

A Social Zombie: The Performative Nature of Contemporary (British) Zombie Cinema Fandom

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ABSTRACT

It may be tempting to brush zombies aside as irrelevant, pop cultural ephemera but zombies have followed vampires out, through film and into wider culture, as icon and metaphor. Zombie popular culture, in addition to movies, books, and video games includes individuals routinely donning complex homemade costumes to march in zombie walks and/or engage in role-playing games like *Humans vs. Zombies* (See companies like Zed events <<http://www.zedevents.co.uk>> paintballing, or airsofting). There is even a mobile phone application circulating around college and university campuses, that purportedly helps new students get to know each other through role-playing a zombie-themed game of tag (other mobile phone applications include *Zombie, Run!* which is a combination of pedometer, GPS, scary soundtrack & zombie newscasts to make jogging fun). This is not to mention zombie related merchandise, (for example undead teds <<http://www.undeadteds.com>> and living dead dolls <<http://www.livingdeaddolls.com>>) zombie music, (for example, *Rob Zombie*, *White Zombie* & *Zombina and the Skeletones*) and zombie fan-sites (all things zombie <<http://allthingszombie.com>> and the Zombie Media Database <<http://www.zmdb.org>>). The ways in which the cinematic spectatorship of the zombie has transformed, extending the spatial, experiential, interactive and phenomenological understanding of horror cinema within the digital context is an interesting one. In particular the relationship between bodies, spaces and technologies provides a philosophical interrogation of contemporary zombie experience. The performance-centric nature of this new zombie fandom can be seen as a new formulation of cinematic immersion and a new notion of interactive play.

In this article I examine the ethnographic case study of combat-ops-UK's airsofting (paintball, without the paint) event - The Hungry Games - in which I performed zombification. I explore how such fan practices enhance the possibilities of cinematic fandom, interrogating the use of new media technologies in enhancing the pleasures (and terrors) that performing as a zombie or zombie-victim add to the cinematic experience.

KEY WORDS

Horror, Film, Movies, Zombies, Zombie, Dead, Corpse, Living, Walking, British

Introduction

'Zombies, it seems, are everywhere.' (McIntosh, 2011: 1).

Within this paper, I turn my analytical attentions away from the cinematic screen, away from representations of new media as performed in 21st century zombie cinema, and to manifestations of zombies 'in real life', as a means of theorizing the ways in which 21st century, technological paradigms have real-world impacts and consequences. I am interested in the ways communities are formed and forged, and how new media enable these meetings. Furthermore, I am also interested in how these new forms of new media-enabled communities differ from more traditional forms of community in their creation, manifestation, communication, and materialization. In examining zombie-inspired communities, I consider *play* as a key element of social networks, while also continuing to push at the definitional boundaries of liveness and the tensions between cinematic and 'live' presences. I begin with an examination of Smart Mobs, a term coined by Howard Rheingold (2002), exploring how these serve as an intersection of 'virality', social communication networks, and remediation; where real bodies, in real space, and real time, performatively embody and reenact the cultural phenomenon of the walking dead.

Zombie mobs offer an intersection of new media, embodiment, and performance. I see *play* as a key concept for theorizing the work popular subcultures do in 21st century Western society. Fans of zombie cinema do not simply watch these films, but playfully reenact the zombie phenomenon from cross-genre adaptations to actual embodiment of the zombie figure. Play is a key element in the development of toddlers and young children where they engage in free- and role-playing as a means of working through social situations they've witnessed and participated in. As adults, play becomes more bounded by explicit rules, time, and location; yet, both child play and adult play involve exploration, learning, and total involvement in the activity for its own sake. (Baym, 2010) By fully participating in fan culture, adults are able to immerse themselves in an imaginary world where alternative social structures emerge and new communities are forged. And play can be read as a secular form of ritual where known social subjects, connections, and situations move through phases of liminality and social bonds are created, founded, and strengthened.

In examining zombies ‘in real life’ the next necessary step is a dialectical reflection and response at work within 21st century zombie cinema—and the history of zombie cinema—but one that considers the implications when zombie play actually invades the space of real existence. I see this step as necessary because part of my argument hinges on the discursive relationship the cinema bears to lived daily existence. Examining the appearance of the zombie (as play-acted and performed, not as somehow an actual reanimated corpse lumbering through the streets), in lived space further connects the work of this cultural object to what can possibly occur beyond the screen for the spectator. The zombie is a uniquely cinematic creature, demanding visual representation because of its pure physicality—the zombie is all body and psychoanalytic drive. The walking dead lose their discursive power when they leave the screen; but this is not to say the zombie loses purpose. The zombie figure becomes unstable, though no longer liminal, they are still not fixed ‘in the flesh’. Zombies continue to build and maintain networks through the subculture that emerges, grows, and continues to morph around this figure.

