

CHRISTOPHER M. FLAVIN
Northeastern State University

THE WATCHING DEAD: THE PANOPTIC GAZE AND IDEOLOGIC ZOMBIES

The image of the zombie horde as a sea of undead ghouls, pressed against the fences and barricades surrounding the final pockets of civilized life, is a mainstay of postmodern zombie films and literature. The specifics of the environment vary, from the posh and almost normalized surroundings of the upper classes in Fiddler's Green (*Land of the Dead*), to the stark walls and hurricane fencing of a Georgia prison (*The Walking Dead*), and even the familiar, cozy environs of the Winchester Pub (*Shaun of the Dead*). The commonality they share is the fixation of the horde on the living who shelter behind the walls and wire, the handful of humans who attract the living dead and represent the individualization and agency which is effaced by assimilation into the horde. The sound and texture of the horde, which varies with each iteration, is underscored by the unwavering gaze of the undead which remains fixed on those inside the defenses. It is this gaze, the ceaseless observation of the living by the dead and the unblinking assessment and interpolation it suggests, that gives the zombie its power to horrify and fascinate. The watchfulness of the zombies outside the walls is, in turn, mirrored by the self-awareness and introspection of the humans who seek to evade the observation of the dead as they must monitor themselves and those around them in order to maintain some sense of security and individuality. The living must watch themselves as closely as they watch the dead, and as closely as they are watched by the dead.

This heightened state of awareness, bordering on paranoia, becomes a form of panopticism obsessed with watching in all directions and yet seeing only the reflection of the watchers themselves, which partially explains why many are interested in zombies and their utility as a metaphor in the post-millennial age. The consumptive gaze of the ghoul, multiplied thousands of times through the swarming horde, is a natural vehicle for postmodern concerns about information mining, identity theft, cyber-security, NSA monitoring, and the unending observation of security cameras. The gaze of the horde, like that of the information consuming technologies which surround us, never blinks or wavers; it remains focused on its target until the object of its fixation is either consumed entirely or is incorporated into the horde and made an extension of its ideology. The power of the zombie in this environment comes from its automaton nature, its mechanical expression of its fundamental state, and the potential for complete interpolation and consumption it represents. Yet, the zombie retains a somewhat human appearance; it still looks like the person it once was and evokes sympathy and identification from the living. It is only when the individual zombie is subsumed in the horde, surrenders its last vestiges of individuality and becomes an extension of the post-human mass pressing in on the living from all sides, that the zombie becomes both truly dangerous and truly terrifying.

Read from a Foucaultian perspective, the isolated enclaves of civilization under constant surveillance by both the undead horde and the living residents mirror the evolution of social discipline and control within a carceral system. This interpretation can be analyzed on two fronts. The first of these is as a rhetoric of control and regimentation which develops among the living who function as their own wardens and must recognize their complicity in their own increasingly regimented positions within society. This recognition and voluntary complicity creates a space in which the visible power structures have been atomized to the individual level and in which a degree of continuous surveillance and reinforcement functions unchecked. While not a truly panoptic scenario in itself, the knowledge of being continually watched and the need to continuously watch each other informs each of the characters and their position within their society. Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, these structures are frequently overlaid on individual zombies, representing them as individuals rather than parts of the horde, which results in a parallel diaspora among the living and the dead, in which the dead mirror the living and become the focus of the terminal gaze of the observed group.

While the specific elements and individuals represented differ substantially in their response to the threat posed by the undead masses outside the walls, all of them reflect a conscious or unconscious understanding of the need for regiment and enforced order, the effective isolation of the individual and the group from the outside world, and the ingrained need for vigilance on the part of the individual to insure the maintenance of order in the face of externalized chaos. At first glance, the scenarios presented by many zombie films and novels would appear to be versions of Bentham's panopticon, environments in which the members of the community exist under the potential for constant scrutiny from without and where the potential for the observation of transgressions places the onus of complicity and regimentation on the individual in order to maintain social order and discipline. While this is, in a limited sense, accurate, it is also an incomplete reading. The stratification of society, the degree of isolation imposed on the individual and the community, and the distinctions between the communities inside the walls and those outside reflect aspects of the disciplinary systems outlined by Foucault. However, the practical application of these systems in film, fiction, and in the obsequious zombie walk creates a space in which identity and cultural positioning are questioned and deliberately disrupted.

