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KATARZYNA ANCUTA

The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies or How to be the Living Dead in Technicolor

Yeah, they're dead, they're all messed up.

George A. Romero

It is hard to be a zombie. Slaving all day for no reward, driven by insatiable hunger, feared, unwanted, unloved. "If your sister were a zombie, what would you do for her?" reads one of the questions of a zombie trivia quiz. The answer bears the weight of a moral judgement: "Ignore her." How come then that those miserable soulless creatures have managed to become cultural icons of the end of the 20th century?

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the infatuation of contemporary culture with *zombies/the living dead* resulting from the glorification of inertia. *Zombies*, as presented in the article, are understood in terms of paradoxical entities defined primarily through their lack of identity and, as such, acquiring new properties and becoming a new identity, instantly recognisable to anyone but themselves.

Beginning with George A. Romero's trilogy of the Living Dead (1968/1978/1985), and especially his consumer zombies, I intend to investigate the image of *the living dead*, as springing from a number of contemporary film productions and literature, and discuss its interdependence on the representation of mental disease. Observing the constant growth of the desirability of the *zombie* category I want to link it to a more and more common belief in the possibility of achieving the sense of liberation only through the complete and unconditional submission to the external reality and the forces governing it.

* * *

To begin with let us think of the origins of the concept. And the origins take us to the island of Haiti. According to a Vodou Encyclopedia a *zombie* (*zombi*, *zombi cadavre*) is a soulless dead body returned to life by a black magician called a *bokor*. Other definitions do not actually speak of the body being dead but rather “believed to be dead” by the family and the zombified person himself/herself. The scientific world, greatly interested in the process of zombification, dismisses the importance of magic rituals for the sake of a more easily verifiable explanation, mainly the use of drugs and a toxic potion, the components of which still remain unknown to the researchers.¹ The so-revived *zombie* is brain damaged and as such becomes easy to control and can be used as a slave for hard labour.

In the interview for *The Times* Papa Williams, a London-based practising Haitian *houngan* (a vodou priest), confesses to zombifying his enemies. He also provides his own definition:

“A zombie is a person who becomes one of the walking dead. You are still alive, but you have no soul. I have a soul here” he says, then taps on a vessel that looks like an oversized coconut and is bound with a string. [...] Using a potion he describes as ‘the powder’; he turned his adversary into a zombie and now keeps the man’s skull on his altar. (As an aside he claims quite plausibly there are many people walking around London with no souls.)²

Papa Williams believes that it was vodou “which secured liberation for the slaves in Haiti in 1804,”³ adding that even today Haiti is 90 percent Catholic and 100 percent vodou. Whether we believe him or not is one thing, but the fact that there has always been a correlation between vodou and the political history of the island is indubitable. It was a *bokor*, François Macandal, who originated the 6-year slave revolt of 1751–1757 and who later paid for it with his life, burnt at the stake by the French. That he was seen to wrench himself free of his chains while being engulfed by the flames only helped to establish a stronger belief in his supernatural powers.⁴ In 1791 a vodou ceremony marked the start of yet another rebellion of the black slaves, whose leader, Boukman, unsurprisingly was a *houngan*. A pike with an impaled carcass of a white baby soon became a distinguishable mark of the rebels, and the bloodshed that followed left an estimated 12 000 dead, with Boukman himself sharing the fate

¹ Among the components of the alleged potion are supposedly substances received from various poisonous plants and animals, such as toads, tarantulas and insects, not to mention human remains to spice things up.

² *The Times*, August 7, 1999; Lee Henshaw, “Worshipping the dark side.”

³ Lee Henshaw, “Worshipping the dark side.”

⁴ Ronald Segal, *From the Black Diaspora* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 107.

of Macandal.⁵ And the 1806 assassination of Dessalines, who came to be recognised as the father of Haitian independence, not only resulted in the general appraisal of his “dying for the cause” but also earned him a place in the vodou pantheon.⁶

Similarly, the years of “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s regime (1957–1991) would not be the same if not his conscious employment of vodou as yet another technique of political manipulation. As a practising vodounist himself,⁷ Duvalier recognised the position vodou held in the awareness of Haitians. Numerous *houngans* and *bokors* incorporated by him into the intelligence and his own rural militia, popularly called *Tonton Macoutes* (the term derived from the *kreyole* word meaning “uncle bogeyman”) helped him in his reign of terror over the island.⁸ Knowing that these were very often the same people, it should come as no surprise that the blue denims, red scarves and peasant hats worn frequently in the countryside by vodou priests became an easily recognisable uniform of the *Macoutes*.⁹

But the cultural concept of the *zombie*, even though undoubtedly heavily indebted to its vodou origins, owes equally much, if not more, to Hollywood filmmakers. And although they are almost as old as the cinema itself, cinematic zombies evolved mainly thanks to the vision of one man – George A. Romero. For when in 1968 Romero released his first part of the Living Dead trilogy (*Night of the Living Dead*), he did much more than revolutionise modern horror film – he contributed to the formation of a new icon of fear.

Romero was not the first filmmaker to take interest in zombies. Films like *White Zombie* (1932), *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) or *The Ghoul* (1933), had all successfully toyed with the concept before. But anybody familiar with those early productions must agree that Romero’s zombies are very different.

