



## ZOMBIES AND THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

### AN INTERVIEW WITH KYLE WILLIAM BISHOP

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**Kyle William Bishop** is Professor of English at Southern Utah University, where he has been teaching since 2000. He teaches courses about American literature and culture, fantasy and horror literature, film studies, and English composition. Kyle is the author of *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall and Rise of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (McFarland, 2010) and his second volume on the zombie is called *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture: The Multifarious Walking Dead in the 21st Century* (McFarland, 2015). He is also the co-editor of the book *The Written Dead: Essays on the Literary Zombie* (McFarland, 2017).

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**Michael Fuchs:** You have been publishing on zombies for fifteen-plus years. Your first publication called “Raising the Dead: Unearthing the Non-Literary Origins of Zombie Cinema” was published in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* in 2006. Has it become boring to study zombies? Or is there something new you continue to discover when looking at new films, new media, new iterations of the zombie?

**Kyle William Bishop:** From time to time, I do get a little saturated. If you look at my publication history, there’s kind of feast and famine. I have to take little breaks now and then because I feel there come moments—and I think all scholars experience this—where I feel like, “Okay. I’ve said everything I have to say. I don’t have anything else to add.” Then a year goes by and somebody makes a new movie or I read a new book or I go to a conference and I go to a session and I listen to some papers and it sparks some new ideas and gets me kind of excited.

But I think I’m in a position in my career—luckily—where I don’t have to do everything. I can wait until the right opportunity comes along. I can take little breaks and then, when I come back to it, it’s something new, it’s something fresh that I want to do. I feel that as a

scholar who's entering into the latter half of their career, my obligation is a little bit more on the mentoring and editing side of scholarship than the writing side—the first line of scholarship, if you will. I have been invested more as a general editor with McFarland in trying to assist new scholars putting together new works. Just this morning, I received a proposal from someone who has a book manuscript on *The Walking Dead*. So, there are still things to say, but I'm very comfortable with the fact that I don't have to be the one to say them all. I can just be involved in the process.

That said, I did write something new for a conference this year. I was a little surprised because I didn't know if I had anything new to say, but thanks to some new films, I have a new idea. It just has to work that way from time to time.

**MF:** So, what's that new idea? Do you want to say a few words about your recent work?

**KWB:** I'm really invested in the portrayal of fatherhood in zombie fiction. For years, parenting took a bad rap in zombie movies. Parents were often horrible: they killed their children or their children killed them, and films didn't explore the underlying issues. As I grow a little bit older, and being a father myself, I've become more interested in fatherhood and issues of paternity.

In the last few years, we've seen a dramatic increase in heroic father figures, not only in zombie films but post-apocalyptic narratives more generally. My thesis is that more and more of the creators of these narratives are fathers and that's what they're invested in. But I think there's a little bit more to it than that. I do like the heroic father in horror films as something of a counterpoint to the monstrous mother, which has been very thoroughly established over the decades. So, I'm teasing out what that means and if these zombie films have something to teach us beyond "shoot him in the head." It would be nice if this genre that I love so much had some value beyond entertainment.

**MF:** You've already hinted at the fact that zombies and monstrous mothers are these embodiments of horror. This interview is part of the session on gothic bodies—bodies in relation to Othering and the Gothic. Can you elaborate a little bit on the significance of zombies, or zombified bodies, to the Gothic and horror? Why are they so important as particular gothic bodies and particularly horrifying bodies?

**KWB:** Of all the literary and movie monsters that we celebrate, zombies are the most gothic, even more so than vampires and ghosts. Even though ghosts have the longest pedigree in terms of the Gothic, zombies are so gothic because they present their antiquation; they don't appear as they did in life, they appear as they do in death. Often, ghosts appear in some kind of idolized or idealized form or they appear as they did the moment of their demise. Vampires are so idealized, especially recently, where they become almost angelic or god-like. Zombies are corpses. They remain corpses and in a lot of the narratives, they continue to rot and to

decay. So, it's this ever-present, unavoidable reminder of mortality that is at the heart of so many gothic narratives. The zombie then incorporates the key concerns of the Gothic and presents them in a way that cannot be mastered. Zombies have this deadness to them.

Of course, that works in Freudian terms—and I use a lot of Freud in my scholarship—because zombies are literally the return of the repressed: they are the dead that come back. We don't want to think about death, so death returns to us. Now, vampires do that, too, but vampires do it in a way that reminds us of our bestiality, our mortality, our sexuality, but not so much our corporeality and not so much this the sense of the grotesque, which is often key to the Gothic. The zombie is grotesque.