The origin of the disruption represented by the modern zombie is much closer to the circumstances described by Michel Foucault in response to a seventeenth century plague, in which a town deliberately isolates itself and regiments its

citizenry in an effort to prevent the spread of contagion. The power dynamics which Foucault examines provides a lens for similar regimentation among the survivors of the zombie apocalypse. The plague comparison itself is particularly apt in light of the explanation provided by the films for the existence of the living dead. In the case of Romero's films, the explanation is provided by unexplained extraterrestrial radiation,¹ while films such as *28 Days Later* are plagued by ghouls who are infected with "rage," which is transmitted through the blood and saliva just as the virus of *World War Z* is transmitted. The viral, infective metaphor is particularly apt with the technological, post-human implications of the zombie. The metaphor of infection removes human agency from the equation and further alienates the undead from their living counterparts. These vectors underscore the fact that the undead in such films, while they fall securely within the genre of zombie films, are not, technically speaking, zombii or zombies.

The key difference between the classic zombie and the modern undead is the ideological and subjective positioning in which they both engage. While the terms "zombie," "living dead," and "undead" have effectively become nearly interchangeable in the popular culture, the distinction between the three is important here, as the living dead are "technically speaking, not zombies...Romero's ghouls are incapable of production (including social reproduction) because they lack ideological normality."² By extension, the same claim can be made of the undead in the majority of such films that draw their inspiration from Romero's work. The normality referred to can be quantified through the production value the undead represent either economically or ideologically, as they are deployed within the film and which is summarily disrupted by the environment in which it is staged.

The disruption of the economy and ideology of the "normal" world by the individual, albeit because of circumstances beyond their control, is closely aligned with the loss of individual agency and identity. It is not the transition through death the viewer or the character fears, but rather the erasure of ideological independence and the appearance of autonomy. As Stanley Solomon notes, commenting on Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, the terror in the film does not spring from either the existence of the living dead or their distorted mirroring of the living, but rather their implacable nature, the persistence with which they pursue and remain, and the fact that they will eventually succeed in violating the boundaries which keep them at bay and contaminate the living, regardless of the resistance they meet.³ The threat of sustained violation, penetration, and consumption which begins with their surveillance of the living and corruption of the social order from a distance both makes the eventual collapse of the barriers more horrific and cathartic. While the living will be transformed and subsumed by the horde, the erasure of the individual can be seen as darkly liberating if for no other reason than it ends the threat of constant

1. Joshua Gunn and Shaun Treat, "Zombie Trouble: A Propaedeutic on Ideological Subjectification and the Unconscious," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 2 (May 2005): 146.

2. Ibid., 153.

3. Ibid., 148.

observation and the rigid discipline the living are forced to maintain if they hope to remain separated from the undead.

The relentlessness of the zombie, their transgression of social taboos and rejection of the imposed social order, represent an essentialist reduction of the individual to their most basic drives and appetites. This specter of autocannibalism, the consumption of the representative self by the projected self on multiple levels, and the implacability of their desire form the sources of terror that underscore the discipline imposed on the living. Rather than encouraging antisocial behavior, the knowledge of the presence of the living dead surrounding the living on all sides, and the collective confirmation of their potential for observing and subsuming the living serves to unify group identity and social norms, thereby reinforcing the perceived social order and self-monitoring within the human cities as a refutation of this drive.

Again, Foucault's description of the plague-besieged town and the late medieval response to threats is beneficial in analyzing the extant structures. The individual, while maintaining the illusion of independence and autonomy, recognizes that their position within their society is both locked and precarious, and that any sign of transgression will be ruthlessly dealt with.

Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of life, contagion or punishment. Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere.⁴

The compartmentalization of the individual is intended to maintain discipline, minimize the effects of contagion on the populace, and to maintain the productivity of the society. It is through this militant regimentation that "the plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every confusion."⁵ The key difference between Foucault's plague and the zombie plagues of modern films is the degree of permanence associated with the latter. The continued presence of the zombies, and the knowledge that every member of living society will eventually become one of them, creates an environment in which the state of heightened vigilance becomes permanent and each member of that community effectively becomes his own jailer and the warden of his fellows in order to maintain discipline and productivity.

The compartmentalization of society and the regimentation of life among the living make it possible for the individual to "avoid those compact, swarming, howling masses" and induces "in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent disability that assures the automatic function of power."⁶ This is particularly true in films such as *World War Z* or *Land of the Dead*. In these films, the swarming masses of the living dead are either constantly visible or represent a recognized presence whose potential is still effective when they are off camera. The existence of the zombies and the unending threat they represent in many ways dictates the

4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 195.

5. Ibid., 197.

6. Ibid., 201.

form of society, and the functioning of disciplinary power is atomized through constant reinforcement at the individual level in their need for participatory regimentation in order to survive. The state-mandated carceral systems are replaced by one of the individual's own construction; the submission to complete surveillance by both the horde outside and the living within gives them the illusion of freedom of movement and free will. This illusory freedom is sharply imprinted with the level of discipline required of the individual and the knowledge of the potential punishments for transgressions.

The human enclaves, in effect, become variants of Foucault's punitive city in which every scene bears the stamp of the recognized transgression against the self or the social order, and serves as a corrective for that transgression.⁷ In both cases, the ultimate punishment of death and the complete abolition of the self do indeed reproduce the code of the law. However, the spectacle of punishment which Foucault claims to be the centering point for a carceral society has been replaced by the knowledge of its possibility and the imminent threat of capital punishment informs every aspect of the society. The scaffold's symbolic potential has been replaced by the world outside the protection of the city's walls and the threat is no longer that of not merely being killed, but also of being forcibly assimilated into the Other without possibility of return. Only the most heinous transgressions are worthy of this punishment, as the loss of life becomes a relatively minor punitive step when the erasure of the self and guaranteed continued existence outside of society without the autonomy of the living is far more terrifying. Yet, these realizations are refuted in context through the continued adherence to the disciplinary forms and the continued enforcement of both causal and effective regimentation in the face of potential disruptions to the perceived order.

Taking Romero's *Land of the Dead* as an example, Colin Davis notes that in that film,

The zombies have more or less taken over, with only one walled city remaining as a pocket of human habitation. Here, then, to be alive is to be encircled by the dead, desperately and hopelessly resisting being recruited to their ranks. But to read the film in this way makes firmer oppositions between the living and the dead than it actually supports. The zombies are precisely *not* dead, or dead enough. Like vampires, they are caught between their first death, which turns them into what they are, and their second death, which will finally destroy them. In the meantime, they are in some sense alive.⁸

The implication is the recognition on the part of the living, and to a lesser degree that of the undead, of the transitory and displaced position each occupies in relation to the other. The difference between their positions within the equation can be summarized in the perceived normalization of the dominant ideology of the living, and the liminal zone occupied by the undead. This liminal space is another projection of the diaspora in which the zombies exist; they are neither

7. Ibid., 113.

8. Colin Davis, "Diasporic Subjectivites," *French Cultural Studies* 17, no.3 (2006): 342.

truly living nor truly dead and exist in an objectified state outside their natural origins or place.

The sense of diaspora, of simultaneously being and not being part of the social order, is epitomized in the portrayal of the zombies in both films by their lack of intelligible speech. This disconnection from the dominant social order, the communicative independence which is central to the roles occupied by the living characters, reinforces the unnatural state the zombies are meant to represent within the social order of the films. Their lack of an individual voice in many ways represents a divorce from their internal experience of the situation, even when their actions indicate some sense of internalized self is possible, and the participatory nature of the society they find thrust upon them. As Derrida notes, the first symbols of thought and meaning, the spoken representations of identity and position, are essential to participation in the "natural order" and realization of experience beyond the instance as "the voice...signifies 'mental experiences' which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance" within the established order of society.⁹ Their silences or guttural articulations, beyond marking them as Othered from the living characters, serves to reinforce their objective, silenced and disconnected, position rather than showing them as clearly subjectivized beings.