Romero was the first to notice that the exotic quality of the Haitian soulless creatures can be successfully transferred into the reality of early American consumerism. His vicious attack on the consumer society is especially visible in the second part of the trilogy (*Dawn of the Dead*). America is already swarming with the living dead, who, like the plague, are becoming more

⁵ Haiti, The Haitian Revolution, “The Slave Rebellion of 1791,” www.usariem.army.mil/haiti/tabcon.htm online 00-05-08, 16:16.

⁶ Segal, p. 203.

⁷ Duvalier’s loa was Baron Samedi, known as “the guardian of cemeteries and a harbinger of death,” although rumours were actually spread as to Duvalier being the incarnation of the Baron himself. Duvalier claimed possessing supernatural powers and would quickly silence all those who dared to question his vodou skills.

See “Haiti: A brief History,” www.language-works.com/Haiti/history.htm online 00-05-09, 17:44; also Segal, p. 216.

⁸ Segal, p. 214: “The word tonton [uncle] refers to a bogeyman who comes at night to take away naughty children in his macoute (the straw satchel of the peasant).”

⁹ Segal, p. 214.

and more difficult to stop. A small group of people decides to make a run for their lives and look for a desert island with hopes to survive the madness in isolation. It seems even more important since one of the group members is pregnant. Unfortunately, fleeing from the meat-eating monsters on the rampage, they encounter an unforeseen obstacle – a shopping mall.

The deserted mall is like a red rag to a bull – it attracts absolutely everyone. The zombies, of course, are no exception here. They flock around the empty shops, chewing on lipsticks and trying on hats, bound to the place, remembering that they used to love and desire it in some other life. It is more than just the hunger for flesh that guides them through the empty shop aisles, after all there is not a living soul in sight. Somewhere on the way they have ceased to be perceived as evil monsters. What is more disturbing, however, the zombies look not just pathetic but also very human in their abandonment and hopelessness, lost in the gigantic labyrinth of the mall.

The pallor of death on the faces of the zombies leaves us under the impression of the dead unwittingly mimicking the glossy plastic mannequins displayed in the shop windows. But the moment our empathy centre is shifted and we begin to see the dead in terms of large walking plastic dolls we also become aware of the monstrous, predatory qualities of the living. The shopping mall suddenly becomes the great prize worth fighting for. The war begins – the living against the dead, the living against the living. In the end the dead begin to look favourable – at least their motives in all that bloodletting are purely survivalist and they do not kill one another for the sake of material goods. The living, on the other hand, do: blood flows readily and we begin to understand that, addicted to possession, the living cannot live beyond ownership. Who is the *zombie*?

Romero's infatuation with zombies is visible throughout his film career. Still, his living dead are not exactly the most pleasing of all creatures. Even though by contrast they may prove more easily justified than humans, it is nonetheless hard to call them human. They are devoid of emotions, their memory, if any, is always very limited and fragmented, and although they react to external stimuli and can be trained by means of positive and negative reinforcement (as shown in the third film of the cycle, *Day of the Dead*), they are in fact presented in terms of lower animals. Their entire *raison d'être* seems to be brought down to satiating their hunger. The hunger for human flesh – just one more reason why they should be feared and avoided. And, one more comparison with the animal world, they multiply like rabbits!

The zombie world is very democratic. Anybody has a chance of becoming a zombie, that is if he or she has not yet been entirely consumed. This randomness of the process makes it even more frightening. Vampires and werewolves prefer a much more elitist approach – you need to be bitten to transform. It is not so, however, with zombies. Here the prerequisite is the fact of

your being dead, and it does not really matter of what causes. But then, perhaps as the price for that, unlike vampires and werewolves, zombies are relatively easy to dispose of.

Romero never provides us with an explanation for the sudden appearance of the walking corpses among the living. Just as there is no real explanation for their motivation, apart from hunger. All they do, in fact, is move awkwardly following the food. And the only disturbing thought in all this is that “the food” is us.

There is no clear reason why zombies should feel the craving for human flesh. One possible explanation may be confusing the “savage” vodou culture, notorious for its animal and rumoured human sacrifices, with the cannibal practices of other feared savages. Or perhaps somehow people felt that walking corpses would not look credible as vegetarians. And since their getting into a shop to buy a juicy steak seemed an odd idea then why not turn the world into a self-service restaurant instead?

In one of the many films spawned by Romero’s original, *The Return of the Living Dead* (1984), zombies have a more specific purpose to their diet – apparently they need to consume human brains, as these very brains are the source of enzymes which diminish the pain of being alive again. How is that for an explanation?

Romero’s living dead are probably the most popular type of *zombies* in culture, represented widely in multiple books and films. They are, however, only a part of the picture. At this point I would like to introduce the classification of the *zombie* icon into 4 types and briefly discuss each of the groups.

For the sake of the paper I would like to suggest the division of *zombies* into four categories: 1) *random zombies* – driven by their survival instinct and characterised by constant hunger, 2) *slave zombies* – direct descendants of the vodou tradition, created solely for the purpose of ensuring the material profit or sexual gratification of their masters, 3) *evil zombies* – malevolent creatures of limited intelligence driven by the desire to do evil rather than just by pure animal instinct, 4) *smart zombies* – fully aware and intelligent creatures whose properties make them superior to ordinary human beings.

