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The Dead Walk

Bill Phillips
Marlene Mendoza

Abstract: Monsters have always enjoyed a significant presence in the human imagination, and religion was instrumental in replacing the physical horror they engendered with that of a moral threat. Zombies, however, are amoral – their motivation purely instinctive and arbitrary, yet they are, perhaps, the most loathed of all contemporary monsters. One explanation for this lies in the theory of the uncanny valley, proposed by robotics engineer Masahiro Mori. According to the theory, we reserve our greatest fears for those things which seem most human, yet are not – such as dead bodies. Such a reaction is most likely a survival mechanism to protect us from danger and disease – a mechanism even more essential when the dead rise up and walk. From their beginnings zombies have reflected western societies' greatest fears – be they of revolutionary Haitians, women, or communists. In recent years the rise in the popularity of the zombie in films, books and television series reflects our fears for the planet, the economy, and of death itself.

Keywords: cultural studies, zombies, horror, monsters, uncanny valley

According to Niall Scott, "The monster is perhaps one of the most significant creations serving to reflect and critique human existence" (Scott, 1). Certainly its presence in world literature and culture is so ubiquitous that its importance cannot be underestimated. Even *The Bible* has hardly begun before we are told that "There were giants in the earth in those days" (Genesis 6:4) while the presence of terrifying beings such as the Cyclops, and Scylla and Charybdis abound in Greek Mythology. Sara Martín, in *Monstruos al final de milenio* argues that the crucial moment in the story of the monster is the transformation of the animal predators of prehistory into the archetypal image of the imagined monster. This occurred when humanity succeeded in dominating the animal world to the extent that other species ceased to be a major threat to human survival. From this point onwards art and religion provide the "contexts in which the monster always symbolises the power of evil which must be controlled and defeated due to the moral rather than physical threat it offers the believer"[i] (Martín, 16).

This moral dimension is clearly apparent in the mythology of monsters such as Lamia, of Greek mythology, who stole and devoured children (Grant and Hazel, 199); or the Hindu goddess Kali, associated with "death, sexuality and violence" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*); or the Medieval incubi and succubi who took advantage of people sleeping to engage in sexual intercourse with them. One of the clearest modern examples of monstrous sexual depravity is the vampire whose portrayal in John Polidori's 1819 eponymous narrative "The Vampyre" touches on heterosexual rape and the then taboo subject of homosexual desire. According to Mair Rigby, "[w]hat is especially frightening in "The Vampyre" is perhaps its insistence that norms, both heterosexual and homosocial, can be appropriated by a sexual monster who not only stands outside the forces of normative regulation, but also knows how to turn them to his advantage" (Rigby, 11).

Given this brief introduction to monstrosity, and especially its religious and moral significance, the figure of the zombie stands out as unusual, even for a monster. Firstly, zombies are not sexy, nor do they engage in any kind of sexual activity nor, one assumes, do they provoke erotic arousal. They have no super-human powers, indeed, they are seriously sub-human in ability (though Max Brooks, in *The Zombie Survival Guide* claims that they have acute hearing and sense of smell. Brooks, 7); they have no sense of personal identity and being very easy to kill, they are only dangerous in numbers. They have no supernatural, divine or diabolical origin, particularly in their twentieth century cinematic manifestations and, unlike many screen monsters, at least of the Hollywood variety, they have no European origin at all. Their violence is also totally arbitrary. They have no goal, no mission, no sense of hatred or desire for retribution. Their victims could be anyone, from the most virtuous to the greatest of sinners; they act entirely from instinct – the religious, and particularly moral, significance of the zombie is almost entirely absent, especially once divorced from its voodoo origins. Zombies are the most unsympathetic of all monsters, perhaps the worst of all monsters, whose destruction is not only to be sought, but to be celebrated in a gorefest of blood, body parts and twitching organs. Indeed, the popularity of the genre may be partly related to the permissibility of violently exterminating them – there can be no moral qualms, no prick of the conscience when burying an axe in a zombie's head since it is already dead, and bent on the mindless destruction of the still living. None of this however, explains the particular horror that the zombie engenders, and there are a number of reasons for this.