I prefer manifestations of the zombie that are visibly dead. Another piece that I'm working on right now is about zombie passing. Zombie passing is interesting because of the parallels to the racial tradition of passing, but those types of zombies aren't as gothic. If they can pass as living humans, they don't have this tangible quality.

The other key feature is that the zombie becomes so atavistic, so ferocious, so feral. This is another thing that the Gothic reveals: the fantasy that we as humans are civilized. A lot of post-apocalyptic narratives—notably Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), any of the Road Warrior films, etc.—explore this question that when push comes to shove, we are monstrous creatures: we will tear, rend, and bite and fight for survival just like animals will. Because zombies, particularly post-Romero zombies, are presented as cannibalistic flesh eaters, it reveals this repressed secret. In terms of Jerrold Hogle's understanding of the Gothic, particularly in terms of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, that's what the zombie really is: it's an antiquated body that reveals the repressed truths of our mortality and our monstrosity. It puts us on a stage that reveals anything. Indeed, zombies can be whatever they need to be. The whole premise of my second book is that they are metaphorical monsters—like all monsters, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us—but they get to do it with a little bit of flexibility that the other monsters don't always enjoy. That flexibility is always gothic at its heart.

**MF:** That's a very important point—the deadness that's embodied by the zombie confronts us with our mortality, more so than other gothic creatures, but zombies are also “flexible,” as you put it; they reflect their times. These are topics that reverberate through both of your monographs: your first book focuses more on the history of the zombie up to the twentieth century, and the second book on the zombie surge that hit us post-9/11. As a matter of fact, you open your first book by stressing that all cultural production speaks to a given society's dreams but also its anxieties and that the Gothic plays a very particular role in this context. Could you maybe list three key American zombie texts and what they tell us about the cultural moments that they emerged from?

**KWB:** I think everybody in zombie studies would agree that *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is where George Romero shifted everything permanently. Prior to 1968, zombies manifested in narratives that were true to their origins in Haiti, where they were enslaved. They were

servants of other, more malevolent powers. They didn't do a whole lot and so the fear wasn't of zombies, the fear was of becoming a zombie. By fusing the zombie with a little bit of vampirism and a whole lot of Middle Eastern ghoulish mythology, Romero came up with his ghoulish creature, which others retroactively named the zombie. It created this creature which was more than just a kind of a postcolonial figure of racial enslavement and became the embodiment of unchecked modern desire; an empty desire, which is key.

Romero was responding to a cultural anxiety that had been brought to the fore because of the Vietnam War (not exclusively, but primarily). Vietnam was the first war that was televised. The American people were seeing images of death and destruction on a level that they never encountered before. Romero drew on existing narratives such as *The Birds* (1963) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and he created a creature that would remind people of their mortality, of their fragility, but also play on current social issues and concerns about the literal assault on the family—the assault on the traditional home—and also to engage in issues of race and racism and the shifting attitudes towards race in the United States. Romero went to his grave saying that he never intended it to be a film about race relations, but by casting his lead as a Black man, he irrevocably did just that: he had a Black hero, but he had a Black hero who didn't always act particularly heroic and simultaneously confirmed and overturned racist assumptions about a Black man. The film became a touchstone moment and a turning point in horror narratives because it was so raw and so basic; at the same time, it made so many sophisticated comments about society in 1968—not coincidentally the year the United States Production Code was retired and filmmakers were allowed to really push the envelope. Romero had people eaten on camera. It was pretty revolutionary and pretty shocking.

That film changed the zombie for the next 40 years. Most of the zombie films you see in America and a lot of the ones you see in England and in Italy followed Romero's lead, with these infectious-like vampires, cannibalistic-like ghouls, but a new type of zombie that continued to explore the idea of loss of agency but did so in a much more visceral way.

The next one that we have to really look at is *The Walking Dead* because *The Walking Dead* is a huge phenomenon that has transcended Romero's humble intentions. *The Walking Dead* was a successful comic (2003–2019), but when it became a TV series on AMC (2010–), it just exploded—it broke records left and right. It was the type of narrative that most would have doubted would ever succeed in a public forum. Up until that point, the zombie was a B-movie, VHS-watch-it-in-your-basement, late-time television creature, but with *The Walking Dead*, it really went mainstream. It gave birth to video games and spin-off shows. This whole world of *The Walking Dead*, this apocalyptic world, is a Romero world. The zombies are Romero zombies. They're flesh eaters, they're contagious, they're slow-moving, and they're only dangerous in large numbers.