The living dead of Romero clearly belong to the first and most popular category. Their strength lies in numbers and although their table manners leave much to be desired they frequently tend to steal the empathy of the audience. But then, as I said before, Romero’s zombies are politicised creatures and they are a part of a metaphor. Stripped of their symbolic dimension they retain the basic characteristics of *random zombies*: they are still the animalistic brainless creatures driven by the insatiable hunger for human flesh. They are, of course, also far from the only ones.

Among others, the *random zombies* category encompasses most of the *morti viventi* of the Italian cinema: the walking dead fathered by Lucio Fulci (*Zom-*

bie *Flesh Eaters* [1979], *City of the Living Dead* [1980], *The Beyond* [1981]), the corpses returning to life on the sixth night after their burial in Michele Soavi's *Dellamorte, Dellamore* (better known as *Cemetery Man* [1994]), or the dead guarding the gates of Hell in the underground crypt of Lamberto Bava's *Graveyard Disturbance* (1987). "When there's no room in Hell the dead will walk the Earth," warns Romero. And, judging from the number of film productions, all with more than enthusiastic treatment of the subject, my bet is they are going to start with Italy.

On the other hand *random zombies* do not feel out of place in the more exotic setting of Calcutta, designated by Poppy Z. Brite to be impregnated with the walking dead. Perhaps because as she wrote, "Calcutta was a city relatively unsurprised to see its dead rise and walk and feed upon it."¹⁰ On a more cynical note she also observed that the dead were among the best-fed citizens of the city, because just as it could be expected they existed only in relation to food.

Peter Jackson's vision of the zombie carnage in a sleepy suburbia (*Brain-dead*, 1992), attributing zombification to a viral infection taking its beginning in a bite of a rat-monkey, is yet another key example of the category. But, whether they walk in exotic places, abandoned malls, picture-perfect suburbia, misty cemeteries or American small towns, *random zombies* are pathetic creatures. At least from our point of view. They are devoid of emotions, of mind, of past and future. They are absolutely of no use to anyone. If they were able to conceive of the predicament they found themselves in, they would most likely prefer to be dead themselves rather than foolishly insist on living.

Slave zombies at least seem to have a purpose. True, from their perspective it is hard to talk about great career options, but for some people they can make a real difference.

A true ZOMBIE would be mine forever. He would obey every command & whim. Saying 'Yes, Master' & 'No, Master.' He would kneel before me lifting his eyes to me saying, 'I love you, Master. There is no one but you, Master.'¹¹

Such, at least, were the lifetime ambitions of one Quentin P., the main protagonist of Joyce Carol Oates' novel, *Zombie*. In her novel Oates paints a disturbing portrait of a warped psychotic mind. The book, which has a diary touch to it, takes us on a rollercoaster ride through the head of a seriously disturbed individual. For Quentin P. might seem the most boring man alive, sharing his time between doing his job of a caretaker and taking care of his

¹⁰ Poppy Z. Brite, "Calcutta, Lord of Nerves," in *Swamp Foetus* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 152.

¹¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *Zombie* (London: Signet, 1996), p. 49.

grandmother's lawn, but in fact he is obsessed with a thought of making himself a *love zombie*.

Forced to suppress his homosexuality, afraid to admit to it himself and already on parole for sexual molestation of a child, Quentin takes to reading obscure medical manuscripts from the early 20th century and experimenting on vagrants, trying to master the art of lobotomising people by means of an ice-pick, with an intention of turning them into his sex-slaves. (Un)fortunately his "patients" never tend to live long after the operation, which forces him to continue his quest.

Underneath the macabre story lie fundamental psychological truths. Quentin is a son of a respected university professor, a powerful father figure he feels unable to match up to. Whatever he does seems a failure; his homosexuality being just one more thing differentiating him from the model son his father wants. The self-suppression of his inner yearnings results in augmenting his desperate need of acceptance. Quentin aches to be loved and cherished, although the dominance of his father makes him look for the same dominant-submissive type of relationship rather than a well-balanced partnership.

His obsession with creating a *love zombie* is nothing else but the admission to his complexes. He accepts as a fact that only a brainless creature would be able to live with him and love him, and indeed, even though his "patients" die very soon after he operates on them, he lives under an illusion that for a brief moment he was loved. He would even go as far as to imagine that his lovers' body parts he preserves after they are gone were given to him as "tokens of their affection."

Quentin P. did not succeed in his plan. Perhaps he failed to account for the paradoxical workings of the human brain, which just hates being interfered with and at the same time readily dons the manacles of love itself. After all, as a well-known song has it: "love is [...] cruel and it's brutal, it distorts and deranges, it wrenches you up and you're left like a zombie..."¹²

But leaving speculations about feelings aside, let me return to the main reason why *slave zombies* are in demand, which is their unquestionable value as cheap labour. The abolition of slavery meant a huge increase in labour costs and let's face it, so far nobody has been marching for the rights of the dead. Films like the TROMA team release, *Chopper Chicks in Zombie Town* (1991), explore the subject of slavery and freedom, continuing the long lasting tradition of horror touching the nerve of social problems.