The zombie, simultaneously as fictional creature and as a creature driven solely by the Id and thus incapable of reasoning and choice, has no agency in its representation and refashioning. When zombies do appear in real life, the agency behind that decision and construction invariably works with different intentions and goals than to analyze and critique the current new media culture. The zombie ‘invasions’ of the 21st century, however innocently fun their authorial intent may be, exist *because of* the same new media technologies: ‘invasions’ require the use of networked telecommunications and the Internet in order to garner the numbers required for a zombie horde. Given the need for new media and technology, zombies ‘in real life’ also function as a conceptualization of biomedicine as an embodiment forged through and because of technology, which makes this particular zombie embodiment unique to the 21st century.

As posited by Nancy Baym ‘machines do have effects’ (Baym, 2010: 152). Without the communication technologies we have now, we could not sustain the mobile and dispersed social and professional networks which many people take for granted. We stay in touch with people for longer and across greater distances. We find and share supportive resources we could never access before. We create groups and

relationships that cross boundaries we could rarely span before. In some cases, we wander into bad circumstances we would have been better off without. Bodiless, unreal and seductive in its modern offering of the pioneering freedom of reinvention, mediated communication is also not about forcing the viewer/user into an alternative world of shallow simulations of inauthentic message exchange that take us farther from one another. It is not a question of either/or, of one versus another. New media is not cyberspace juxtaposed with the offline. It's a question of who's communicating, for what purposes, in what contexts, and what their expectations are. When people need more than mediation can provide, their use of the Internet does not stop them from getting it. They just step away from the machines and get together, often using machines to coordinate that togetherness. Anderson argues that all communities beyond the face-to-face are imagined, a process enabled by mass media. Rather than asking whether these new types of communities are authentic, he suggests that we look instead to 'the style in which they are imagined' (Anderson, 1996: 6).

An interesting aspect of zombie enactment and community making is vocalisation and language activities have been given particular attention in practice theory for their community-instantiating force. Although zombies do not have language, use of (as Shaun in *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004) calls it) 'the Zed word' (zombie) and the guttural growls and grunts that come from the mouths of the corpses themselves, (which could be called linguistic routines) are predicated upon, and embody within themselves, the fundamental notions of temporal, spatial and social ordering that underlie and organize the system as a whole. In enacting these routines, actors not only continue to be shaped by the underlying organizational principles involved but continually re-endorse those principles in the world of public observation and discourse.

I examine one particular zombie flash mob – combat-ops-UK's airsofting event, The Hungry Games – in which I performed as a zombie, and explore how the performance of zombification is enhancing the cinematic fandom of the zombie. A flash mob is the sudden appearance of a large group of people in a public place. This congregation is usually convened using some modicum of technology, whether that be the telephone, or computer. Usually this group of people performs a highly unusual act—a pillow fight, or dancing and singing a musical number as if in a Disney movie, for example,

—for a brief period of time and then immediately disperses. A quote from a review of the event, by Terror Attractions encapsulates it thus: ‘Kudos to the gory blood soaked fem-zombie who made me jump. I was too scared to ask her her name!’ (See the scaretours review of the Hungry Games at <<http://www.scaretouruk.com/review---the-hungry-games.html>>). I examine the pleasures (and terrors) that performing as a zombie or zombie-victim add to the cinematic experience, as a foray into the current cultural phenomenon of zombie flash mobs and zombie walks, which serve as crystallizations of the intersection between biomedicine (the biological ‘informs’ the digital, just as the digital ‘corporealises’ the biological), networks (interconnections between multiple nodes), and remediation (the refashioning of media within other media) (Rheingold, 2002).

