living his sexual and emotional identity to the full. But I believe that the aborted coming out is only a red herring, hiding clues to a much more substantial issue involving the structure of the power dynamics regulating the relationships between cohesive groups and stigmatized individuals; actually, between *any* group and *any* individual as such.

The superimposition-equalization of gays and zombies is particularly felicitous as a metaphor first of all because it makes it possible to explore the risks of homonormative repression: just as, in a heteronormative context, a gay man is rejected by the group, so in a place where what elsewhere counts as stigma is the rule, such as the gay community, a new stigma, such as being a zombie, brings about the exact same rejection. The mirroring is literal in the scene where Miles the zombie and Dwayne the pansy unexpectedly face each other when a sliding door opens (6:40-43): each cries



out at the sight of the other, and the comic effect is the result of the implicit equivalence between their respective monstrosities: the zombie's festering wounds on one side and the paraphernalia of effeminacy (curlers, beauty creams, lap dog) on the other.

But there is another interesting point: what the gay+zombie shortcircuit allows to resurface is the anthropological origin of the most ancient and fundamental form of repressed desire: the affection for dead loved ones in opposition to the solidarity which connects and *must* connect the living members of the group. My reading presupposes the theory of the historian of religion Ernesto De Martino who, in a study of ancient mourning rituals, emphasizes that funerals in ancient cultures can be interpreted as having the basic purpose of repressing the drive which would lead the mourner to follow his loved one in the grave<sup>25</sup>. If, as Baudrillard maintains, the divide separating the living from the dead is the most ancient form of distinction, the one from which human culture itself originates<sup>26</sup>, then it can be stated that human culture grows from a fundamental repression of individual emotion: the transgressive love for the dead is thus the first victim of a repressive management of desire by the cultural norm, and the impulse towards a possible attachment of a living person for a dead one represented in *Gay Zombie* harks back directly to the archetype of all desires which run against the grain of social cohesion.

Culture only accepts forms of desire which confirm its collective identity. This is why legitimate desire is *centripetal*, that is, oriented towards the core which defines collective identity (the elements by which all members are alike). The reason why culture represses every transgressive desire, such as homosexuality or affection for the dead, is its *centrifugal* nature, which makes it a danger for the cohesion of the social group. This can also explain the need for 'adonic' objects of desire, that is, for objects which approximate a canon of ideal beauty: beauty is whatever is recognized as such by a given culture, that is, by a whole group; to desire the object which the whole group finds beautiful is to admit implicitly the equivalence and interchangeability of all *subjects* of desire: if I as an individual desire what everybody else desires (to win the world football cup), anybody can take my place, because I will be *like everyone else*; if the object of my desire is atypical, private and idiosyncratic (an animal, a weird face, a corpse), then

25 E. De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2008 (1958).

26 J. Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* Paris, Gallimard, Paris, 1976.

I will be recognizable as an individual, and no longer be simply a member of a homogeneous collective.

Centrifugal desire is among the fiercest enemies of groups and of their cultures; this is why culture represses it in several ways. The most obvious and explicit one, is exclusion, to which Miles the zombie is subjected when he is chased out of the bar, together with his new friends, from the patrons who are first frightened and then organize themselves into a homophobic posse (4:57 sgg.). A less explicit, and all the more interesting one is the one we might label 'inclusive repression'; this is the most dangerous form, since its aim is to neutralize all potential centrifugal deviance by apparent acceptance. In *Gay Zombie* this strategy follows two trails: assimilation as performance and discursive elision through political correctness.

The former presupposes Butler's theory of gender as a script to be performatively actualized. In Miles' case, the performance takes place through a proper disguise as a "normal young man" in which the origins of homonormative repression are clearly recognizable (8:43 ss.): the zombie's deviant appearance is disguised under a literal surface of make-up (9:50 ss.) which reveals "normalcy", the objective of assimilation, to be nothing but a disguise to be assumed at will. It should be noticed that the disguise considers all most striking variations of gay identity (leather, fetish, drag) only to choose in the end a "preppy boy" identity which is definitely the closest to an ideal of 'centripetal' neutrality. Another dangerous signal is that the 'end product' of the make-up session is presented to its prospective buyer according to a procedure which closely resembles the anthropologically widespread situation of the presentation of the bride, which presupposes a verdict of conformity uttered by a bridegroom who is at the same time a judge. This entails a double bind between being redeemed by love and being judged fit to the expectations of my target group.

The second strategy of repressive inclusion can be recognized in the conformity of the gay community discourse to a politically correct form of expression and, of course, in political correctness as such; even though this passes for a recognition of diversity, its ultimate aim is in my opinion the wish to erase diversity from discourse. The refusal to call things by their name («DWAYNE You know... you have... what we call "problematic skin"», 10:05) is the first step of a blunting of perception which ends in the impossibility to recognize the peculiarity and irreducibility of the individual as such. Far from accepting the other, political correctness makes it impossible to perceive its otherness, and ultimately its very existence.