Chopper Chicks is one of the so-called "TROMA's strong women's series," films devoted to turning the fragile, vulnerable, often initially abused women into heroes and letting them take revenge on their oppressors, whoever they are. Here, the notorious *Chopper Chicks* are a gang of women bikers who

¹² Eurhythmics, "Love is a Stranger" (*Sweet Dreams*, 1983).

escaped the bondage of stereotypical gender conventions in a patriarchal society in search of freedom and personal fulfilment. They go as they please, take whatever, or indeed whoever, they want to and lead a carefree life. To some of them, however, this seemingly free life is yet another form of slavery and they secretly dream of going back to the husbands and children they abandoned. And all they need to make their choices obvious is a horde of zombies, who accidentally break loose from the mines where they have been kept and exploited by the good town folks and are ready to ravage the town. This incidental rebellion of the mindless creatures helps our heroines realise they can in fact make their own choices, the zombies are quickly disposed of, and everything resolves in a happy ending to the enjoyment of the audience.

So far the only cinematic attempt to treat zombies with a gravity accordant to their original importance in Haitian vodou practice has been Wes Craven's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1987), based on a non-fiction book by a Harvard ethno-botanist, Wade Davis. Davis, who was paid by a pharmaceutical firm to investigate Haitian drugs and poisons used in vodou cults, discovered there was in fact a form of tribal judgement in which a person who offended the tribe was given a special drug to appear dead to the family. Then, while such person remained conscious all the time, s/he was in fact burnt alive during what was supposed to be a funerary ceremony.

Craven, who never shied away from admitting that he was making a commercial film, did manage to go beyond the usual clichés of the horror genre. His vision of *The Serpent and the Rainbow* is in fact a terror story with elements of adventure, romance, and politics set in the times of "Baby Doc" Duvalier. Being aware of the ways of Duvalier and his *Tonton Macoutes*, and the corruption of vodou for the sake of political terrorism in Haiti, Craven explored the potential for manipulation and power games connected with the zombie symbolism. But even though the film crew did get the initial blessing from the local *bokor* (plus one extra pig sacrifice with the ritual blood drinking in the middle of the night), the growing number of incidents of mysterious diseases, hallucinations and madness fits, which began to plague everybody involved in the shooting, combined with the political situation getting out of control (1987)¹³ forced them to leave Haiti and its vodou to themselves. Had they stayed they would have become just one more relatively easy target for economic and political manipulation – the game all too familiar to zombiephiles.¹⁴

¹³ "Island Connoisseur – The Republic of Haiti – History": "The leader of the interim military-civilian government, General Henri Namphy, promised presidential elections for November 1987, but they were called off after Duvalierists massacred at least 34 voters early on polling day with apparent military connivance." www.caribeansupersite.com/haiti/ online 00-05-09, 17:39.

¹⁴ Brian J. Robb, *Screams and Nightmares. The Films of Wes Craven* (NY: The Overlook Press, 1998), pp. 125-135.

Whether kept for the sake of sex, politics or simply as cheap labour *slave zombies* seem useful, even if only in a perverted sense. In the age of huge business corporations more and more greedily regulating our lives one cannot but draw comparisons.

While the first two categories represent rather low forms of life – the animalistic *random zombies* driven by instinct and the *slave zombies* turned to mindless and soulless property – the latter two categories could be seen as intelligent living-dead forms. They also differ substantially from the zombies we have already talked about.

Evil zombies, represented at its best by *The Evil Dead* trilogy (1982/1987/1992), could under certain circumstances be treated as a mutation of the meat-chewing *random zombies*. They are dead, they are relatively easy to dispose of, their strength still lies in numbers and they act instinctively. But at the same time they are creatures of some, even if limited, intellect, which they use entirely with the intention of inflicting grave bodily damage on people.

Here the symbolisation of *zombies* mingles with that of *demonic possession*. When the usual plan of taking those whom they want by force does not work *evil zombies* employ deceit. They will shift shapes, speak in voices, lure with empty promises, bargain and reason with their potential victims and very often get their way by tricking people into submission. At the same time they will always give in to human intellect in the end.

Evil zombies often serve some higher power, usually called a *Demon*, and in fact are merely mercenaries. Their presence is nothing but the acting out of the Christian idea of temptation, the resistance to which is the certain way to salvation. In fact they are often referred to as “the servants of Hell” and their goal is to enslave human souls and take over the world on behalf of the *Demon*, a scenario not that far from the *Book of Apocalypse*.

Evil zombies refrain from meat-chewing activities, as it is not just the hunger for flesh that drives them. They are, however, partial to axes and chain saws, as these seem to be perfect tools for handling the meat we never cease to be in their eyes. A grotesque version of psychopathic killers, *evil zombies* often act according to some well-devised plan, frequently motivated by revenge. In Sam Raimi’s *The Evil Dead*, the dead begin to plague the living after the mythical *Necronomicon*, *The Book of the Dead* has been stolen from them. In Lamberto Bava’s *Changeling* (1987) the dead husband returns to take revenge on his unfaithful wife guilty of his murder. In Romero’s *Strange Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar* (his contribution to *Two Evil Eyes* [1990] co-directed with Dario Argento) Mr. Valdemar gets back at his wife and her lover after he has fallen victim to a hypnotic experiment.