The monster represents "a boundary space between human and non-human (originally human and animal) - the imaginary region between being and non-being, presence and absence" (Boon, 33), and nothing, therefore, is more monstrous than a zombie since it has the form of a living being, yet has no identity; is both present and absent, physically active, yet intellectually and spiritually void. Boon goes on to argue that the "zombie myth embodies the monstrous, inhuman other and rightly locates the human instinct for the survival of self in issues of mortality. In the zombie, death is given agency. Fear of death is a primary human impulse, because death opposes the human instinct for survival, thus it is part of the survival instinct" (Boon, 34). Human instinct, especially for survival, is key in understanding the particular disgust and horror that zombies produce. A means of understanding the depth of this reaction may be provided by the theory of the 'uncanny valley' proposed by the robotics scientist Masahiro Mori.

Since the early stages of robotic science, one of the main challenges of the discipline has been to design and produce robots that look as similar to a living human being as possible in order to make them likable. However, there is an inflection point at which affinity towards imitation of human life becomes eeriness. It appears when non-human features

clash with those traits associated to healthy living bodies, as in the case of mannequins or prosthetic hands (Mori, 2). Prosthetic hands can resemble real hands in great detail but there are certain features that cannot be reproduced with absolute accuracy, such as skin texture and temperature. Consequently, these artificial limbs elicit a high degree of rejection in those who, at a glance, believe the hand is real and then, after close examination, realise they are unnatural. Intrigued by this reaction, Masahiro Mori theorised about the eeriness caused by artificial life. In his paper, published in 1970 in the Japanese journal Energy, Mori hypothesised that every case of imitation of human life would elicit affinity until the non-human features of it render it unnatural and, therefore, eerie. Mori's uncanny valley is a graph which shows peaks for affinity and a single trough for eeriness. At the very bottom of the negative curve, just below prosthetic hands, at the point of greatest eeriness and uncanniness, corpses are to be found. In a variation of the theory, Shawn Steckenfinger and Asif Ghazanfar suggest that the uncanny effect is triggered not by increasing realism alone, but rather because "increased realism lowers the tolerance for abnormalities" (Steckenfinger; Ghazanfar, 18364).