What really is important about *The Walking Dead* in terms of building on Romero is that the true monsters of that franchise aren't the zombies. The zombies are helpless victims. They're doing what comes naturally; they're animalistic, they're atavistic. What's really scary

about that gothic landscape are the humans, the humans that will do anything to survive. A zombie has no sense of morality because a zombie has no agency; humans do. The humans in *The Walking Dead* are really terrifying: they're ferocious, they're vicious—both the protagonists and the antagonists, which is what makes the narrative so compelling. Because what you would have to do to survive that scenario is you would have to become a monster yourself. I've written about that referencing Nietzsche—this idea that the one thing you want to avoid when fighting monsters is becoming one yourself. *The Walking Dead* shows that that's impossible. True monstrosity can only be confronted by equally severe monstrosity.

Here, it's important to note that *The Walking Dead* really took off on the heels of September 11—national trauma, televised violence. It makes sense that we get this first big bubble of the zombie with Vietnam and the zombie renaissance on the heels of September 11.

Now, you asked for a third, and this is where I want to be a little bit more unexpected. I'd like to talk about *Maggie* (2015) because *Maggie* is a movie that kind of got ignored. It's an independent film. What makes the movie so interesting is that it stars Arnold Schwarzenegger—and he did this film for free. He loved the script so much that he wanted to give it a shot because it does put him against type he's supposed to be. He plays a simple small-town farmer who isn't a juggernaut like the Terminator; he's not a highly trained military offensive; he's just a dad. He's a dad who's trying to survive in a new world in which a zombie plague has ravaged society. It becomes a movie that is much more about family and it's much more about individuals than it is about the apocalypse. It's a pretty quiet film with a small cast and you only see a handful of zombies throughout the entire movie. Of course, the point is that the title character, Maggie, played by Abigail Breslin, is a zombie. The scenario of this film isn't so much Romero as kind of a *28 Days Later* (2002) situation where zombieism is a plague. It's an infection and the zombies spend weeks transforming. It takes about six weeks for someone to fully die from the infection and to come back as a zombie. So, society has set up a quarantine system, they've set up detention centers, and they've come up with a system for euthanizing the dead before they become a threat for the living.

These issues resonate perhaps more so now than when the film was made because we do have a plague and we do see the mistreatment of those who are infected and we do see the incarceration of the innocent. All of that really resonates and perhaps *Maggie* is a more important film now than it was when it came out. But at its heart, it's a film about a dad who loves his daughter who's terminally ill and who refuses to accept that. It's a touching film; it's quiet, it's sensitive, it's sad, and it's not an action-adventure horror film like so many of the other zombie movies. It's important because it represents the types of narratives that the zombie figure can tell.

**MF:** You've raised two points in your answer that I'd like to continue with: the zombie renaissance and the meaning of the zombie in our pandemic times. Let us first focus on the first couple of years of the twenty-first century. As you indicated, the national trauma caused by

9/11 definitely had an impact on the proliferation of the zombie figure in the United States; were there other reasons for this zombie revival? In particular, the zombie spread across the globe in the early twenty-first century, so what happened in addition to 9/11 to allow the zombie to become this global phenomenon?

**KWB:** 9/11 really helped kick off the viability of these narratives. You do get a number of films right out of the gate and then a lot more to follow and that did expand a little bit more globally with the War on Terror that the United States perpetuated.

Curiously enough, horror films and zombie films are not only catalyzed by warfare, they also appear during economic hardship. So, the 1930s—definitely in the United States, but you get to see it on a global level, as well—were a huge decade for horror. It wasn't because of war; it was because of economic depression. The Great Depression did resonate worldwide and did have a global impact. The United States film industry started making a lot of horror films because—in super-reductive terms—when times are tough, you want a narrative about people for whom times are tougher. It kind of makes you feel better; it's very cathartic. One of the things that really kicked off the zombie renaissance was the global economic collapse.

Of course, we also have become a much more global world than we were in the 1930s or in the 1960s and 1970s. That's one of the reasons why zombies were able to proliferate so quickly: everybody was kind of struggling in the first few years of the twenty-first century and because of the internet, because of globalization, it was much easier to share stories. It was much easier for people to access the films of other countries, to access comic books, and video games. The video game market is hugely important to the zombie renaissance because zombies have been flourishing in video games since the 1990s. They make such a great foe because you can shoot people and not feel guilty about it.

But we also got really nervous about infection because right after 9/11, we had swine flu, we had cow flu, we had avian flu, we had weaponized anthrax—all that happened in just a couple of years. We had problems with immigrants, we had problems with refugees, we had militarized conflicts all over the place, and that level of diverse trauma and anxiety came together to produce a potent world for a horror revival.

