

The Zombies Are Here

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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You may not have noticed, but currently we are in the midst of a zombie craze. From the popular culture platforms of movies, television, websites, computer games, book and comics publications, and death metal and horror punk music to academic courses, conferences, and studies, highbrow novels and short stories, art and poetry to new product lines of consumer goods—right now, zombies are a value stock: a gift that keeps on giving. They just keep coming at us. Roughly 5.5 million people watched the first episode of the AMC cable’s “The Walking Dead,” that’s 83% more than the 2.9 million who watched the Season Four premiere of “Mad Men.” (Chuck Klosterman, “My Zombie, Myself: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead,” *NY Times*, Dec. 3, 2010. Hereafter Klosterman)

And the movie “World War Z,” starring Brad Pitt, is lined up to be one of the coming year’s cinema blockbusters. There are cult and bestsellers books like Max Brooks’ *The Zombie Survival Guide*, the *Book of the Dead and Still-Dead: Book of the Dead 2*, zombie mashups like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombie* and *Alice in Zombieland*; we have Steven Schlozman’s “The Neurology of Zombies,” John Morehead’s *Toward a Zombie Theology* and Jonathan Mayberry’s *Zombie CSU: The Forensics of the Living Dead*. And I haven’t started on the computer games and the deluge of movies.

A zombie is variously defined as an animated corpse brought back to life by mystical or scientific means, by natural or experimental disasters, or by some wholly unknown cause. A zombie is an undead, mindless, reanimated corpse—one that’s able to move around either in a slow, shuffling walk or with unnerving speed; and, especially since George Romero’s 1968 cult classic movie *Night of the Living Dead*, a zombie typically has a single, relentless, driving hunger for human flesh.

Something very much like zombies has been around for a long time. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, perhaps the oldest written story on earth—at least 4000 years old, we read the following: Gilgamesh has spurned the advances of the goddess Ishtar, and in a rage she hurls the following curse:

I will knock down the Gates of the Netherworld,
I will smash the door posts, and leave the doors flat down,
and will let the dead go up to eat the living!
And the dead will outnumber the living!"

In Old Norse and Icelandic mythology there were the undead creatures named *draugurs* who rose from their graves to protect buried treasure. “Again-walkers,” or *revenants*, were documented in medieval histories and legends. For example, in the 1190s, William of Newburgh wrote: "one would not easily believe that corpses come out of their graves and wander around...to terrorize or harm the living, unless there were [the] many cases in our times, supported by ample testimony". And the Qing dynasty legends and folklore of China are rife with stories about the *jiang shi* or animated corpses who haunted and preyed upon the living. But that was then, and this is now--

Why zombies have gained such prominence in our contemporary culture—and believe me, they have—is a question to which I will return. But before that, I want to talk about horror and examine why we resort to scaring the bejeezus out of ourselves by reading, viewing and consuming works of horror—a genre designed to elicit intense feelings of fear, loathing and dismay.

“There will always be fiction that aims to awaken terror, awe and dread,” writes the British essayist Roz Kaveney. “What such works have in common is their perspective on the universe—a sense not only that there are things we do not fully understand, but that those things... are dangerous to think or speak about, that the world is [indifferent, wholly other and]

not our friend.” (Roz Kaveney, “Horror of blood...”, *Times Literary Supplement*, December 9, 2011) This sense of terror and dread that we find all over the place in horror is quite different from other types of fantastic genres. Generally speaking, *science fiction* maintains that the universe can be solved like an equation; *fantasy* assumes the world can be cured, that fairyland can be reconciled with the mundane and that the good ruler will learn his/her trade. In *dark fantasy and the paranormal romance*, like the Harry Potter and *Twilight* books and movies, the creature of nightmare can be staked, or tamed, battles can be won, and most characters will survive—it’s possible to get out of the bad dream alive and basically intact. As well, we’re drawn to the vision of the sublime in these works—vast, exalted, extraordinary landscapes of space and time that can produce in us feelings of awe, humility and grandeur. *Science fiction* achieves the sublime through vistas of interstellar space; *fantasy* pulls it off through a vision of deep time and the slow working out of consequences that are essentially optimistic. (see Kaveney)