Zombies and Society

Recent zombie horror’s resurrection of this popular 1970’s genre, in terms of films (speaking of Romero), and zombie ‘play’, allows us to trace continuities between that period and our own, specifically the ways in which ideas of nationhood are re-narrativised, re-visioned and re-remembered in the service of nationally-specific military-industrial ends. Whether this is in the aftermath of traumatic events such as military atrocity, terrorist outrage, or the impending threat of total thermonuclear war. But if all of this appears to emphasize an unnecessarily grim picture of what it is to be the member of a nation-state, subject to its laws and engaged with its cultural products, then its ability to offer traumatized subjects a means of initially recognizing, subsequently conceptualising and finally overcoming the traumatic dislocations of the past. In the exploration of British horror of the new millennium, Linnie Blake has thus attempted to indicate how horror cinema might point the way to a new, desirable and indeed necessary model of masculinity (we are reminded here of the male reviewer running from this researcher as female-zombie) for a post-patriarchal age. This is not of course to deny or marginalize the sense of violently retributive misogyny that is very much alive in aspects of the culture that created these films. But it is to illustrate how horror cinema’s socially engaged deployment of humorous pastiche and affectionate parody (both of earlier films and of available ways of being a British man) might bring forth a new form of subjectivity from the trauma of the past,

unbinding the wounds of the nation and in so doing offering them the opportunity to heal (Blake, 2008).

Then there is the historical network of cinematic representations, as well as cinematic remakes and references. Within the world of fandom, a network of adaptations emerges in graphic novels and fiction. What began as a uniquely American and cinematic phenomenon began to spread across the globe as early as 1979 with the work of Italian director Lucio Fulci, and has more recently found expression in countries such as France (*La Horde*, 2009) Norway (*Dead Snow*, 2009) and even the UK (*Harold's Going Stiff*, 2011) This list of international zombie cinematic productions is by no means complete; in my research I've discovered the list of zombie films produced around the globe to be inexhaustible. The zombie networks are global and local. They are national and international. They spread from screen to screen, across telecommunications bandwidth, and into the streets. Zombies remediate through these networks and through embodied reenactments. The conceptual reaches of biomedica are re-imagined when mobile communications inform where people localize, who they meet, and what they do with their bodies. This apparent ubiquity, however, may not be as pervasive for everyone. Zombies, though they seem to be everywhere, may be but a small blip on a larger radar for many. Again, this demonstrates the intricate inter-weavings of networks, technology, and embodiment: what is a pervasive means of cultural expression for some, serves only to briefly flash through the representational landscape for others. Zombies serve as one means of metaphor, but the pervasive impact of digital technologies remains a shaping force, even for those who choose to eschew these technologies as much as possible.

As mentioned earlier, there is a vocal aspect to the 'community' of zombies, which derives from the genre and has been taken on and expanded through performance. Consider the example of *Pontypool* (2005) in which the zombie virus is spread through the spoken word. The infection is English, and located in specific words, which the infected orally fixate on and repeat, spreading the infection as widely as possible; like the vectors of a biological virus. This repetition of words then leads on to confusion and muddling of words and oral fixation which leads ultimately in victims' of the virus chewing each others mouths off. This is potentially culturally significant as the spread of slang terms within language (such as English) can be seen

as likened to the spread of a virus (or cancer) through society. New vocabularies emerge such as LOL (laugh out loud), YOLO (you only live once) and even the term 'selfie' (a photo taken by the self of the self) being added into the Oxford dictionary. The spread of these slang terms conversely results in the creation of 'cult' languages, such as old English and Latin as well as forgotten definitions/usages of words.

There is also this further example within *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004) where Shaun states "Don't say the 'zed' word", almost as if verbalising it makes it real or spreads & solidifies it somehow. This links back to verbal communication as being 'cult' with the advent and popularity of text messages, mobile phone applications, email and associated technologies. For example, teenagers now prefer to text rather than call, hence mobile phone packages now being provided with so-called 'unlimited' allowances for text messages and internet-ready smart-phones able to handle emails. And again, although zombies do not have language, use of 'the Zed word' and the guttural growls and grunts that could be called linguistic routines are predicated upon, and embody within themselves, the fundamental notions of temporal, spatial and social ordering that underlie and organize the system as a whole. In enacting these routines, actors not only continue to be shaped by the underlying organizational principles involved but continually re-endorse those principles in the world of public observation and discourse.

Zombies Walk among Us

To examine how social media is used in organizing the performance of zombie fandom, let us now consider the case of CombatOps UK, which I will examine under the academic lens of the practice approach. Nancy Baym used this approach to look at Soap fandom and online community (Baym, 2000). At the centre of the practice approach is the assumption that a community's structures are instantiated and recreated in habitual and recurrent ways of acting, or practices. This way of defining community shifts the grounds of definition from either language or social structure per se (for Zombies have no language or social structure) to the engagement of actors in some project. A family, sports team, or the crew of a ship is a community of

practice in this sense (Baym, 2000). As a framework for just such a mode of analysis the following is a description of my experience at The Hungry Games.