Ignoring zombies for a moment, it's interesting to me that almost every major horror film from the 1970s was remade during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The time was right and it was the parallels to the 1970s: the economic hardship, the warfare—it really came together again.

What made the zombie particularly essential for this moment was its versatility. Vampires are still around, but vampires had shifted. Vampires are still monsters, but they're more often than not romantic heroes, if not superheroes. The zombie is also on that trajectory, but initially in the twenty-first century, it was the figure we could use for whatever we needed to use it for. That's really the thesis of my second monograph—the idea of the zombie as a multifarious monster. It's a meaning machine that can mean whatever the filmmaker or author or video game designer wants it to be.

I've been thinking a lot about zombie films as a genre but the fact that the zombie shows up in other genres makes me think that maybe it isn't a genre at all. It's an element, it's a monster, it's a trope, it's a thing that can be added to almost any story, genre, or tradition. If you look at what we've gotten over the last twenty years, you still mostly have zombie horror films, but you see zombie crime dramas, you see zombie action-adventure films, you see zombie superhero comics, you see zombie sitcoms, you see zombies that are mostly political satire, you see fan films on YouTube that are better than Romero's first movies were. The zombie shows up all over the place now and you see really great zombie films outside of the United States.

As I've been trying to survey the key zombie films of the last two or three years, the majority of them are not from the US, which is really great and really important. Frankly, the best zombie films right now are coming out of Asia and a number out of Australia for reasons that I haven't quite figured out. US zombie production is still going strong but there's a lot of recycling and there's a lot of riding the *Walking Dead* horse. Internationally, we're getting more interesting zombie films and they're evolving because the zombie is like any other animal—it has to evolve and adapt or it's going to die.

I do talk about zombies in terms of Darwin a lot. They need to be able to be more than they are. The zombie gets to do that easier than other monsters because they don't have hundreds of years of tradition. They don't have a gothic literary tradition the way that the vampire does. To me, "zombie" has become a shorthand. Everybody knows what a zombie is, so anybody who wants to tell a zombie story can start there. But since zombies aren't real, they can go any direction they want to and audiences will buy it. I just finished *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017–2019), which I had put off because I didn't think I'd like it very much. I loved it! It's not a particularly gothic version of the zombie, but it's a great use of that creature to tell a certain story. That's why I'm excited that we're still seeing new original creative works to explore global issues of anxiety and fear but also catharsis.

**MF:** You just provided a perfect transition: global issues, global anxieties. We're experiencing the first truly global pandemic in a century—a pandemic that was, according to quite a number of scientists, long overdue. Do you see another zombie boom coming up in the next couple of years, triggered by Covid?

**KWB:** Yes. I think we're going to see a surge in all infection narratives. In so many ways, at its heart, the zombie story is an apocalyptic story. It's a viral narrative. I can imagine that there's a number of screenwriters and authors who've been quarantined who are looking out their windows, who are looking on the TV, and they're seeing real-life plot elements and story devices. I think we're going to get a Covid version of the zombie. At the very least, people are going to be more invested in these narratives because they're going to feel like they've been through it. Now, obviously, we haven't because the coronavirus isn't a zombie virus. The death toll is nowhere near as high as in most post-apocalyptic narratives, like *The Stand* (novel

1978; miniseries 1994; miniseries 2020), but it's enough that people have woken up to our fragility as a society.

It's a rough time to be a citizen of the United States because we entered this pandemic with such arrogance and now, we're the country that has been hit the worst. We're the country that has the most fatalities because we botched it. The amount of death people have experienced, maybe not firsthand but definitely second- and thirdhand—pretty much everybody in the United States knows somebody who died and that's similar in other countries around the world—you can't have that kind of national and global trauma without having art reflect it. If we saw a surge in horror narratives because of September 11, what are we gonna see from this, where the death toll is astronomically higher?

Starting in the next year, once productions can start to work again, once people can go back to work, we're going to see a ton of these: we're going to see a post-apocalypse, we're going to see infection narratives, we're going to see exposés, we're going to see docudramas that are going to try to reveal what went wrong, and we're going to see zombies. We're going to see lots and lots of zombies, and I'm pretty excited about that. If we can do it differently, if we can do things that are new and exciting and change the script a little bit. It's now Americans' turn to take cues from other countries and to do more than just remake foreign films but to actually make new films with new narratives. I'm feeling pretty optimistic that the zombie isn't done. We have a collective global trauma that needs therapy and horror films are the best therapy out there. Horror narratives are there and so people are going to get to work if they haven't already.