Horror is quite different from its fantastic siblings. Unlike fairy tales, think of *Beauty and the Beast*, or movie characters like Chewbacca in *Star Wars*—where the monstrous is “part of the everyday furniture of the universe,” the monster of horror is “an extraordinary character set in an ordinary world.” Settings for horror stories are usually exceedingly mundane and set in the so-called ‘real world.’ What makes them disturbing and terrifying is that the creatures of horror violate conventional categories of nature and culture—they’re simply not kosher: they are formless, rotting, putrid, half-made things possessing a malignant power that cannot be bargained or reasoned with; and they are “native to places outside of and/or unknown to the normal, human world”—they come from outer space, from under the sea, and from the grave. Finally, we, along with the human characters of horror fiction and movies, react to them with agitation, fear and disgust. See Noel Carroll, “The Nature of Horror,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1987, pp. 51-9)

For me that begs the question: why are so many drawn to terror, awe and dread; why do we go to places of the imagination calibrated to provoke agitation, fear and disgust; and why zombies? The fictions of horror in print, movies, and other media are imaginative cultural responses to dis-ease and dread when conventional ways of doing things are under threat, when our understanding of the world and of human institutions are going through radical change. The 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal responded to new discoveries about the size and age of the cosmos and the removal of our planet from the centre to an insignificant corner of the universe with horrified astonishment. They utterly violated religious, philosophical and pre-modern pictures of the world where creation was supposed to be *all about us* and humanity its crown, its glory.

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in 1818 and captured the anguish and dread many felt over the displacement of traditional craftsmanship and the possibility of science going destructively, monstrosly awry. Herman Melville's 1853 "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" is a nightmarish depiction of the soul-sucking, mindless alienation of the urban, bureaucratic workplace. Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* is a threatening fever dream of porous international borders, repressed sexuality, and world-wide contagion. Movies in the 50s like *The Thing* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* wrestled with Cold War anxieties about alien ideologies, territorial invasion and mutable loyalties. *Rosemary's Baby* and *the Exorcist* manifest barely expressed terrors of apartment hunting in an unknown city, the inscrutability of neighbours and loved ones, and the violation of innocence.

Those drawn to these tales, in print and screen, try to imagine what they would do/how they would respond to these uncanny, uncertain, malignant and violent situations. We emerge from the strange, threatening, transgressive geography of horror in the printed page and the

darkened cinema and return to the comforts of family, home, work and civilized institutions with relief and recommitment. Or do we? Perhaps part of the power of these experiences comes from the fact that it enables us at once to face the truth of our own fates—age, work, ignorance, maladaptive skills, disease, and death—and to pass it off onto doomed surrogates, onto to others, and thus experience a momentary triumph in our own over-determined lives.

And don't discount the lure of *intense feeling*; once upon a time, before an era of omnipresent talking heads and images churned out by media and advertising, before Prozac, iPhones, central heating, standardized testing, and new age pabulum—life could be a little more intense; art, music and print more rare; the elements closer and more vivid; health more precarious. I'm not hankering to turn back the clock—but you get my drift. A close encounter with well-wrought tales and images of horror can provoke heightened emotional and physiological responses increasingly absent from the mundane world. The intensity of horror “fixes you in the present tense. Overwhelming terror,” Jason Zinoman writes, “may be the closest we ever get to the feeling of being born. (Jason Zinoman, quoted, “In brief” section, *TLS*, January 20, 2012)

Some people “like being scared,” writes family therapist Margaret Burr. From amusement park rides to gambling, to edgy relationships, to horror—think of that whoosh of feeling; it's an adrenaline rush that increases mental and physical capacities. And for a brief, intense moment, we connect just a bit with our ancestors who had to face and overcome nature's savagery. We—like they—get to be sorely tested, and survive. Here's one reason teens and young adult—the largest audience for horror—may be drawn to these narratives and images. They're not watching “Downton Abbey;” they're entering one of the most challenge-filled stages in their lives, and are connecting on a deep psychological level with their own need to

endure and overcome. “They’re readying themselves for the survival tasks of adulthood” in a very difficult time, and the monsters of horror are the personifications of what we fear.