The inability to speak or fully integrate into the society of the living becomes the defining feature of the diasporic condition of the undead within such films. Though possessing many other faculties they used in life, the zombies have neither a written nor a fully verbalized language. In the context of the film, this erasure of language is symbolic of the erasure of their status as individuals and their reclassification as property, thereby becoming the symbolic and constitutive Other. While they maintain the trace of language, the capacity to understand what is said to them and nonverbal expressions of that understanding, they cannot originate speech. While this gives the appearance of a lack of intelligence, the actions performed by the zombies also serve to remind the living characters, as well as the audience, of the latent potential they possess as well as of the divided nature of their existence. The zombies maintain the remnants of humanity, the form and trace of the living other, yet are not like them. Being neither fully alive nor fully dead, yet performing in some ways as if they were living beings, they are both a physical presence and a biological absence that prevents them from fully integrating into the society in which they find themselves.

Diasporic subjectivity entails an openness to dissemination so that the very terms which might be used to characterize it (presence, being, selfhood, exile, nostalgia, return, belonging and alienation, even life and death) are at risk of being drained of their recognizable senses. The diasporic subject is a ghost, whose residence is never assured, who does not belong here or elsewhere, and whose possibility of encounter is vouchsafed by a constitutive incompleteness.¹⁰

9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 11.

10. Davis, "Diasporic Subjectivities," 346.

The removal of meaning from these concepts necessitates the existence of the subject as defined by another before it can achieve any degree of self-actualization. While the subjectivity and identity of the zombies is dependent on their reception in the community of the living, the human community is equally dependent on the image of the zombie to define itself. The evolution of subjectivity and identity "encodes a need, crucial to cultural modes of identity construction, to establish distance from and superiority to a possessable other. While the subject...may pretend hegemony, it in fact can be defined only by contrast with what it is not."¹¹ In many ways, this difference is defined by what it lacks in order to define itself, through the lack of speech, the lack of individual agency, and the lack of active gaze. This need for the possessable other underscores the presence of the dead among the living, the ownership and objectification of the consumptive other in its most literal sense and its reduction to its most basic form.

Ethically, this mutuality carries with it a substantial debt to the Other. The self-prescriptive nature of the relationship between the visible other and the constructed self necessitates ignoring questions of belonging. This is further complicated as the essential mortality of the living insures their eventual conversion into the living dead. In this case, the zombie in the kitchen or on Main Street is as displaced from a normal system of order as the living human in the room has, in fact, become. The failure on the part of the living to recognize their circumstances, in spite of the fact that in both film and live encounter it is the gaze of the living which is the source of all definition and power, is the moral and psychological *differance* of Derrida, the refusal to see that which they consider beyond their immediate realm of interpretation and therefore cannot see clearly despite its proximity.

The threat of exclusion, of being removed from the perceived individuality of the living and forcibly interpolated into the horde, to give in to its hunger and gaze, is the threat of dehumanization at its most literal. As Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry observe in "The Zombie Manifesto," the loss of control of the individual body and psyche is to become subhuman or wholly inhuman in the eyes of the viewer as:

Humanity defines itself by its individual consciousness and its personal agency: to be a body without a mind is to be subhuman, animal; to be a human without agency is to be a prisoner, a slave. The zombi(i)/e is both of these, and the zombi(i)/e (fore)tells our past, present, and future.¹²

The inevitability, and presumed finality, of mortal death is not the issue here; rather, the forced commodification of the individual and the reanimation and continuance of the person as a purely ideological, consumptive being is what

11. Elizabeth Mayes, "The Fantasy of Internalization in the Theoretical Imaginary," *Representations* 62 (Spring, 1998): 104.

12. Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," *boundary2* 35, no.1 (Spring, 2008): 95.

horrifies the living characters and, vicariously, the audience. Lauro and Embry correctly suggest that "the zombie now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system,"¹³ but it is important to recall that this ideological shift is still represented on an individual level by the zombie as a singular entity. The retention of a human form, of a recognizable countenance, of the shape of someone known to the viewer, locates the ideology and forces the living inside the barricades and the outside viewer to reestablish their own gaze and to shift away from the recognition of the faceless, swarming horde and to recognize the individuated zombie as a diasporic figure with which they must engage on a different level. The subjective distance the horde makes possible further erases the individuality and identity of individual zombies in the mind of the living viewer. Instead of a mass of individuals, the collective horde serves as a single entity in its gaze and its power, which adds to the cognitive rejection of the assimilation such a body represents for the living.

This is what makes characters such as Bub in *Day of the Dead* or Fido in the 2005 film of the same name memorable: they are zombies that are recognizable as individuals rather than as a symbol of the horde. Yet, they are neither truly living nor truly dead. They exist in the liminal space between the actualized human being observing them, as either character or audience, and the automaton extension of the zombified Id. They are diasporic in their ability to turn the gaze of the viewer and to drag them to the level of silence imposed on those who do not "belong."

In framing the zombie as a diasporic entity, it is necessary to clarify their presentation in recent films. One aspect of *Fido* that sets it apart from many contemporary movies is the duality of the zombies presented in the film. They are not merely ravaging ghouls mindlessly slaughtering the living, although that is frequently shown to be their basic nature; they are also depicted as the basis for industry and status symbols when electronically domesticated to serve the living. These contradictory states define the status of the undead within the film. The zombies are not merely automatons, but retain aspects of their previous humanity that are deliberately overlooked by their living overseers. "Big Daddy" in Romero's *Land of the Dead* wears the uniform which defined his life in some ways and represents the convergence of the culture of the living and the collectivity of the undead. He is also the one who is seen leading the zombies away from the broken remains of Fiddler's Green at the end of the film, which further complicates the living characters' ability to qualify him as part of the mindless horde.

A similar metaphor of displacement can be seen in films such as 2013's *Warm Bodies*, in which R, played by Nicholas Hoult, regains his humanity and is reassimilated into human society after rejecting his position as a ravaging ghoul. R's movement back into a subjective position can only occur after he has descended into the depths of objectification and othering by giving in fully to his consuming nature as a part of the horde. His individuality is restored, somewhat

13. Ibid., 106.

ironically, by tapping into the very humanity he feeds upon. While Fido represents the internalization of the zombie as a diasporic subjective positon, and Big Daddy represents the intermediary state between the automitonistic undead and the actualized living characters, R represents the logical conclusion of the diasporic experience represented in these films as he gradually loses all of the markers which identify him as Other and assimilates into the dominant culture as imposed, the pseudo-carceral culture of the living.

As Josh Gunn and Shaun Treat observe in regard to the genre as a whole, the evolution of the zombie in film from the source of mindless labor in films such as *White Zombie* (1932) to "agents of consumption" in more recent films represents an ideological stance that seems to have been deliberately rejected. Rather than allowing the zombie to occupy a single ideological position, the duality represented in recent films shows not only the possibility—and the perils—of incorporation of the undead into living society, but also a degree of ideological interpolation conspicuously absent from other films in the genre. However, in the context of *Fido* and *Warm Bodies*, such an ideological positioning requires a degree of selfhood not generally allowed by the strictures of earlier films. Their interpolation, in the Althusserian sense, represents both the success and the inherent displacement of the dominant ideology as they are commanded to perform "an illusory being-for-self or a particular performance of selfhood."¹⁴ The movement from objective recipient of projected perceptions to a subjective participant requires a degree of active participation that the base, id-driven nature of the feeding ghoul cannot encapsulate. Therefore, it becomes necessary to position the zombie as more than a simple ideological subjectivity, which complicates the nature of its interaction with the living.