**MF:** And, of course, we will read past horror films and zombie narratives in a different way, as well. Since you have already been speculating about the future of horror and zombie narratives: you mentioned that you expect filmmakers to take new paths and do things differently in the future, but let's turn to the scholarly side. Especially in your role as editor of the *Zombie Studies* series for McFarland, where do you see the field of zombie studies going in the next few years? Is there something particularly exciting that you see emerging?

**KWB:** This is such a great question because I wish I had all the answers. I don't know if I have another zombie book in me, but I definitely know that zombie books are continuing to be pitched and promoted and developed. I was an external reader for a zombie monograph last month and, like I said earlier, I just received a proposal for a manuscript today. As we continue to get more and more zombie narratives, we're going to find new ways to approach those. As literary production increases, so does scholarly interest. Having been a graduate student twice, I know that grad students are always desperately trying to find something new to do, something new to say, and they're going to increasingly look at contemporary trends and contemporary narratives. So, for example, as you just said, reconsidering existing zombie narratives through the lens of a post-Covid world is going to afford a host of different readings, as scholars will ask, "Okay, but what happened when it really took place?"



People are going to continue to try to explore the zombie from new critical perspectives. Race has been done substantially in terms of zombies, but not much on gender, not much on parenting, not much on queer studies or disability studies. In particular, the zombie as a disabled body—that’s going to become increasingly more relevant. But it’s globalization that I think is key. The Italian zombie tradition is fascinating and very extreme and that hasn’t really been done. There’s so much happening in Asia that hasn’t been explored thoroughly. The idea of the zombie surfacing in previous colonial nations like Australia hasn’t been touched too much. Zombie-like folklore and mythologies hasn’t been developed very much. I’ve written a little bit about the opti gångr in Norway, but not a lot has been done with the draugr up in Scandinavia. Not much has been done with some of the Chinese or the Japanese versions of the zombie. We’re going to see more. There’s more to be said. There’s more to be explored: globalization, the international exploration, the folkloric origins—there’s still a lot to be said. People still have things to say about the *Walking Dead* as a specific text. And I think there’s still plenty to be said about the zombie as a whole.

Probably the most important thing to me right now is zombies as protagonists, zombies featuring in comedies, zombies that are more sympathetic and more emotional—these are the things we haven’t explored as much. I’m fascinated to see what other non-horror zombies are out there and what they mean because the zomedy can be just as important for cultural study as the horror zombie—although scholars generally discount comedy, anyway. Zombie comedies are saying things that are super-interesting that could be explored in more depth. I don’t know if I’m going to do it, but hopefully somebody out there listening will. Send me and McFarland a few manuscripts to check out.

### Open Q&A session

**Mónica Fernández Jiménez:** I’d like to ask you a question, trying to link your talk to my interests. You mentioned the Caribbean origin of the myth and the creature. I was wondering if you have looked at artworks from the Caribbean, by Caribbean creators.

**KWB:** That’s a great question. My friend Sarah Lauro’s *The Transatlantic Zombie* (2015) is the book on the Caribbean zombie narrative. She is an amazing scholar. She’s quite much smarter than I am. She travelled to Haiti to do a lot of research firsthand, which I haven’t done, and she’s been able to explore a literary tradition that’s a little bit richer than I think any of us initially thought.

With my work, I did touch on it a little bit, but I kind of worked on a kind of secondary level, through the scholarship of Zora Neale Hurston and some other key Haitian scholars, where I did look into the origins of the idea of the zombie and Haitian life. The zombie is kind of a misinterpretation of voodoo culture and voodoo rituals, but I mostly looked at how that was translated into the cinema of the United States. I have looked at some of those short stories but there are more and they’re more recent that deal with the Caribbean zombie and the zombie as a victim of a nefarious agent. I don’t feel super-qualified with it and that’s why I’ve

stepped back a little bit. And then when Sarah published this book and I read it, I kind of said, “Well, I’m out because I can’t compete with that.” But I don’t think that she’s done all the scholarship that remains to be done. And there are narratives that could be explored through the lens of zombie scholarship, such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which could be read as a type of zombie narrative—not a literal zombie narrative. A then other, more overt zombie stories that have come out of the Caribbean, particularly out of Haiti, but also in places like Florida and Louisiana that have a strong Creole culture. I am not super-well-versed in it but if you haven’t read *The Transatlantic Zombie*, read this and it will give you a launching point for stories to read, authors to follow, and new scholarship to produce. Since Sarah wrote that, I’m pretty certain there have been a number of those types of narratives produced and published.