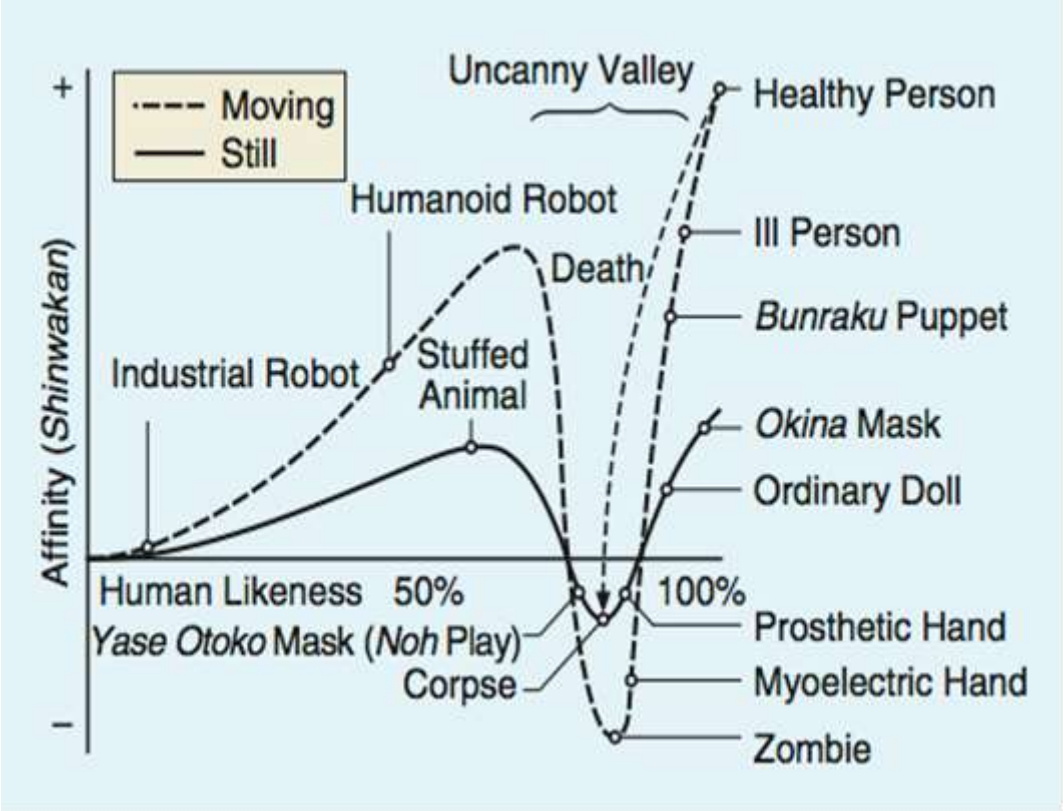

Fig. 1 the uncanny valley (Mori, 1970)

Movement intensifies both affinity and eeriness, as represented by the discontinuous line on the graph. Myoelectric hands, which function through the contraction of residual muscles that trigger a signal to a powered limb, are located on the graph below more conventional prosthetic hands. Sick and diseased people are more disconcerting than the healthy, but even corpses, being immobile, are not as unsettling as zombies. The arrow, which marks the sudden death of a healthy person, does not fall all the way to the bottom: "We might be glad this arrow leads down into the still valley of the corpse and not the valley animated by the living dead!" exclaims Mori (Mori, 5). The abrupt fall into the

valley by means of death might be, in Mori's words, the secret to the uncanny valley effect –the instinct for self-preservation.

It has been suggested that aversion to humanlike robots might be the result of evolutionary contagion avoidance by rejecting human-looking entities or because this kind of robot casts doubt on human uniqueness (MacDorman, 696-697). Steckenfinger and Ghazanfar tested the uncanny valley effect in macaque monkeys and concluded that they showed greater interest in unrealistic synthetic faces than realistic ones, thus suggesting the effect is also present in monkeys, supporting the idea that the uncanny valley is evolutionary, though whether the monkeys felt disgust or fear during the tests is unclear (Steckenfinger; Ghazanfar, 18364). The results from the tests carried out by David Lewkowicz and Asif Ghazanfar with children from 6 to 12 months old suggest that even though previous studies have concluded that the uncanny valley is evolutive, the effect is initially developmental, not becoming visible until the second half of the first year of life (Lewkowicz; Ghazanfar, 128; 130). Our response to zombies is related to our survival instinct: they make us feel uneasy in a similar way that humanlike robots do, because they trigger that feeling of revulsion related to the ambiguously (non)-living.

The work that turned the classic zombie figure of a sleepwalker who happens to be dead into the flesh-eating, decaying walking corpse we know today is *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a horror film written and directed by George A. Romero. For the first time in the history of horror fiction, the zombie is detached from voodoo imagery and is turned into a reanimated corpse with the sole purpose of preying on the living. This creature does not act at a master's command, does not offer the chance of dialogue nor can be scared away. In addition to these predatory features, the zombie presents evident signs of death that vary from mere pallor to severe decomposition or wounds that would have been fatal if inflicted on a living person. Zombies differ from other popular monsters of horror fiction such as vampires, ghosts, werewolves, witches, aliens or psychopathic killers in that, among other characteristics, they are wandering reminders of what death can do to a human body. Additionally, they eat and disembowel people alive, violating the body envelope, while remaining horrifyingly contagious. The organic matter transfer produced by the slightest scratch will lead the victim to days of fever, pain and delirium, with eventual death, subsequent reanimation and transformation into a mindless eating machine that will try to consume the victim's loved ones alive. However, this is just the beginning, because the greatest danger represented by zombies is their capacity to multiply through contagion and their tendency to crowd together in large swarms when following food. The apocalypse is thus unleashed by collapsing "societal infrastructures" (Kyle Bishop, 20) and exposing society to its greatest fear ---annihilation (22).