It is Friday; late-afternoon, maybe early evening; the end of a workweek. Standing on the edge of a suburban park, within a matter of minutes, we see a large white van, covered in the bloodied hand prints of the infected and heavily loaded with military personal, pull up beside us and order us to hop in with them. As we drive deeper and deeper into the site and approach the infected area, the sheer scale of the area begins to overwhelm us. Arriving in an already busy car park we are soon surrounded by armed guards who are there to get us into the safe zone so we can sign in. No sooner had we jumped down than the screeching and roaring sound of zombies filled the air. Gunfire followed and before we knew it we were being whisked away whilst the soldiers stayed back to protect us. A harrowing barrage of screams and groans interrupted us and then that was it, the game was on. The armed guards did their best to hold them back but it was hopeless, and as 140 participants scattered for their lives, it was very obvious that this was going to be a high adrenaline event. Throughout the evening, the zombies were relentless. There were a number of different zombie styles and the actors were incredibly physical and stayed in character, while the participants were hunted for a full 3 hours. These monstrosities were a delightfully original undead collective of talented scare actors and volunteers (see Fig. 3) and Combat Ops' inventive and somewhat macabre sense of humour shines through in awesome visionary thinking. I do feel obligated to mention the Screamers, who reminded one of the once famous 1970's Donald Sutherland film (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* 1978) with pointed menacing finger included (see Fig. 2). The combat-ops-UK event is a combination of a role-playing game, a theatrical experience (à la secret cinema) and a reenactment of zombie cinema and as such it is an excellent addition to the Zombie universe, Combat Ops have successfully kept to the spirit of a traditional zombie run but added their own blood-infused flavour of twists and turns.

One of the other many highlights of the day was entering a derelict house in an Afghan village (see Fig 1.) where one of the supply boxes was placed, only to be confronted by a unique scene straight out of the mind of George A Romero. Also a personal highlight was hiding in a crawl-space, a gory blood-soaked female zombie (the author). Listening to the groans of the undead and the shuffling, and the

occasional contestant walking past the space... until one hapless events reviewer, looking for one of the locked supply boxes, groped blindly into the black space...only to grab a bloodied, (zombified) foot, at which point said zombie came alive, growled and lunged and the (male) reviewer screamed and jumped! (see Fig. 4). An air raid siren signaled the end of the event and the participants were then given the impossible task of making it to the extraction point within just 6 minutes. As they reached the brow of the hill with the safety of the armed guards in sight they were met with a sea of zombies! The zombies had also heard the alarm and knew where to get their final feast. The participants stopped for a while, silently considered what they could do and with a giant collective scream they went for it - running, falling, dodging and being charged from every angle by over 40 zombies, leaving a trail of carnage as their numbers continued to swarm. Simon Orpana argues that zombie walks in this vein evoke Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque by providing 'a temporary and imaginary dissolution of modern power structures. The walks create a spectacular performance that cathartically addresses social anxieties regarding contagion, exclusion and the increasing incursion of the modern state into the bodily, collective life of its citizens' (Orpana, 2011: 154).

Although one wouldn't think the living dead to be particularly techno-savvy, it was the Internet that made such a bloody mob possible. Organizing efforts began with posts on social media (See facebook at <<https://www.facebook.com/CombatOpsUK>> and the CombatOps UK website at <<http://www.CombatOpsUK.com>>). What is initially framed as information warning about zombies quickly morphs into a veiled set of rules in which one can learn how to avoid being attacked by, and thus becoming, a zombie. The language of this post, like the entire blog and website, is campy and self-conscious, thereby foregrounding the performative nature of CombatOps UK as a collective that attempts to maintain their self-shaped identity as zombie fighters while giving pertinent information about zombie flash mobs. In other words, CombatOps actually serves to network and organize groups of people into flash zombie mobs under the pretense of zombie invasion warnings. By following the blog, receiving their Tweets, and from there branching off into isolated clusters that then continued communicating via email, text messaging, and even phone calls, people can participate in one of the many zombie events initiated.