**MFJ:** I was really thinking about *Wide Sargasso Sea*—it maybe takes a different form that we can analyze through zombie scholarship. Thank you very much.

**KWB:** Awesome. The zombie is used as a metaphor so often that I think zombie scholars need to embrace that and zombie scholarship can be about more than just zombies. The metaphor is so widely reaching, it’s a reason why we call things “zombies” that aren’t. I think that the scholarship can go that direction, as well.

**Anna Marta Marini:** You talked about different kinds of zombie narratives and I, for one, really enjoy what I call “incognito” monster narrative. I really like it when monsters need, want, or can hide their monstrosity and pretend that they are “normal,” which happens more often with vampires, but it happens with zombies, too. I really liked, for example, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (novel 2014; movie 2016). I binge-watch series like *iZombie* (2015–2019) and *Santa Clarita Diet*. I’m thinking maybe *The Glitch* (2015–2019) and *The Returned* (2015–) also fall into this category. So, do you think that there is a change in the zombie or undead narrative/dynamics/messages when the zombie or the undead is, to an extent, passing as human?

**KWB:** I think that’s a cycle that we get with monsters. It’s all building on the vampire tradition because even if you go back to Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819), the power of the vampire as a monster is its ability to pass as a human, to walk among us—and that’s what’s so terrifying about Dracula: the idea that this Eastern European monster would dare invade Europe and that it could walk the streets with impunity. For a long time, the zombie was so markedly visually different from the human that there was no mistaking it, but that narrow focus on the zombie limits the stories that can be told.

You’re absolutely right, in the twentieth century, we didn’t have the passing zombie at all; in the twenty-first century, we’ve shifted because people love monsters and then they love monsters so much that they don’t want to Other them; they want to become them. They want to embrace the monster and they want to be able to love the monster more. the zombie is following in the footsteps of the vampire, particularly as treated by Anne Rice where we’re

going to make the zombie a little bit more identifiable, more sympathetic; give it more access to the human experience.

When I first started my research, I did not like that trend and I really resisted it because once you give a zombie a voice, once you give a zombie consciousness and agency, that seemed fundamentally opposed to the origins of the zombie as depicted in Haitian mythology. But I've changed my mind. All the texts that you just mentioned are really fascinating: *iZombie* explores a lot of interesting ideas about what would it take for a monster to be human, to retain humanity, and to function within society and how do you differentiate between monsters that are monstrous and monsters that are trying to be less monstrous. I really enjoyed *Santa Clarita Diet* because the passing in *Santa Clarita Diet* is easy. It's probably the easiest of the narratives because once they arrest the decomposition, they still look and act human. They just have this kind of secret side to them. The best narrative that has explored this is *In the Flesh* (2013–2014), where zombies have the ability to pass but have to confront whether or not that is right for them. The resistance to passing is perhaps more interesting to me than the passing itself, but I think that's where we're going to get some really interesting stories because then we have to ask ourselves what is monstrosity.

Human monstrosity can be manifested in zombie narratives by the uninfected humans. You can get narratives in which the zombies are, in fact, more humane than the humans. And then you get the narratives where there are different types of zombies. That's one thing I haven't mentioned yet: increasingly, we're getting stories where there are at least two very different types of monsters. You get it in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), you get it in *Warm Bodies* (2013), you get it in *Girl with All the Gifts*, which is amazing—it's a fascinating narrative where the book is much better than the film; but the film also has a lot of interesting things happening in it. So, the idea of the monster-monster versus the human-monster versus the human-human monster, I think that's super interesting and I think there's a lot to be said and I think there's a lot to be done with the zombie-vampire comparison. You usually don't get both in the same story; you do sometimes but you rarely get them together. Crossovers would be worth investigating.

**AMM:** You know, that would have been my third question because there are a few crossovers where you don't really know if they are zombies or vampires. They act a bit like zombies, a bit like vampires—is that a trend?

**KWB:** It's a trend, but it's also the origin because *Night of the Living Dead* is an adaptation of *I Am Legend* (1954). Romero was working with vampires conceptually when he started. Romero accidentally invented the zombie, but he started with the vampire. What he did is he's like, "The communicability of the vampire is super-cool and the idea of a monstrous apocalypse is super-cool," but drinking blood wasn't enough for Romero; he wanted them to eat everything—which is the ghoul. The lines are being blurred increasingly. When you look at the most recent version of *I Am Legend* (2007), with Will Smith, they're basically zombies but they're photo-sensitive like vampires, which brings us to *Minecraft* (2011), where the zombies

don't act like zombies at all; they act more like vampires. I don't know why the skeletons are photo-sensitive, but that's another issue. We are going to get more crossover.