Evil zombies also seem to be great favourites with Stephen King, who very often associates their malevolence with juvenile delinquency. Many of the dead he brings back to life are in fact children or teenagers. But whether they used

to be angelic toddlers (*Pet Sematary*) or adolescent town bullies (*Sometimes They Come Back*) the message we read in King's books is clear: death corrupts all. The good and the bad, the innocent and the guilty – if they ever come back, they come back evil.

The fourth category, *smart zombies*, causes most controversy. It refers to those of the living dead who remain in full (or almost full) control of their intellect. I agree that my inclusion of such a category at this point may seem risky. But then, if we take all the four categories of zombies into consideration, we begin to understand zombies in terms of anthropomorphic forms (dead or alive) characterised by their complete lack of *identity* rather than *intellect*. And even though *smart zombies* remain acutely aware of the reality surrounding them, any new identity they assume remains always a negative identity. In other words, they comprehend what they are not but are unable to see what they are. Somewhere on the way they lost out on the process of transformation, being left only with its outcome. With no memory of what they used to be, they have no idea what will become of them.

At the same time, although I believe *smart zombies* to be *zombies*, I also think they should be treated separately, for their zombiehood is very unusual. What is most singular about them, however, is neither their consciousness nor intellectual prowess but their unique superhero appeal. Contrary to other zombies, *smart zombies* are not considered inferior to humans but rather treated as superhuman, their quality of being already dead making them virtually immortal (“virtually,” since, as in the case of every “immortal” monstrous creature – see vampires or werewolves – there is always a way to dispose of them). And, what is also a novelty, they tend to be on the good side.

Intelligent zombies are a relatively new phenomenon. They owe their existence to a trend prevalent in contemporary Gothic, Horror and SF genres ever since Ann Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* shifted the empathy centre onto the non-human hero, seen as the embodiment of otherness in the times when the representation of the Other as Woman, Homosexual, or Ethnic Minority is no longer sufficient. Good examples of such alternative *zombie*-heroes may be *The Crow*, the risen-from-the-dead avenger created by James O'Barr, James Herbert's *Survivor*, left behind by the dead to investigate the crash of their plane, Clive Barker's *Cabal*, resurrected to fight for the underworld, or Lucius Shephard's green-eyed melancholy vodou warrior (*Green Eyes*).

In recent years [smart] zombies have taken over philosophy. They have been successfully utilised to argue for and against issues concerning consciousness, functionalism, materialism or artificial intelligence. David Chalmers, whose book *The Conscious Mind* contributed greatly to the philosophical zombies having risen from the grave, defines *zombies* as creatures which are “physically and behaviourally identical to a conscious human, but lack any conscious

experience.”¹⁵ Chalmers believes his zombies to be logically possible or, in other words, conceivable.

David Chalmers believes in the possibility of zombies understood in terms of hypothetical physical entities lacking qualia (the properties of experience or phenomenal properties). He sees them as a conceptual possibility. His zombies may have no qualia but they still have beliefs because “beliefs unlike qualia, seem to be characterised primarily by the role they play in the mind’s casual economy.”¹⁶

Describing the zombie’s mind Chalmers frequently uses the phrase “all is dark inside.” In his counter-argument Allin Cottrell points out that “darkness” in itself is a quale and suggests thinking of the inside of the zombie’s head in terms of a rock-like structure instead.¹⁷ Larry Hauser, on the other hand, opts for the image of the head full of saw-dust.¹⁸ But whether it is darkness, saw-dust, or rock, most philosophers agree that there is *nothing* it is like to be a *zombie*. The argument of course follows whether the above statement is not itself enough to posit the inconceivability of zombies as such.

Chalmers’ work defends the principle of organisational invariance, which states that “given any system that has conscious experiences, then any system that has the same functional organisation at a fine enough grain will have qualitatively identical conscious experience.”¹⁹ At the basis of his theories lies the presupposition that a given functional organisation can be realised by different physical systems, such as for instance the brain and a silicon system, or indeed the human and his zombie equivalent.

In effect Chalmers suggests that a zombie is going to be capable of experiencing things and drawing logical conclusions on the basis of these experiences, the only difference being that although he will use the same self-ascription mechanisms as we do he might be wrong about his ascriptions. He will say “I see red” and he will not see anything, or perhaps he will see blue instead. But the fact of the zombie being wrong about his mental states does not make it impossible for him to have beliefs, for beliefs, as Chalmers argues, do not depend on qualia.

Similarly Todd Moody believes that “[s]ince conscious inessentialism tells us that no mental activity requires conscious accompaniments, it follows that

¹⁵ David J. Chalmers, “Absent Qualia, Fading Qualia, Dancing Qualia,” www.u.arizona.edu/~chalmers/papers/qualia.htm online 00-03-14, 16:26.

¹⁶ David J. Chalmers, “Self-Ascription Without Qualia: A Case Study,” www.u.arizona.edu/~chalmers/papers/goldman.html online 00-04-07, 12:38.

¹⁷ Allin Cottrell, “Sniffing the Camembert: on the conceivability of zombies,” www.imprint.co.uk/cottrell/jcsmainframe.html online 00-03-14, 17:20.

¹⁸ Larry Hauser, “Revenge of the Zombies,” www.members.aol.com/lshauser/zombies.html online 00-03-14, 16:48.