John Stratton argues that zombies are related to "displaced people... refugees, asylum-seekers and illegal immigrants" (265). Zombie crowds are usually referred to as *swarms* or *herds*, words that are semantically close to others used to name groups of "asylum-seekers" (277). According to Stratton, this can be read as a sign of the anxiety experienced by Western civilisations when they face immigration flows of displaced people (278). In relation to this idea, Jason Faulkner, Mark Schaller et al. explore the mechanisms of disease avoidance in xenophobia. They claim that immigrants are often associated with the outbreak of disease as carriers and propagators (333) and that, consequently, evolutionary pathogen-avoidance mechanisms are triggered, thus eliciting disgust, which can lead to the rejection of the untrusted group of people (335).

Bearing in mind the main features of zombies previously described, it may be concluded that these creatures are so popular because they are reminders of death and, additionally, allow us to toy with the idea of the fall of civilisation, all from the safety and comfort of fiction: the rotting corpse moaning and tumbling towards us becomes a modern-day memento mori. Beyond this, however, there are other more complex affective mechanisms by which zombies are reminders of death.

One is that of disgust. Disgust is a basic emotion, but unlike others such as anger or happiness, literature about disgust is less extensive. However, it has been suggested that disgust is an evolutionary defence from disease vectors because it prevents the body from coming into contact, mainly through the mouth (Paul Rozin and April Fallon, 23-24), with potentially contagious elements, more particularly those which are undergoing a process of decay (28). Jonathan Haidt, Clark McCauley and Paul Rozin developed a scale based on disgust domains obtained through the participation of diverse members of the University of Pennsylvania. They observed that the most commonly mentioned source of disgust involved the breach of the body envelope (702). Also, instances of contact with death produced surprisingly high frequency results, so much so that their Disgust Scale considered body envelope violations and death two distinguishable domains of disgust (707). They concluded that the prevalence of the disgust domains of body envelope breaching and death in experiments frighteningly revealed, in one case, our similarity to other mammals and, in the other, that contact with death reminds us of its inescapability, thus eliciting anxiety (712). Disgust is a mechanism of defence against reminders of animality and, therefore, mortality (Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt; Clark McCauley, 12) because animals die. The fear of death lurks behind most psychological anxieties in response to our self-preservation instinct (Ernest Becker, 16). In relation to this, the Terror Management Theory proposes that we cope with the fear of death by avoiding reminders of mortality and by placing ourselves above animals in cultural environments that offer a symbolic perpetuation of life and values, with the consequence that when this position is destabilised, anxiety rises (Jamie Goldenberg; Tom Pyszczynski et al., 428). This explains the kind of disturbing feeling zombie hordes provoke.

Other studies on disgust suggest that this emotion is more related to the avoidance of disease rather than a manifestation of the fear of extinction; it is an adaptative mechanism to prevent contact with pathogens. Disgust as a disease-avoidance mechanism was proven to be more intense when exposed to an infectious-looking stimulus, cross-cultural, and more salient in women because they not only protect themselves but also their offspring. It becomes gradually less salient as reproductive potential declines and more noticeable when there is contact with strangers (Val Curtis, Robert Aunger, Tamer Rabie, 131). Consequently, zombies would elicit rejection because they are potential disease carriers and not merely tokens of death. Supporting the thesis that disgust is more related to disease avoidance than death, Daniel Fessler and David Navarrete argue that disgust is not a cross-cultural response to exposure to mortality. Their experiment with people from rural Costa Rica, where they used the same Disgust Scale created by Haidt et al. (1993), showed that when the fear of death is not particularly high, sensitivity towards reminders of animality through expressions of disgust is also reduced (289). Consequently, contrary to what the Terror Management Theory proposes, they suggest that disgust as an expression of death avoidance is apparently not universal. However, as zombies are people that have come back from the dead, one could argue that disgust would be triggered cross-culturally as a disease-preventing and/or a mortality-avoidance mechanism because even though not all cultures consider death to be taboo, the fact that these creatures defy the natural cycle of life and death would be affectively disruptive.