The best evidence for this is an episode from John Landis' *The Kentucky Fried Movie*<sup>27</sup>, purportedly an advertisement for a charity whose purpose is the abolition of discrimination against... the dead: after a short introduction the charity's testimonial hands over to Mrs Hefsteder, who in a plain monotone comments a short clip (00:54 sgg.):

Three years ago our Johnny died. We thought that there was no hope. But then we discovered the *United Appeal for the Dead*. They showed us that despite Johnny's handicap he could still be a useful member of our family and of our community. Our *United Appeal for the Dead* case worker showed us that the absence of life from Johnny's body didn't have to mean his absence from our daily lives. We realized the constant joy that could be ours as we were able to include him in our family activities. The *United Appeal for the Dead* turned misery into happiness. We have them to thank for our family's new-found togetherness.

At the beginning Mrs Hefsteder is sitting on a sofa with her husband beside her; the camera moves back to reveal the corpse of her son John sitting on the other side; subsequently Mrs. Hefsteder's voiceover comments three short clips which shows John's corpse being included in typical scenes of family harmony: the Thanksgiving dinner, a football match and at the pool, where the corpse floats face down next to a girl who plays happily with a ball.

The point of the skit is the unmasking of a system of euphemisms which blunts and reduces every salient and marked reality, up to and including the experience of death itself, to a mere "handicap". The other relevant element is that the reasons of society, in this case the family, are affirmed against the individual, who is asked not to be someone, but simply to be there. His identity is pared down to his availability to take up the position which has been defined for him by the group structure, and this is enough for him to be confirmed as a "useful member". The "togetherness" of the family, and by extension of every social group, does not need persons: corpses, or more generally simulacra of persons, are enough for it to function smoothly. For once, the life of the group ("our daily lives") replaces the life of the individual ("the absence of life from Johnny's body"), with overbearingly loving and tolerant inclusion, in a completely physical and literal way.

The last relevant point to a queer analysis of *Gay Zombie* is a possible reading of its ending as a representation of the power which the group

27 The quotations in the text are from an upload of this episode, accessible in July 2011 at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_kXl8LyD\\_JA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kXl8LyD_JA).

wields over the individual through its representative, in this case the therapist. The woman appears unexpectedly only to fire a shot at the zombie's head and thus prevent him from kissing the first boy who would have been ready to love him in spite of appearances:

THERAPIST It had to be done. You gave him a good send-off, you should be proud.

TODD [*shocked*] You killed him.

THERAPIST He was already dead. I just saved your life.

TODD You're a monster. I could have loved him.

THERAPIST In another life.

TODD [*whispering*] O my God!

THERAPIST There was no future there. You're ready to move on, now.

TODD [*thoughtfully*] You're right. Thank you.

THERAPIST No, thank you.

[17:00-37]