This is just one example of the amalgamation of performance and technology. It allows the performance text of zombie cinema to extend well beyond the screen, even beyond the genre into other modes of embodied participation. What began as a cult fascination with zombie cinema has evolved into a blurring between the fictional world of zombies and our own 'real' world experiences. This 'real-world' zombie infestation moves beyond the circumscribed events of *The Dark Knight*. *The Dark Knight* (2008) is an adaptation of a comic universe created by DC comics. It is a sci-fi, horror, drama, and it is the most widely and most uniquely publicized film in recent times. This publication of the film involved the encouragement of active engagement in the film universe even before it was released from its potential audience, through fictional websites, emails and even voicemail messages from the characters of the film which encouraged active participation from the viewers, around key moments in the film, including the creation of fictional political campaigns in which participants were asked to side with either the character of Harvey Dent or the Joker. These campaigns then, in turn, served to invade the lives of non-participants (the general public) on a much larger and more pervasive scale.

Just as the 'Why so serious?' campaign of *The Dark Knight* encouraged viewers to engage with the cinematic universe, Zombie flash mobs are also an opportunity for fans of the living dead to embody, and be, zombies. In these mobs we have a demonstration of the way in which performance and imaginary play are a necessary and vital part of existence. Clearly, mobile Internet technology has altered the way we connect and interact. Back in 2003—a significant leap in technological terms, a baby step for academia—Bill Wasik, then senior editor of *Harper's Magazine*, orchestrated the first successful flash mob thanks, in part, to remote social organization made possible through mobile phone technologies. Because Wasik was able to use text messaging and email to communicate instructions in real time simultaneously to groups of people located in four distinct Manhattan bars. The first flash mob was born on 3rd June 2003 at a Macy's department store when a group of one hundred individuals gathered around an expensive area rug. The mobilization can be purely grass roots or organized as a publicity stunt and/or by any corporation or firm, but, it can be argued that these events would not qualify as a flash mob because they are not purely grass roots, community based events. The fact that flash mobs can often be grass roots, community-based actions—is an important one, because it reaffirms the

primary intent of flash mobs as an embodied demonstration of new modes of social networking and connecting in action. In order to qualify as a flash mob, the orchestrators must use telecommunications (phones, word of mouth etc.) or social media devices to connect with and organize the participants. Rather than being the silhouetted problem of a loss of social presence in real life smartphones give us immediate access to the Internet and email (and thus to technological forms of social communication), provide a new means of staying connected to current, and forging new, social networks, and locating one another ‘in the flesh’.

The flash mob, then, is a demonstration of how new, screened technologies, and modes of communication deployed through them, both hinder and encourage physical social connectivity. Rather, these new technologies encourage a new means of connecting to one another, meeting new people, and forging new relationships. Although the flash mob is, by definition, fleeting and transitory, the communities it demands, encourages, and engenders are permanently fluid—they are there but always shifting and altering as the network grows, reforms, adds, and subtracts. In fact, it is this fluidity that is key to understanding the new types of social connections established through screened technologies. Instead of being bound to a circumscribed location, limited by an inability to reach-out beyond our immediate social environs, the Internet and subsequent mobile technologies provide us the means of reaching a large network of people, encouraging that group to come together in one location at one time, and then give us the means to stay connected to the individuals we meet in the singular time and place in order to potentially create more real-time social gatherings. The Internet gives fans a platform on which to perform for one another, and their informal performances might please fans more than the official ones do.

Fans also amuse one another with fan fiction, writing their own soaps and story lines that are collected and posted to websites. As media converges more and more audience members go online, the absolute control of producers over their products might erode further.

The zombie flash mob is just one example of the new social form made possible by the combination of computation, communication, reputation, and location awareness. Social technology theorist Howard Rheingold explains how communities are formed and networks forged. Drawing on a report by the Wearable Computing Group at the

University of Oregon, ‘When Peer-to-Peer Comes Face-to-Face: Collaborative Peer-to-Peer Computing in Mobile Ad Hoc Networks,’ Rheingold further defines this phenomenon, what he calls the smart mob:

‘The *mobile* aspect is already self-evident to urbanites who see the early effects of mobile phones and SMS. *Ad hoc* means that the organizing among people and their devices is done informally and on the fly, the way texting youth everywhere coordinate meetings after school. *Social network* means that every individual in a smart mob is a ‘node’ in the jargon of social network analysis, with social ‘links’ (channels of communication and social bonds) to other individuals. Nodes and links, the elements of social networks made by humans are also fundamental elements of communication networks constructed from optical cables and wireless devices—one reason why new communications technologies make possible profound social changes’ (Rheingold, 2002: 170).