Sheila Woody and Bethany Teachman established a relationship between disgust and fear, although these two emotions work differently. The fact that disgust is a defensive response equates it to fear, and both disgust and fear can be triggered by the same stimulus; "(f)ear-motivated avoidance protects the person from perceived danger, while disgust-motivated avoidance may be more often linked to sensation or imagery." (293) More specifically, they suggest that there are three types of threats that elicit both disgust and fear, namely bodily harm, social rejection and the possibility of losing control of one's mind (296). Theoretically, zombies can produce bodily harm and uncontrolled panic, so it seems logical to believe that they provoke both disgust and fear, emotions related by some scholars to the avoidance of death.

The inclusion of zombies in the uncanny valley chart inevitably gives rise to the question of why zombies have a more negative value than corpses or moving artificial hands in terms of affinity. It seems that zombies reminds us of death like no other creature in horror fiction because their ghastly appearance triggers disgust and fear, possible mechanisms for coping with death and for avoiding vectors of disease. Additionally, the collapse of civilisation in zombie narratives plays to our deepest societal fears. In accordance with the Terror Management Theory, it is civilisation which enables us to place ourselves over animality, and thus over death.

Given the especially horrific nature of the zombie as monster, it is not surprising that its representations have changed and adapted in line with the dominant fears of those societies which have adopted its allegorical significances. The zombie emerged in Haiti in the 1790s although, like voodoo, it also contains elements which owe their origins to Africa. 19th century reports on Voodoo emphasised cannibalism (Kee, 12), a practice commonly associated in the European mind with black, aboriginal and African people such as those to be found in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The first English language zombie story, " Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields", by William Seabrook, was not published until 1929. Seabrook's zombies were not cannibal, but harmless victims of unscrupulous farmers who had resurrected them to work like cattle as free labour. Both cannibalism and Seabrook's portrayal of the zombies as dumb animals reflect the fears and prejudices of many Americans who perceived, on the one hand, the independent republic of Haiti as a dangerous place ruled by savages, and on the other, coinciding with the United States occupation of the island from 1915 to 1934, of Haitians as little more than slaves, capable only of hard, repetitive labour.

The zombie is thus identified as the Other by white America and Europe. This othering of the zombie continues into World War Two with the portrayal of women zombies resisting their masters. According to Peter Dendle, these "movies as a whole deny the possibility of complete containment; the repressed anima of the zombie woman surpasses its prescribed boundaries, just as women in society were surpassing traditional gender roles" (Dendle, 49), a development which, to a large extent, was suppressed by the postwar return to the workplace of a male labour force and the banishment of women to the domestic sphere. As a consequence the female zombie largely disappeared. Nevertheless, the Cold War's inevitable representation of the zombie as a political Other continues the trope of the living dead as the enemy within, intent on imposing "alien ideologies of homogeny (ideologies that are, not coincidentally, reminiscent of popular caricatures of communism)" (Dendle, 49).

A change occurred, however, with the publication of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* in 1954. The zombies (who, confusingly, are described as vampires) are infected by a contagious virus which, as well as converting them into the living dead, also gives them an insatiable taste for human blood. The significant moment, however, in the novel comes at the end when the sole surviving uninfected human being realises that it is not the zombies/vampires who are different: he is. He has become the Other, and commits suicide. From being a clear reflection of a community's fears of an external threat, the zombie suddenly becomes a site of identity ambiguity. It is no longer clear who now is the zombie, nor if he/she is the enemy. This is consistent with the very nature of zombies, and the reason for their fearsomeness so neatly explained by Mori's uncanny valley – they once were living people; they are not necessarily different in appearance from the living; they could, in fact, be a former friend or loved one. We do not know if the zombies are them, or us.

I Am Legend was the inspiration for George Romero's aforementioned 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*, the film which defined the characteristics of the zombie in the popular imagination from then on: the condition is caused by a virus, the zombies are driven to consume human flesh, and they are utterly without purpose or ambition beyond their cannibalistic instinct. They are not the puppets of an evil megalomaniac, nor do they have any specific plan to take over the world: they simply exist, mindless, amoral and deadly. Romero's second zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) narrates the struggles of a group of survivors taking shelter from the zombie apocalypse in a shopping mall. The advantage of such a refuge is twofold: it is an enclosed space which can easily be fortified from attack, and it is full of everything needed to survive. Once safely inside the survivors indulge in an orgy of consumption: food, clothes and sports equipment are all picked over, briefly consumed or used and then discarded. The survivors' behaviour is unambiguously compared to that of the zombies who obsessively seek out human flesh to consume: Romero's film is an allegory of mindless twentieth century consumption.