We've had vampire-werewolf crossovers since the Universal days. It would be interesting to see whether zombie-ism is vampirism. How are they similar? How are they different? In a lot of ways *iZombie* is a vampire narrative, not a zombie narrative. Those zombies are vampires. They have to eat to survive, they have to eat to stay young, or to look normal, to maintain their humanity, but it builds on the John Russo version of the zombie, which is brain-eating only; vampires are blood-drinking only; in *Santa Clarita Diet*, she eats everything with gusto. Are we going to see different variations like that? Absolutely. The more monsters fuse and cross and meld, the more interesting things get. The taxonomy of monstrosity is going to become increasingly challenging, but you see the same thing in genre. Genre is increasingly difficult to identify. Monsters are going to become the same; they're going to follow the same trajectory, which is cool for scholars, but it's even cooler for fans.

**AMM:** Moving to a rather different question: You mentioned Italian zombies. Why do you think they're so extreme? I've watched so many and my favorite Italian zombie movie is *Cemetery Man, Dellamorte Dellamore* (1994). It's so weird and quirky. What do you think about the Italian zombie tradition?

**KWB:** Italy had the cannibal film tradition. Italy was not limited by the Production Code restrictions the United States was limited by. So, some of those early Italian cannibal films are just shocking. That was the foundation upon which they built their zombie tradition. And the second thing is Fulci. He ripped off *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). He made an unofficial sequel to it by calling his first zombie film *Zombi 2* (1979), which is hilarious. But he was building on an established Italian cannibalist tradition. Fulci wanted gore that substantially transcended Romero's gore. Even after the Production Code, Romero had to make films for a US audience which was limited by the MPAA rating system. Fulci didn't, and Fulci had a built-in audience that expected gallons and gallons of blood and flesh-ripping and all these horrifying moments. Back in 2006-2007, when I watched all the Italian zombie films I could get my hands on, it was pretty shocking. There was a learning curve for me to accept that different paradigm. That would be my short answer: it's the pre-established cannibal film tradition in Italy followed by Fulci's single-handed vision of where the zombie would go. Other filmmakers in other nations have followed his lead more than Romero's, as it is this sense of true grotesque barbarism and an embrace of the atavism that you get from some gothic narratives. The Italian gothic is different from the US gothic in many ways.

**Laura Álvarez Trigo:** You briefly mentioned the role of zombies in comedy movies. This is something that we've seen for several years, with films like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), but also more recent movies like *Anna and the Apocalypse* (2017), which is not only a musical but also a Christmas movie, and also *The Dead Don't Die* (2019). I was wondering whether the zombie is a monster that lends itself to be used in these ways of dealing with fears through comedy,

through laughing? These movies are not necessarily less scary or less gory. They're very dire; many of these comedy zombie movies have very bad endings—everybody's going to die. The comedy doesn't mean that they're happier in any way.

**KWB:** I think it's a great question. I'm glad you mentioned *Anna and the Apocalypse*, which is a really great film because it tries to be everything; it's every genre at the same time. Comedy and horror are so closely related because fear response and humor response become manifest similarly. We cry when we're scared, but we cry when we're happy. We can laugh when we're scared. The zombie comedies, the zomedies, can still say important things and they can still help us wrestle with anxieties and fears. They can still be gothic. The gothic comedy isn't new to zombies. This idea of "we're going to turn it on its head and we're going to explore it through comedy." What is essential for any comedy is familiarity and that's why early zombie films weren't particularly comedic or early zombie comedies weren't particularly successful. In order to parody something, you have to have an audience familiarity with the rules and the tropes and the conventions that you can turn them on their head. While there were comedies in the 1980s such as *I Was a Teenage Zombie* (1987), which is not great, and *The Return of the Living Dead* films (1985–1993), and they're pretty comedic, but they're still in the Romero tradition. Then you get something like *Dead Alive* (1992) by Peter Jackson, which is just off-the-wall, no-holds-barred, and then you get to *Shaun of the Dead*.