In this brief passage, Rheingold brings together many of the thematic elements discussed throughout this paper: networks, nodes, mobility, new technologies, and community. Thus I would equate Rheingold’s smart mob with the zombie flash mob. Although the phenomenon of networked communities emerging and shifting is not particular to zombie flash mobs, and even though these cultural themes find expression in other cinematic genres, it is the crystallization of all these things together around contemporary popular zombie culture that marks 21st century zombies as a vibrant site for such explorations. With zombie flash mobs we have a unique and complex manifestation of liveness and screened, mobile, digital culture onto a singular site. Doheny-Farina (1996) writes:

‘A community is bound by place, which always includes complex social and environmental necessities. It is not something you can easily join. You can’t subscribe to a community as you

subscribe to a discussion group on the Net. IT must be lived. It is entwined, [is] contradictory, and involves all of our senses'(Doheny-Farina, 1996).

The marriage here is imperfect and messy, with its shifting signifiers and confused borders. The bodies are live, but portray the reanimated dead. The people come together in real life, and are physically present to one another, but it was their use of mobile and screened technologies that allowed this physical meeting to materialize. Additionally, the community as physically materialized in that meeting, is fluid and transitory, not unlike the migratory and diasporic communities found throughout all global hemispheres. And its not just any flash mob that suggests these larger global connections and unique, lived situations, but the *zombie* flash mob proves even more poignant a manifestation because of the complex layers of philosophical and political problems that lumber along with the zombie – roots in colonialism and slavery, questions of ontology, biological reimaginations and the ethics of interpersonal relations and networks.

For example, within the Combat-Ops-UK event, there were zombies of different nationalities and genders, and these raise interesting questions about the social implications of the zombie/victim dynamic and how this may change or shift depending on the background of the actor. Furthermore, when we recall zombie liminality, with its real world implications for marginalized communities and cultures (for example see BBC3's zombie drama *In the Flesh*, which portrays an interesting dichotomy between homosexuality and zombification), the smart mob again emerges. Rheingold often references the political activism in the Philippines and Senegal as illustrative sites for the real world, political effective potential of smart mobs. And I would add to this list Egypt and Libya. In these cases, mobile technologies connected people and communities and helped to organize them into political protests with regime changing effects.

The rise of consumer digital technologies and telecommunications inspired and offered the means for an explosion of a new wave of zombie cinema and culture. Zombies, and the cinematic narratives surrounding their emergence, embody and perform cultural shifts as a result of technological innovation and proliferation. There

is an interesting dichotomy, however, in 21st century zombie cinema, where the apocalyptic world that serves as the landscape for the narrative is devoid of technology. Within the diegetic frame of the films themselves, technology and mass telecommunications have dissolved due to a destruction of the infrastructure that supports them: the networks of communication and social connection have been obliterated along with the political and economic systems that support them; and while new technologies have been nearly erased from the representational field, it is these same technologies that create and present the zombies that have brought about the very crisis that makes the sustaining of those technologies impossible. Even Romero adjusts for this loss of technological infrastructure when moving from *Diary of the Dead* (2007) to its sequel. *Diary* takes place within the first few days of the zombie apocalypse, thereby making it feasible that networked technologies would still have the systems in place to function. In *Survival of the Dead* (2009), however, the narrative occurs on an anachronistic island just off the New England shore, which is dependent solely on generators, machines and other analog forms of technology.

The apparent stress between the analog world of the zombie narrative and requirement of digital technologies to produce those zombies also plays out in the new television series *The Walking Dead*, based on Robert Kirkman's graphic novel of the same name. This new television series takes place months into the zombie apocalypse, painting a world in which the systems and infrastructures taken for granted in the modern 21st century have disintegrated: telephone and power lines no longer work; although the most basic and rudimentary radio broadcasts can be sent and received; and cellular and internet networks are completely destroyed. This world, devoid of advanced technologies, is populated by zombies whose likeness, as it appears on television screens, was constructed using advanced digital postproduction techniques. Kirkman, is invested in the zombie narrative as social critique. Often, tying back to my interest in real world effects and community, this critique manifests as an examination of character development in moments of extreme duress: how individuals respond, what happens to social groupings and hierarchies, and how interpersonal relationships shift and play out. Each of these represents a network segment, a link in the chain of interconnectivity. So, in *The Walking Dead*, the character of Shane Walsh (played by Jon Bernthal) evolves through the status of dear friend, to lover, to

renegade live wire—each of these stages in direct relationship to the same core set of friends from before to during the zombie outbreak.