The general functioning of this redefined ideological paradigm is relatively simple, as it "offers the individual a fantasy of self-transparency, an image of the self as a discrete, autonomous, and unified whole" which is itself authorized by the society and proscribed by social assignations.¹⁵ This articulation of the self within the proscribed social and ideological framework is both liberating and limiting as applied to the portrayal of the living dead. In order for the zombies to achieve a degree of subjectivity, to fully participate in the ideological structures, they must not only become aware of their subjective position within their society but also their alienation from those structures. Typically, this positioning is achieved through the negation of the subject and the cancellation of individual self-recognition. As Joshua Gunn notes:

Like the infant of pre-interpellation, the living dead is a post-interpelated subject, a being of pure drives, an id in need of a superego, which ideology provides. Ideology marks the emergence of self-consciousness in a being of needs and desires. Romero's living dead films represent the dialectical negation of the laboring zombie with the consuming ghoul.¹⁶

14. Gunn, "Zombie Trouble," 155.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

Gunn's analysis provides a baseline by which the negation of the subject can be observed within the genre, providing a frame of reference for the degree of participation and negation imposed on the zombie, but fails to recognize the further development of the individual zombies in recent films. *Fido*, Romero's *Land of the Dead*, *Warm Bodies*, and *28 Weeks Later* all present characters who are able to repress their more base drives and who can function outside the laboring/consuming binary.

Rather than examining these extremes as polar opposites, these dialectic states are coeval in many cases. This is achieved by overlaying one dialectical component on the other, enforcing the position of the laboring zombie on the id representation of the consuming ghoul or the watchful outsider with the observed subject. Film and television, by their very nature, subject the zombies to as much scrutiny as the fictional characters feel from their undead counterparts. The willing suspension of disbelief, the engagement with the fiction as it is presented, is insufficient to fully isolate the viewer from the cyclic observations presented by the work. The panoptic gaze is constantly redirected and only focuses on specific elements for a moment, highlighting the awareness of both the viewer and the viewed of the created situatedness of the media. Each gaze, each formulated observation and tracery of possibility, is both penetrating and reflexive as the synthetic nature of the experience reflects the observation back on the external viewer and determines their response to what is seen, even as they determine the relative value of what is observed in the moment. The result of such layering becomes the division of the subject against itself in many ways and facilitates the construction of a subject-position that is both volatile and self-limiting. The internal divisions of the zombie as subject, their divided natures and unstable social positions, are coupled with prejudice by the living against them because of the underlying violent nature of the repressed ghoul. This leaves the humanized zombies in a position that cannot be fully incorporated into living society; instead, they are dispersed or disseminated among the living in a state of persistent belonging/not belonging. This dispersal and fragmentation moves beyond the safe confines of film, literature and television through events such as zombie walks and cosplay encounters. By removing the barriers which separate the living and the dead in the media, the viewer's perception of the zombie is radically reoriented and the underlying ideologies the zombie represents become immediate and personal.

Zombie walks, in particular, have become regular events in many cities. Zombie walks are precisely what the name implies, walks or runs in which the participants take on the appearance and mannerisms of the living dead. Rather than observed at a distance, the zombies are brought literally within feet of the observers. This proximity removes the intellectual and ideological security which film, television, and literature provide, and makes the experience visceral. The inverse of the panoptic effect of the horde outside the gates is invoked, as rather than the living being the object of the unrelenting and unavoidable gaze of the dead, the reinscription of the dead and the adoption of their nature attracts the gaze of the living outside the event to the mock dead participating in the spectacle. For those who play the parts of the zombies, who place themselves in the abject and objective position the zombie occupies as a singular entity, the unrelenting hunger of the undead is internalized and redirected, allowed a

carnivalesque expression which directs a psychological rather than physical attraction and obsession outwards as the performers deliberately attract the observation of those around them. As Bryce Peake observes, the zombie walk, through its voluntary nature and deliberate repositioning of the symbolism associated with the dead among the living, recreates the horde and turns the consumptive associations attached to the undead into an outward and frequently sexual expression of Id by manifesting the willing loss of self and reflexive interpolation as part of an alternate ideology. The individual who chooses to participate, to become the "other" as represented by zombies, becomes a spectacle which allows for the expression of otherwise repressed or alienated redefinitions of self within a specific context.