*Shaun of the Dead* is probably the first really sophisticated zomedie because it plays with the expectations, it plays with the tropes; it's able to make jokes because the audience knows the joke is inside. But the ending of the film is tragic, it's awful, it's traumatic, it's traditional. Narratives like *Anna and the Apocalypse* are the same way: the first half is a comedy, a musical comedy, and it's funny, and it's silly, and we make fun of the zombies, and we make fun of the people surviving, and we may even make fun of the people who get killed. But the second half of that film is pretty dark and it turns relatively tragic and the music shifts. The musical quality and the subject matter shifts. Frankly, I was a little surprised because I thought it was going to be pretty silly up until the end, but it had a bleak ending. To me personally, the final musical number missed. It's hard to maintain what it was trying to maintain.

The zombie comedy is really an essential part of the creature's development. We're at a point where enough people are familiar enough with zombies that we can make fun of them but not in a way that's dismissive. We can make fun of them in a way that we'll laugh but also think about it; and we'll maybe think about it for a few days later. Comedy has tremendous power for cultural awareness and cultural therapy and cultural change, but in a lot of ways, it's harder. A zombie horror film's easy. I've seen a bunch of them, low-budget ones, uninspired ones; they're still effective; they're still scary and startling. Zombie comedies are hard because sophisticated comedy is hard; otherwise it's just jokes. It's the satire and the irony and the sophistication that we need to see more of. Not a lot's been written about zombie comedies, so that's another area where scholars have more work to do.

**Paula Barba Guerrero:** I am particularly interested in the role of nostalgia in post-apocalyptic fiction. I was wondering if you could comment on the relation between the zombie and this almost mythical return home, which is particularly relevant when thinking of trauma and memory. Is the nostalgic zombie a thing? Right now, I can only think of Colson Whitehead's stragglers in *Zone One*, but I am sure there are other examples of this type of return to the familiar home, which in a way humanizes the zombie.

**KWB:** That is a great question. Nostalgia is essential for gothic narratives. The Gothic is all based on nostalgia. Walpole was nostalgic to a fault—that's what gave rise to the Gothic originally. But there is a nostalgia in zombie films that's really tragic and it's really painful. On the one hand, Romero has always explored the idea of nostalgia among his human survivor characters; the idea that the people trapped in a zombie apocalypse are understandably longing for the pre-zombie world. Think of *Dawn of the Dead*, where they so meticulously try to recreate normal life inside that shopping mall, as they make a home; they build a house, essentially. They have fun, they play, they do all the things they normally would do, but it's only the men. Francine gets that it's not going to go back to that; it's not going to be normal again. We get that increasingly in zombie narratives where people try to hang on to normalcy, to hang on to the past.

But the point you raise, which is so great, is this idea of the zombie as the nostalgic figure. Colson Whitehead explores it quite a bit; the *Girl with All the Gifts* film does an interesting play on it, with the zombies going about their business in tragic ways—I'm thinking of the woman who's pushing her baby coach. It's just gut-wrenching and really sad. Some more recent films have played around with it quite a bit, as zombies talk. In the film *Alone* (2020), which is the US version of the South Korean film *Alive* (2015), the zombies just wander around and make noises and they repeat phrases from their existence, which I find really disturbing—this idea that even though they're dead, they can't quite let go of the life they once had. *Cargo* (2017) is really disturbing, as well, because you have zombies that are infected to the point where they lose their cognition, but they still kind of go through the motions. It's an important thing to explore—the idea where the dead can't be completely freed from their existence. We're seeing more of that.

*I Am a Hero* (2015) is a great Japanese film that I really like; a lot more than I thought I would. They speak and they act but they can only do what they had when they died. They hang on to this last moment of existence. That's where the zombie becomes such a powerful metaphor for modernity. How many of us are doing it, particularly with Covid? We just go through the motions, hoping that things will get back to normal at some point. I find myself doing that at work—"well, time to grade the papers." With Zoom and with everything that we're coping with, we're all zombies to a certain extent. We all suffer from substantial nostalgia right now. "I just want to go out with my friends." "I just want to see a movie in a movie theater." We miss the simple things that all sufferers of an apocalypse end up missing. The

goal is to re regain some semblance of that lost life—whether we’re human survivors or whether we’re zombie victims, we want to reclaim that.

Nostalgia is the motivating factor of zombie movies—you nailed it. *The Walking Dead* is about nostalgia: “Let’s rebuild the government,” “Let’s rebuild civilization,” “Let’s rebuild trade and diplomacy,” “Let’s rewrite the constitution.” What’s interesting to me is the zombie narratives that say “Let’s return to what was” versus the zombie narratives that say “Now is our chance to build something new” because too much nostalgia is dangerous. We’re going to see in our real world that life is not going to return to what it was before the pandemic, nor should it. Nostalgia also always has to be tempered with pragmatism. The zombie narrative allows us to explore those risks more safely.

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