This is an interesting contradiction that needs addressing. This phenomenon seen in *The Walking Dead* – a lack of technology furthering the zombie ‘mob’ – controverts the previously mentioned use of technology to form zombie mobs in live performances. Across an ever-broadening array of media, zombies are making their presence known, and in several variations they are learning, adapting to their altered circumstances with frightening rapidity, and evolving into a rather perplexing ontological problem for humans. As in Romero’s latest incarnation’s *Survival of the Dead* the question arises: are zombies becoming more human, or are humans becoming more like zombies? (Christie & Lauro, 2011) The former can be seen in the recent Hollywood film *Warm Bodies* directed by Jonathan Levine (Summit Entertainment, 2013) where the zombies do indeed regain speech and emotion, the protagonist R (a zombie) falls in love with one of the few human survivors (Juliet) and they live happily ever after. If the latter is true, might that resolve some of our uniquely humanist problems? Christie and Lauro ultimately ask; ‘might we not all be *better off dead?*’ (Christie & Lauro, 2011: 2).

In Christie & Lauro’s work on zombie as post-human questions emerge as to whether the zombie resembles our prehistoric past, reflects our present anxieties or suggests a future of a more evolved post-humanity, or the graves of a failed civilization. They consider the zombie ‘not only as a fictive monster on which we stamp our society’s latest fears, but also as a model to which we have applied modes and methods of reading’. (Christie & Lauro, 2011: 2) This leads them onto ‘an investigation of the zombie from an interdisciplinary perspective with an emphasis on deep analytical engagement with diverse kinds of narratives. Just as we approach the zombie from many different points of view, we also employ diverse theoretical perspectives’ (2011: 2). I would posit that this diverse ‘scattergun’ approach to the zombie can be a problematic one looking at the same subject through multiple analytic lenses will not build a coherent picture of the development of the genre.

Conclusion

Perhaps of all of our beloved monsters, the zombie has undergone the most drastic shift in their social roles and identity construction in recent years. Here, at the beginning of the 21st-century, there has been a sharp and steady rise in post-apocalyptic zombie cinema, mirroring a fascination, paranoia, and socio-political-cultural moment of war. Horror movies (monster movies in particular) help to make sense of ill-timed spaces of death, but also serve to elude us: we do not have control, only different ways to wrestle with the inevitable. In today's zombie films, we're confronted with new possibilities as the walking dead demand to be social actors in society with rights and responsibilities. There has been a 'shift in zombie characteristics' (Sutler-Cohen, 2011: 193). The walking dead have changed. As decades pass and the trend for zombie paraphernalia comes in the form of things as innocently popular as a Hello Kitty toy, fans are asked to sympathise with the undead as we also continue to seek to violently avoid becoming one of them. The time has come for zombies to not only be the ones to survive, but rally for social justice and social change as they are susceptible to violent hate crimes. It is complicated at best when contemporary settings for zombie movies confront our age-old sensibilities about what (and who) zombies are and what they're capable of. *Can zombies become well-meaning citizens and are these new social roles simply revisioning attempts at cultural reinvention, or not?* (Sutler-Cohen, 2011: 184).

With the walking dead now claiming the streets in zombie walks, along with cinematic recreations of what it means to be a zombie, there is a cultural shift afoot. Given these changes, there are questions fans of the celluloid walking dead must face and grapple with when investigating the sociological meaningfulness of zombie 'societies' and the political nature of survival, which must also mirror the morphology of the zombie. Max Brooks' works on surviving the zombie apocalypse has cinched this possible third wave of zombie styling, which now includes these two possibilities; first, that zombies will survive their own apocalypse and work in convenience stores or serve as pets, and second that we now have directions from Brooks on how to live full lives in their world by learning about who they are, their many nuances and survivability. For both of these scenarios, we are at war with zombies and our choices become political: *which side are we on?* (Brooks in Sutler-Cohen, 2011: 185).

All of these possibilities beg many questions. Do the walking dead have a survival instinct? How have recent constructions of 21st century zombies redefined the genre if they are suddenly rendered not only **mostly** dead, but social outcasts? In the case of the walking dead, our fears turn our terror back to us. As the future of zombie movies are changing, so our relationship with these fabled characters also changes. Whatever the shape future zombie performances do take, it is abundantly clear that zombies won't be contained.