As the century progressed it became increasingly clear that the kind of human greed depicted by Romero was actually putting at risk life on the planet itself. In Max Brooks's novel *World War Z*, the zombie apocalypse renders much of the world uninhabitable and much of humanity is seeks refuge in the northern parts of Canada, Alaska and Siberia where the cold freezes the zombies into inactivity. This scenario is extraordinarily similar to James Lovelock's prediction of the future in *The Revenge of Gaia*, in which global warming will restrict human survival to the same northern latitudes. As a parasitic, destructive menace to the planet's thermal equilibrium, humanity is nothing more than a swiftly self-propagating disease which will die once its unwitting host becomes a less congenial environment to live in.

But, as the uncanny valley demonstrates, it is death itself which provides the most chilling and unique characteristic of zombies. Zombies are not only a threat to life: they are death itself. In an article published by the *A.V. Club* (a media offshoot of the satirical magazine *The Onion*), Todd Van Der Werff suggests that television series such as *The Walking Dead* have a similar effect as the memento mori of the Middle Ages: "The hope was to play up the ultimate emptiness of vanity, of living one's life to gain things rather than working towards the betterment of the everlasting soul … it stood, always, as a contemplation of the thing that unites every human being on this planet: death" (Van Der Werff). *The Walking Dead* television series, about survival in a zombie post-apocalypse, began in 2010 and, according to the online showbiz and entertainment magazine *Digital Spy*, enjoys "cable's highest ever rating for a drama series in US TV history", suggesting

that interest in zombies, and death, is a serious preoccupation of our society, in Van Der Werff's words, *The Walking Dead* "stands as a modern memento mori, an endless reminder that the cost of life, no matter one's station, is always the same."

Of course *The Walking Dead* isn't the only television series which pays particular attention to death. Long-running series such as *CSI*, which began in 2000, frequently dwell on dead bodies, how they died, and how they are cut up in autopsies. The fashion for stories centred on the graphic dissection of dead bodies began with Patricia Cornwell whose first novel about Chief Medical Examiner, Kay Scarpetta, *Postmortem*, was published in 1990. Other authors, such as Kathy Reichs followed suit: *Déjà Dead* (1997), the first of a series of novels about forensic anthropologist Temperance Brennan, also dwells at length on autopsies. The BBC Television series *Silent Witness*, with a female pathologist as protagonist, was first broadcast in 1996, and Temperance Brennan made the jump from novel to television in 2005 with the Fox TV series *Bones*. A possible argument for the growing interest in the exposure of dead bodies - formerly a taboo area - is related to the long term, ongoing secularization of much of western society since the nineteenth century. Carole Cusack, in a 2005 article on twentieth century detective fiction argues that "[a]s organized religion retreated, it became more difficult to believe the theologically-charged notion that good and evil do not go unpunished, and that human life is ultimately meaningful, even when random violence threatens to destabilize both individual and community" (Cusack, 161). The role of the fictional detective (and perhaps the real life one) is to replace the priest. He, or she, tracks down and either punishes, or causes to be punished, the evil doer, in a similar way to the priest who once led the sinner through the shriving process of confession, penance, and absolution. Just as the priest, or God, had access to the spiritual inner workings of the soul and thus divined its motivations, faults and failings, so the pathologist, by penetrating the body, weighing up the organs and screening for toxicity, learns much of the habits, behaviour and vices of the deceased. The detective who replaced the priest, has now been substituted, in turn, by the pathologist.

This fascination with the corpse has a further link to secularization: our bodies are all we have. Without them, in the absence of an after-life, we are truly dead. However, developments in medical care, particularly of people in the last stages of life, have made the definition of bodily death – once relatively simple – highly problematic. In a recent article about *The Walking Dead* in *Religion Dispatches*, Ann Neumann reminds us that "[d]ead used to mean three things: you weren't breathing, your heart wasn't beating, and your brain wasn't working." With respirators and defibrillators, and the ability to maintain life in a vegetative state, none of these definitions of death is any longer clear. The consequences are often to prolong the process of dying for many years, perhaps in pain and discomfort, and certainly at great financial cost.