¹⁹ Chalmers, “Absent Qualia, Fading Qualia, Dancing Qualia.”

no overt behaviour requires them either. So if conscious inessentialism is true, zombies are true [...] it is quite possible for an entire world of zombies to evolve.”²⁰ At the same time, however, he posits that although zombies could be treated as our behavioural twins and as such they would be capable of communicating in a language not that different from our own, zombies would not be able to originate our mentalistic vocabulary. They could talk about “knowing,” “understanding,” and “believing,” but these words would mean something different and they would be devoid of conscious experience.

Daniel Dennett argues for the inconceivability of zombies.

[W]hen philosophers claim the zombies are conceivable, they invariably underestimate the task of conception (or imagination), and end up imagining something that violates their own definition [...] If, ex hypothesi, zombies are behaviorally indistinguishable from us normal folk, then they are really indistinguishable.²¹

He blames the philosophers’ sudden outburst of interest in zombies on, what he calls, the *Zombic Hunch* – an intuition that there is something missing (although it is hard to say exactly what) in mechanistic models of consciousness and a conviction “that there is a real difference between a conscious person and a perfect zombie,”²² both claims which he predicts, will be implausible in future.

Although Dennett mentions that the zombie discussions resemble the futile philosophical disputes of the old days regarding the number of angels dancing on a pinhead, his voice remains one of the loudest. In fact he himself is attacked by Jaron Lanier, as being a splendid example of a zombie. Lanier writes

It turns out that it is possible to distinguish a zombie from a person. A zombie has a different philosophy. That is the only difference. Therefore, zombies can only be detected if they happen to be philosophers. Dennett is obviously a zombie.²³

Speaking from the position of a computer scientist, Lanier accuses philosophers that in their speculations they forget about “the layers of abstraction,” as he calls them, referring to concepts, platonic forms, cultural context or words,

²⁰ Todd Moody, “Conversations with Zombies,” www.imprint.co.uk/Moody_zombies.html online 00-03-14, 17:26.

²¹ Daniel Dennett, “The Unimagined Preposterousness of Zombies,” www.ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/unzombie.htm online 00-03-14, 17:45.

²² Daniel Dennett, “The Zombic Hunch: Extinction of an Intuition?” www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/courses/consciousness/papers/DD-zombie.html online 00-03-14, 17:22.

²³ Jaron Lanier, “You Can’t Argue with a Zombie,” www.well.com/user/jaron/zombie.html online 00-04-07, 13:51.

without which neither brains nor any functionally similar to them systems exist. Taking on the discussion of computers Lanier argues that they are not distinguishable outside a specific cultural context. He believes that to a Martian there would be no difference between a computer, a toaster or a rock as there is no possibility of detecting computers on the basis of objective analysis, for “[w]hat makes a computer a computer is our way of thinking about its potential, not its observed actuality.”²⁴

Fascinating in their complexity as they are, such discussions seem beyond the point from the cultural perspective. In cultural criticism there is no doubt as to the existence of zombies, the zombie imagery assailing us from all the directions. We have zombie movies, zombie music groups, zombie drinks... Moreover, if I tell you that today I feel like a zombie, most of you are going to be sympathetic or at least recognise the feeling. And this in itself is enough to suggest the existence of a more or less unified cultural concept, let me call it, the cultural icon of the *zombie*.

To discuss the cultural icon of the *zombie* I need to return to the definition. As I said before, generally *zombies* could be defined as anthropomorphic creatures (dead or alive) which are paradoxically identified by their lack of identity. This definition accounts for all the 4 types of zombies I have referred to so far. The cultural icon, however, does not seem to take into consideration those zombies which possess (even if limited) intellect. The reason for such discrimination is very simple: icons depend on visual representation and the multiplicity of forms adopted by the more intelligent zombies does not allow for the successful clarification of the concept.

Smart zombies, for that instant, do not look different from ordinary humans, although they do bear the mark of the Other, accentuated by their appearance (the brooding look and the predominance of black/dark clothes). Their superiority is additionally strengthened by a plethora of macho attributes such as black leather jackets, powerful motorcycles, or deadly weapons (mostly large knives or guns as these seem to be considered most manly). This apparent inability to distinguish *smart zombies* from humans gives us one more reason why they should be treated separately.

Evil zombies may also present a certain problem when it comes to their representation. Since the category blends with that of *demonic possession* one of the characteristics of *evil zombies* is their ability to shift shapes. It is thus difficult to talk of one clear image, which could be associated with all the *evil zombies*.

When working on *The Exorcist*, probably the best ever picture of demonic possession, Friedkin was very careful in his choice of make-up for Linda Blair. For the sake of credibility of the picture he refrained from overdosing on special

²⁴ Lanier, “You Can’t Argue with a Zombie.”

effects. His main aim was to make the audience believe that all the wounds on the body of little Regan were self-inflicted, and resulted from the various acts of self-abuse to which she was pushed by the demonic entity possessing her.

Similarly *evil zombies* often look very much like battered human beings, covered with scars and bruises, or simply, if they were raised after they had been buried, marred by the signs of corruption. Evil radiates from their eyes, which often acquire some uncanny shades of yellow, red or green. Rotating heads, speaking in voices or an ability to mimic other people may come as an extra but these are the *demonic* rather than *zombie* properties.