In many ways, it becomes the direct inverse of the rigorous control of the gaze in film and television by removing the layers of mediation which allows the viewer to remain detached from the reflexive, reflective scrutiny of the undead. The walk places the participants within the panoptic subjectivity as individual *and* as part of the horde, as a means of expression and escapism; it is a reverse voyeurism which underwrites/overwrites the normalized self.¹⁷ The isolation of the realized individual, and the sublimation of the self as part of the horde, places the walkers at the center of the observation, yet creates an environment in which the gaze is mirrored back onto the "living" spectators. The walking dead, by submitting themselves to surveillance, do not show the observer the symbolic nature of the zombie as it is represented in fact, but rather the possibility and erasure concealed within the desires of the spectator. Even in its diasporic state, silenced and fragmented by being removed from its native environment and redefined by those who see it as simultaneously identifiable and Other, the self-consumptive nature of the zombie metaphor is transmuted and transmitted effectively and voluntarily through both the active and passive participation of both the walkers and the watchers.

Removing the barriers between the zombies and the living observers warps the objective perspective established in the films, television programs, and through the literature by giving the encountered Other an immediacy and intimacy that is absent in the media. This proximity creates an environment in which the gaze of the living becomes simultaneously horrifically acute and distorted by the perceivable humanity of the living dead by removing the mediation and security distance provides. In Elish Sheridan's view, these zombies are in effect more abhorrent because they make "the thanatophobic contemporary world face death in the midst of life and without any means of separation or control" and invite the erasure of the semblance of boundaries between the two states.¹⁸ The objectification and id-driven commodification of the individual, living or dead, is in many ways a natural extension of the social tensions aroused by the material and ideological consumption represented by the undead and contained within

17. Bryce Peake, "He is Dead, and He is Continuing to Die: A Feminist Psycho-Semiotic Reflection on Men's Embodiment of Metaphor in a Toronto Zombie Walk," *Journal of Contemporary Anthropology* 1, no.1 (2010): 55.

18. Elish Sheridan, "Establishing the Postmillennial Rebirth of an Undead Genre: The Contemporary Zombie" (master's thesis, Institute of Art, Design and Technology at Dun Laoghaire, 2009), 35.

the liminal gaze as it is established here. As Martin Lefebvre notes, the zombie in its natural state, that of a ravening ghoul, is by its very nature a metaphor for social consumption, which is projected out in a form of

“tropical displacement,” the reification of internalized malaise in the form of the other, becomes an effective double mirror as it conspicuously displays the actualized desires of society in a concrete form and serves as a present reminder of the underlying potential for such expressions within the observer.¹⁹

In this context, the zombies, in film, fiction, or encounter, remain objectified, and to a degree fetishized, as the exemplum of both the consumer and the consumed. The unspoken, proscriptive caveat in this exchange is the knowledge that any member of the community can, and at some point will, become part of the consumptive other.

In a particularly Freudian sense, the incorporation of that which is the most alien yet simultaneously the most similar to the members of the community makes manifest the need for the other by which the group is able to define itself. The zombies walkers, for example, then represent the implicit “cultural imperative to distinguish an imagined collective from some other group according to the criteria of self-control and self-containment, or the degree of voluntary control an individual may display over the body and actions.”²⁰ The crowd which assembles to observe the zombie walk, regardless of their motivations, observes the proceedings judgmentally and, as consumers of the spectacle, mirrors the directed gaze of the horde in modern zombie films by adopting the same power structures as they seek to interpolate or consume that which simultaneously attracts and repels them. The walkers, representing the dead thrust into otherwise normalized communities and dynamics, become the embodiment of disruption and their route becomes an almost ritualized space of consumption and evaluation which is defined only by the observation of the crowd. This projects the walkers as a form of *pharmakos*, a scapegoat by which the crowd is able to recognize their own potential for corruption in order to define themselves and to purge their own sense of culpability outside of the event. This, along with their liminal positions, simultaneously living and not quite dead, makes the zombie walker the perfect symbol for group enforcement and identification through contrast.