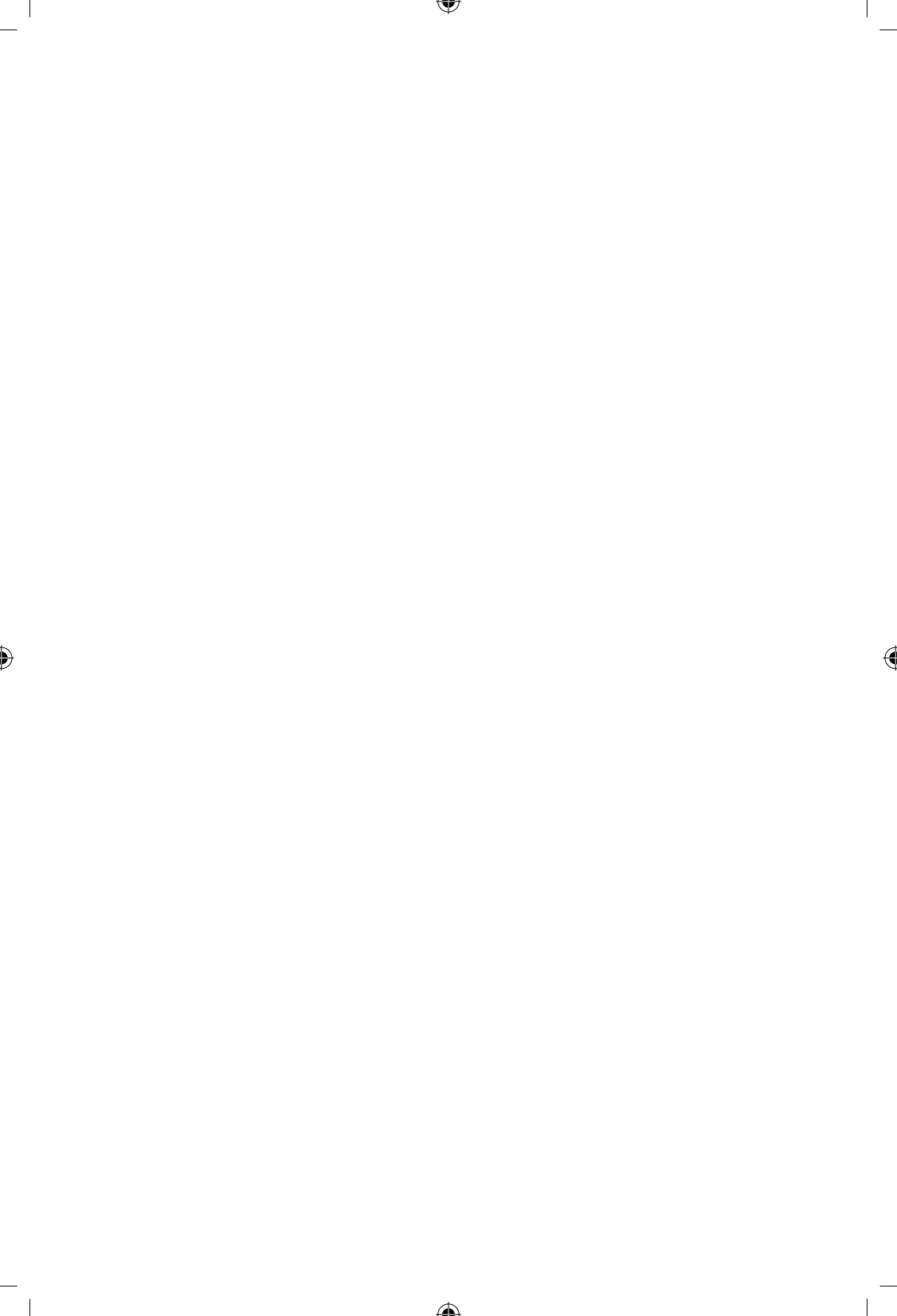
In this case the therapist is the representative of group values: she destroys a possible centrifugal love relationship for no other reason than that she sees it as socially counterproductive. Her judgement—"No future"—can only be understood in the context of Lee Edelman's theory<sup>28</sup>: what society really cares about is nothing more than its own survival and that of the *status quo*. Because of this, the foundations of meaning are systematically displaced into the future: this idealized projection of the present into an always open and indeterminate future allows *today* the legitimization of repressive strategies which would otherwise be unacceptable. Edelman singles out the idealized figure he calls the "Child" as the most pervasive avatar of this justification of social power on the individual. Even if there are no children in *GZ*, the repression of Miles' and Todd's individual aspiration is brought about by a dilatory strategy which puts off to an indeterminate future ("In another life") the possibility of an individually transgressive satisfaction.

As she speaks the last line, the therapist strokes Todd's chin, and in so doing displays a mark of decay which the boy glimpses in horror. This apparent contradiction in the ending, which shows the therapist too to be a zombie, is actually aimed at demonstrating the arbitrary nature of power. It should be noticed that the therapist shows her festering arm only *after* Todd has shown himself to be convinced by her arguments. Her purpose is to get Todd to rationally agree with her, only to reveal immediately afterwards,

28 Cf. L. Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 2004.

with a glaring contradiction, that the reasons of power are not founded on any coherent or predictable logic. The logic is the same as in the ending of Orwell's *1984*: the object of repression is not the individual as something (Winston as Todd) as, more generally, the individual as such. In *1984* too O'Brien acts as a representative of an ideology, but after Winston's individuality has been annihilated he can safely admit to being one of the authors of the subversive book against which his party officially fights.

Thus in *Gay Zombie*, as in *1984* (as in life in general...), the purpose of society is to discourage all forms of centrifugal attachment, from that of the mourning person who would like to die with his deceased loved one, to that of Winston for Julia, to that of Todd for Miles. And the most radical evidence of the success of power in this enterprise is, in *Gay Zombie* as in *1984* (as in life?...), the dissociation of the individual from the desires which make him one, and thus first of all from his love objects: just as Winston in room 101 manages to escape torture by crying out "Do it to Julia!", so Todd appropriates the therapist's reasons for the elimination of Miles ("You're right") and even thanks her ("Thank you"). In both cases the characters who are subjected to power have been led to abjure their centrifugal desire, and have thus been deprived of their principle of individuation. This, as *Gay Zombie* confirms, is the rule of the group: in order to be a member (and it is impossible not to be one), one *cannot be* an individual.



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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## LGBT

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