The ethical questions thrown up by medical technology are, Neumann argues, similar to those faced by the protagonists of *The Walking Dead* – hence its unprecedented popularity as a television series. From the very first episode the morality of destroying zombies, who were, after all, once human, is questioned. This is soon resolved, of course, on the simple grounds of expediency: the zombies are a very serious threat to the still living, but such decisions are not easy to make, particularly if your loved ones number among the living dead. Zombies (following Romero's model) can only be stopped by destroying the brain, they will not die if left to their own devices, but will continue in a slow process of decay until they become legless, limbless, even trunkless, but still alive while the brain remains. Immediately, a further moral question arises: should they be put out of their misery? Do

they feel pain? Do they suffer? Again, in episode one, this question arises, as Rick, onetime lawman and the closest to a leader and moral conscience that the survivors have, shoots a struggling female zombie in the head as she pulls the remaining top half of her body along the ground with her arms.

Putting a bullet in a zombie's brain becomes relatively simple: it is better for the survivors and preferable for the zombie; but what of life in a post-apocalyptic world which seems to offer nothing but hardship, fear, and the probability of becoming yet another of the walking dead? In the final episode of the first series one of the characters, Andrea, chooses to commit suicide, but is tricked out of it by her friend, Dale, who threatens to die with her. Neither die, but both claim to have saved the life of the other. Dale is initially triumphant at the success of his trick, but Andrea reveals it was she, ultimately, who saved him, by agreeing to carry on living. The relevance to our contemporary debate about euthanasia is obvious and profound, questioning not only the right to life, but the right to death, and the need for comprehension and selflessness when someone asks to die. Zombies remind us that the "living and the dead are sharing territory all the time" (Neumann). It is a cliché that our society attempts to deny death, tidies it away to hospitals, hospices, the discreet premises of the undertaker and the muted crematorium, yet it is also true. Death remains the one great certainty, but it is taking longer to get there, and all too often with indignity and discomfort, a situation which we have yet to adjust to. Neumann concludes that"[c]ulturally, we've exhausted all of death's chaperones: God, Satan, Science. We're back to Old Goth Death, in the form of zombies, resurrected to instruct us on how to die."

Zombies are subliminal reminders – of our atavistic survival instinct, of our fear of the other, our fear that we might be the other, of the death of the planet, of our helplessness and unwillingness to act meaningfully, and of death itself. Spain, where this article was written, seems to be heading for financial and social destruction. Literally heading, since the heads of government, of commerce and banking can only address the problem by revealing their own responsibility for the situation, and thus of their corruption and culpability. The obsession with accruing money manifested by those who rule us in recent years has been as mindless and undeviating as the walking dead. Yet the ease with which we allow those who decide for us to do as they wish is equally zombie-like. If we do not fight back, use our brains, assert the transcendence of ethical decision making over material gain, in short, if we do not take advantage of this pre-apocalyptic moment, we will, like zombies, be condemned to a lingering, living death. Ironically, the zombie, the most amoral of monsters, provokes the profoundest of moral questions.

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Bill Phillips is a senior lecturer in English literature and culture at the University of Barcelona. He has published widely on poetry, particularly of the Romantic period, ecofeminism, gender studies, science fiction and crime fiction. He is also a member of the transport commission for Sabadell town council, a district councillor and vice-chair of his 'barrio' association.

Marlene Mendoza has a degree in English Philology and a master's degree in Lexis and Linguistic Communication from the University of Barcelona. She is currently a PhD student in the Lexis and Linguistic Communication Doctoral Programme at the UB. She works at the Institute of Advanced Chemistry of Catalonia (IQAC-CSIC) and has a lifelong interest in horror literature and films.

[i] "contextos para los cuales el monstruo simboliza siempre el poder del mal que debe ser controlado y derrotado a causa de la amenaza moral – más que física – que supone para el creyente" (Martín 16).