With such a variety of forms, however, it is obvious that in order to arrive at the clear cut icon of the *zombie* we need to concentrate rather on the two first categories, leaving their intelligent cousins to their fate. And since both *random zombies* and *slave zombies* can be further characterised as brain damaged creatures, the search for their representation brings us into a new territory – the representation of mental disease.

In the 18th century a Swiss preacher-author Johann Lavater introduced a new way of seeing the insane – *physiognomy*. He suggested that people should be examined on the basis of their inherent features, such as the shape of their nose, the colour of their eyes or their bone structure. These features were seen as predetermining character, and since mental illness was believed to be “merely a reflection of character” the conclusions were drawn as to the correlation of certain physiognomy and proneness to mental afflictions.

Lavater’s work was accompanied by a number of plates by Daniel Chodowiecki. Among many depictions of the “mentally weak” we find drawings of idiots, characterised by their sloping foreheads and fixed facial expression. Similarly in Philippe Pinal’s *Medico-philosophical Treatise on Mental Alienation, or Mania* (1801), who returns to the idea, idiocy is characterised by the small size of head, sloping forehead and a fixed, empty expression on the face. The small size of idiots skulls and the facial expression characterised as “stupid and without meaning” returns again, this time in connection to phrenology, in Johann Gaspar Spurzheim’s *Observations on the Deranged Manifestations of the Mind, or Insanity* (1817).²⁵

From the very beginning of the scientific interest in that affliction, idiocy was strongly associated with degeneration, in the 19th century overtly linked to sexuality. It was then the placement of idiocy as the cause or effect of “masturbatory insanity” was suggested. It was also then when idiocy (or indeed degeneration) began to be understood in terms of regression to a more primitive human form, and the idiot started to be perceived as the child.

²⁵ Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to Aids* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 24–30, 33–34.

Sander L. Gilman remarks on B. A. Morel's generalised typology of the cretin on the basis of a 23-year old woman:

The cretin here is the child and the primitive. The cretin physiognomy is that of the child, her sexual attitude that of the child and the primitive. The unrestrained sexuality of the cretin, the cretin's childlike appearance, the geographical and familial isolation of the cretin provided the ideal cases upon which to base the portrayal of retrogressive sexuality. For Morel [...], the presence of shame is the proof of adult and therefore civilized sexual behaviour. The cretin stands apart from civilization, as does the deviant, in a world inhabited by the sexual Other, the primitive and the child.²⁶

And the *zombie*, we might want to add. If we take a closer look at the zombies, as we know them from the movies or books, we will be struck by the similarity of description. For the sake of clarity let us eliminate from the discussion all the zombies in which the process of corruption went too far to talk of discerning any facial features at all. We are left with a strangely uniform vision of beings not that different from what is depicted on the plates of the 19th-century medical books. Fixed facial expression, eyes dulled and focused on one point, slowness to their moves, difficulty to control their body movements, jerking limbs, disarrayed clothes reminding us, in fact, of the loose garments of the mentally ill patients, sleek hair, sloping foreheads. The white/grey pallor of their skin and sunken eyes coincide with the book images of masturbatory insanity. Their heads often seem small in contrast with their unnaturally stiff bodies. And let us not forget about their "childlike" lack of shame.

One of the heroines of *The Return of the Living Dead* tells her friends of a peculiar sexual fantasy she has, which involves being torn into pieces by a crowd of hungry zombies. Aroused in her vision she actually undresses and begins to run naked around the cemetery only to have her vision realised. Within seconds we see her again, this time leading a horde of brain-hungry zombies and looking relatively happy in nothing but her high heels.

A character created as relatively brainless from the very beginning she did not actually change that much after her transformation. She has acquired, however, a new credibility and a purpose. As a person her behaviour seemed odd to say the least. As a zombie she does not surprise anyone with her nudity. Moreover, her body has ceased to be considered as potentially arousing and is now but a biological confirmation that she used to be human.

The 1999 film of Lars von Trier, *The Idiots*, advocated getting in touch with one's inner idiot and told a story of a group of people, who made such self-

²⁶ Sander L. Gilman, "Sexology, psychoanalysis, and degeneration: from a theory of race to a race to theory," in *Degeneration, The Dark Side of Progress*, eds. E. Chamberlin and S.L. Gilman (NY: Columbia UP), p. 74.

induced idiocy the essence of their lives. What was a method of healing one's psyche for some group members was also pure escapism for others. Regression to idiocy proved an effective way of coping with the stresses of adult life, but at the same time, as a habit, it turned out to be difficult to break with. In the western civilisation of the end of 20th century, where stress and neurosis come as standard, idiocy has become a desirable category.

Searching for one's inner child is supposed to be a successful trauma-relieving psychoanalytical technique. Similarly isolating the primitive in man has been an aim of scientists since time immemorial. Regression into a *zombie* state allows for both and offers an inviting prospect of a retreat from the restraints of social conventions.

A zombie does not need to take responsibility for its actions, for blatantly ignoring the rules of the society. Blaming external conditions for one's unseemly behaviour is a desirable solution to many problems. At the same time it puts the culprit in the position of the victim of circumstances and it is a human thing to sympathise with victims rather than with oppressors.