Davis suggests that diasporic subjectivity in the context of social placement and identity is inherently unstable in that, in environments such as this, the subject cannot, and yet must, simultaneously occupy two incommensurable sites while maintaining a recognizable identity.²¹ Yet, the zombie on film and the zombie walking along the street by its nature must occupy more than two. It is living and dead, generative as well as deconstructive in its appetite and potential, the ravaging symbol of consumption while possessing the potential for individuality

19. Martin Lefebvre, “Conspicuous Consumption: The Figure of the Serial Killer as Cannibal in the Age of Capitalism,” *Theory Culture Society* 22, no.3 (2005): 49.

20. Mayes, “The Fantasy of Internatlation in the Theoretical Imaginary,” 102.

21. Davis, “Diasporic Subjectivites,” 336.

and generation, it is also individually recognizable rather than an anonymous part of the horde. This multiple subjectivity serves as the frontier for its diasporic condition in modern films, as increasingly the zombies are shown to have at least a limited awareness of their condition and their displacement, hence the rise of the individualized or humanized zombie which is capable of representing these instabilities.

On the surface, at least, the notion of the diaspora relies on a settled distinction between a series of related binaries: native/alien, insider/outsider, included/excluded, belonging/ intrusion.²² While this represents a simplification of the diaspora, such a binary system does not limit the possible subject-positions of the diasporic zombie, but rather transmutes their position into a social rupture through which their existence within the society of the living becomes a site of disruption and play.

It is this schism in the social order that gives meaning and value to the role assigned to the zombies in the film, just as it creates the ritual space surrounding the zombie walk. This social dissemination provides for the creation of a separate, yet dependent identification based on the confusion caused by the inclusion of the diasporic subject into a society in which they have no natural place. The subject can only be defined as they are observed and known, as nature is expressed or repressed and judged by those around them from limited, individualized perspectives. This again returns the position of the individual, living or dead, to the source and effect of the gaze. In the case of the directed gaze of the horde in the zombie film, it is not the gaze itself which is damning but rather the awareness of the gaze and its accompanying causality as recognized by the living. Similarly, the gaze of the crowd on the representative zombies of the zombie walk shows not only the individuated positions, spatially and metaphorically, of the walkers but reflects the ideological impositions of the crowd back on the audience. The zombie becomes value- neutral beyond its capacity to see or to be seen; it is the gaze of the living that carries judgment and weight that is incidental and collective. It is the living gaze that negates the independence of the subject on which the gaze falls.

The oppressive gaze of the horde outside the gates has no power; it simply is. The zombie has no identity beyond its state of being; it is given identity and purpose by serving as a mirror for the living who define themselves against it and give it ideological power. The zombie on the street corner is as lost to themselves as the observer who fails to recognize their coworker behind the artifice of the Other but sees only the potential of the form before them. It is through the establishment of these divergent identities and their projection that the power structures are both constructed and disseminated in zombie films and literature as well as in the cultural events. The living and the undead do not comprise a closed binary, but serve as referents for each other in an open system of exchange. It is only through the reduction of the other that the dominant group is able to define itself, and it is through constant observation of the other

22. Ibid., 338.

and themselves that the living are able to construct a subject position that allows them to function within the proscribed regiments of social control. The horde sees the living but does not comprehend their position; the living see the undead and impose their fears and hidden ideologies on the collective other, yet each is defined by the way in which the very act of observation and reinscription defines them through opposition.

CHRISTOPHER FLAVIN is an assistant professor of English at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, where he teaches courses in literary theory, criticism, and medieval literature. His current research interests focus on the construction of identity in literature and film, with an emphasis on gender and group affiliation.

© Christopher Flavin

Flavin, Christopher "The Watching Dead: The Panoptic Gaze and Ideologic Zombies" in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 13 no. 2 (Spring 2014): 82-95.