Fig. 1: The 'afghan' village. © CombatOps UK, 2014.



Fig. 2: The 'screamer' zombie. © CombatOps UK, 2014.



Fig. 3: 3 types of zombies - the screamer, the berserker & the hunter. © CombatOps UK, 2014.

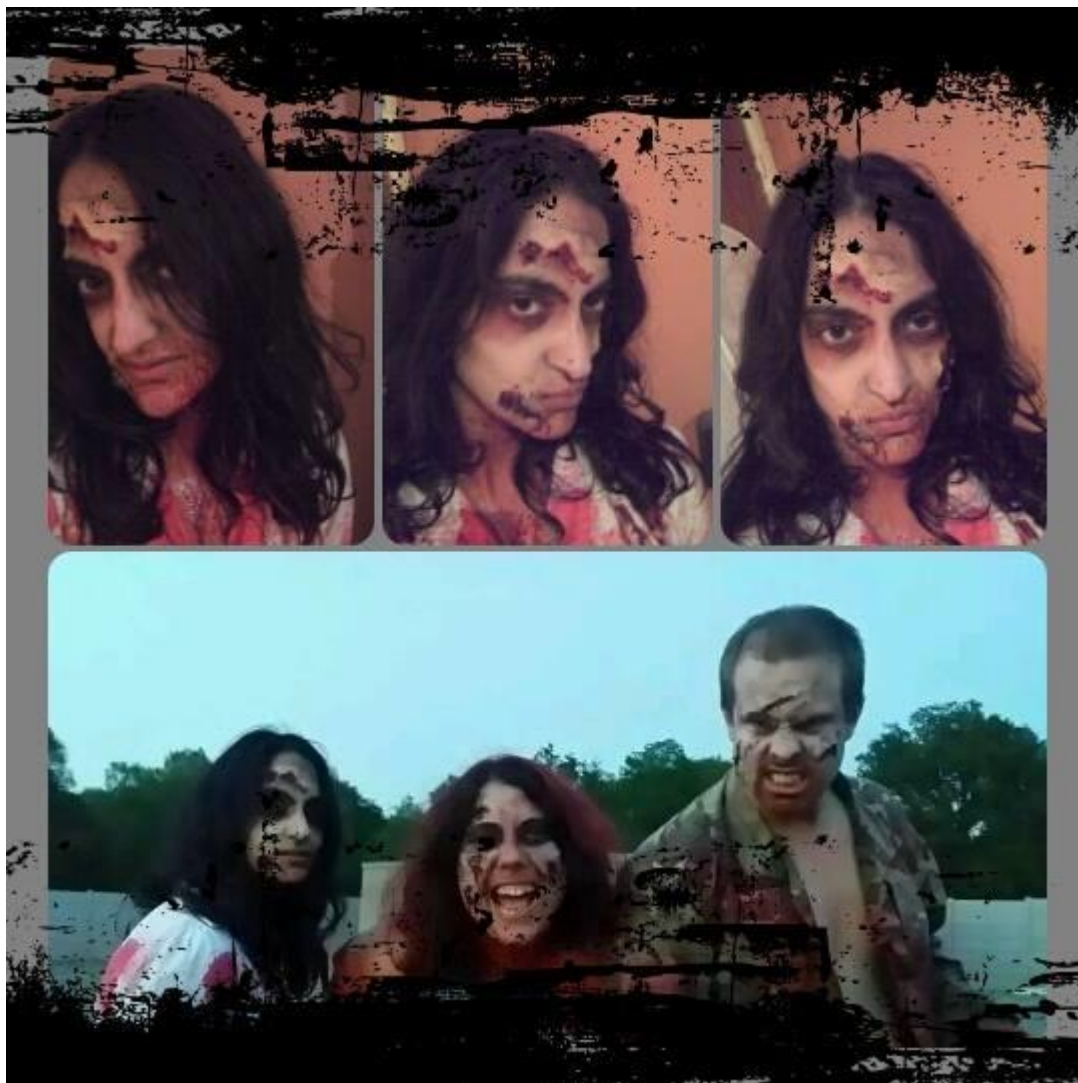


Fig. 4: the blood-soaked female zombie (I, researcher) © Shanaz Shakir, 2014.

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