In the earlier part of this paper I defined zombies as creatures lacking identity. Similarly, identity crisis may be seen as an inevitable side effect of living in a multicultural society. Now, imagine what would happen if, instead of pondering over our misplaced national or cultural identity, we were to opt for erasing our identity altogether? Clearly by the rules of logic we would have to be then perceived in terms of *zombies*. But would it be necessarily so bad?

In her book on masochism Massé describes it as "a psychic strategy that makes the best of bad business."²⁷ She sees it as more than a resignation to one's fate or stubborn resistance against cultural traumas. In fact she believes that masochism can form a coherent identity, assure continuity for the ego, and allow the person to control both the self and the external reality – a necessary means to ensure the survival of an individual.

Massé is not the only one to see submission as a technique of dominance. Jessica Benjamin similarly notices that "[t]he individual tries to achieve freedom through slavery, release through submission to control,"²⁸ and reminds us that in order to understand submission we need to see it also as a *desire* to be dominated and not just concentrate on depicting the miserable fate of the submissives.

Taking it even further Robert Stoller explains that

Masochism is a technique of control, first discovered in childhood following trauma, the onslaught of the unexpected. The child believes it can prevent further trauma by re-enacting the original trauma. Then, as master of

²⁷ Michelle A. Massé, *In the Name of Love. Women, Masochism and the Gothic* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 42.

²⁸ Jessica Benjamin quoted after Massé, p. 45.

the script, he is no longer a victim; he can decide for himself when to suffer pain rather than having it strike without warning. Or, when we have more of the hidden text, we can see masochism as an attack ('suffering is my revenge').²⁹

"Letting go" and becoming a *zombie* as a means to taking control over the harsh reality of life and a way of resisting its ploys is certainly a tempting prospect. Unconditional submission to the external conditions places the zombie beyond any sort of conventions and releases it from the burden of immediate decision-making. Since the zombie has waived its right to decision-making and it does not take the initiative, the cause-effect relation becomes suspended and the zombie can no longer be held responsible for its actions.

James Sacksteder sees masochism in terms of a negative identity, which "represents for some individuals their best possible effort at creating and maintaining a separate and autonomous sense of self, one that salvages for them a modicum of satisfaction, security, and self-esteem."³⁰ The only person the masochist has to worry about is himself/herself, the responsibility towards others being suspended from the moment of accepting the masochistic identity. By doing that, by fully embracing one's masochistic self, a person voluntarily steps into the realm of the zombie. And as we have seen it in numerous movies, we know what becomes of such a person: sooner or later s/he is bound to turn out a zombie as well.

The realisation that one's actions go unnoticed because everybody around is not more but an unimportant piece of some vast machinery may evoke bouts of individuality. Any anti-utopian work where the moloch of the system topples because of the action of one man who wanted to remain individual could be an example of that. But the individual would not even think of rebelling if it were not for the thousands of zombies who, by their meekly submissive behaviour, made it obvious that the system was flawed.

Surely no system that turns humanity into a flock of brainless zombies can be good and the hero who brings it down deserves fame. But the 1990s are the decade of victims rather than victors (it is enough to tune into any of the numerous talk shows to see that), and inertia has found justification. While some people still like to act others begin to notice that loud protests with their slogans, attacks and fights are equally efficient as those silent sit-ins, whose participants do nothing knowing that their strength lies in numbers.

As a society of masochists we are a society of zombies, even though our zombiehood is self-induced and totally reversible, provided we feel like it. But being a zombie is an easy option not requiring much work on our side and luring us with a promise of stress-free life. "When there is no room in Hell, the dead

²⁹ Robert Stoller quoted after Massé, p. 46.

³⁰ James Sacksteder quoted after Massé, p. 45.

will walk the Earth.” Only they should hurry, for the Earth is already swarming with the living *zombies*.

Filmography

- *Beyond, The* (Lucio Fulci, 1981)
- *Braindead* (Peter Jackson, 1992)
- *Changeling 2, The* (Lamberto Bava, 1987)
- *Chopper Chicks in Zombie Town* (Dan Hoskins, 1989)
- *City of the Living Dead* (Lucio Fulci, 1980)
- *Crow, The* (Alex Proyas, 1994)
- *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978)
- *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985)
- *Dellamorte, Dellamore* (Michele Soavi, 1994)
- *Evil Dead, The* (Sam Raimi, 1982)
- *Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn* (Sam Raimi, 1987)
- *Evil Dead 3: Army of Darkness* (Sam Raimi, 1992)
- *Exorcist, The* (William Friedkin, 1973)
- *Ghoul, The* (T. Hayes Hunter, 1934)
- *Graveyard Disturbance* (Lamberto Bava, 1987)
- *Idiots, The* (Lars von Trier, 1998)
- *I Walked With A Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943)
- *Nightbreed* (Clive Barker, 1990)
- *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968)
- *Pet Sematary* (Mary Lambert, 1989)
- *Return of the Living Dead, The* (Dan O'Bannon, 1985)
- *Serpent and the Rainbow, The* (Wes Craven, 1987)
- *Sometimes They Come Back* (Tom McLoughlin, 1991)
- *Two Evil Eyes* (Dario Argento/George A. Romero, 1990)
- *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1933)
- *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (Lucio Fulci, 1979)