Which brings me finally back to zombies. Horror stories about animated corpses brought back to life wreaking havoc on the living have been around for thousands of years. These mindless creatures with their relentless hunger for human flesh fill us with fear, loathing and dismay. They join their hapless kin of horror—Frankenstein’s monster, vampires, werewolves, demon-possessed adolescents and dolls—for myriad reasons having *everything to do* with our own fears, dread, and repressed desires. They are metaphors, sign-carriers pointing beyond themselves to the unease, disappointments, and anxieties we experience in our own lives and times. *The zombies are here* because of the strength of their contemporary metaphorical power.

Zombies are the wolves at the door: mortgages we can’t pay, relationships gone sour, the relentless aging of our all-to-human flesh, the fear of world-wide pandemics, the specter of our planet’s dwindling resources—the things that seem to keep coming at us and will not stop until we’re toast. They are the tsunami of want in consumer culture we can’t possibly keep pace with or outrun; they are the inundating greed of 21st century capitalism. Zombies are dead-end jobs, groupthink, the conformity of crowds, mindless videogame playing, and late-night TV channel surfing. They are the fear of having our extreme states of feeling and consciousness being nuked with meds into tranquilized, shambling stupefaction.

They are unnerving signifiers pointing to the seemingly empty husks of governments—I mean we feed them, the institutions appear to be there—but increasingly they can’t fill potholes, legislate a living wage, provide affordable housing, decent transit, and quality education. What are the myriad financial institutions with an economic net worth of zero that continue to operate because governments back them up with credit?—zombie banks. With consumer spending down

and commercial property values in freefall, what are people calling the late great temples of North America consumerism?—zombie malls. What’s an empty church, synagogue, temple? What are independent books stores, retail shops, and movie houses shuttered up, lights turned off, staff let go...? And where are the people?

What’s funny about the opening scenes of the movie *Shaun of the Dead* is that the heroes don’t even notice what’s happening all around them—it just looks like normal, undead life.

“Every zombie war is a war of attrition... a numbers game,” writes Chuck Klosterman. “In other words, similar to reading and deleting 400 work e-mails on a Monday morning or filling out paperwork that only generates more paperwork, or following Twitter gossip...or performing tedious tasks in which the true risk is being consumed by the avalanche....This is our collective fear projection: that we will be consumed.” (Klosterman)

But there’s more to it than Klosterman’s hip essay. Anyone who’s seen Romero’s *The Night of the Living Dead*, or any of the gazillion movies, TV shows, or books and comics that have been inspired by his nihilistic vision knows what has become *the* standard zombie narrative: First of all, it’s set in a post apocalyptic landscape; a worldwide zombie plague has crashed humanity; the infrastructure is gone; all the major institutions that order human life—the media, the government, the military, science and religion—have failed. And second: the survivors are few and scattered. “People are trapped somewhere with a growing zombie horde outside; and we watch the cohesion of the group unravel to the point at which the zombies can get the upper hand.” (see Jonathan Mayberry, “Take Me to Your Leader: Guiding the Masses through the Apocalypse with a Cracked Moral Compass,” and Kim Paffenroth, “‘For Love is Strong as Death’: Redeeming Values,” in *The Walking Dead*, from *Triumph of the Walking Dead: Robert Kirkman’s Zombie Epic on Page and Screen*, 219-221.)

“Modern day zombie stories,” writes Terrence Rafferty, “read like plague narratives, in which a panicky populace struggles to deal with a threat that is overwhelming, unceasing, and apparently uncontrollable....[The] prevailing values for the beleaguered survivors is a sort of siege mentality, a vigilance so constant and unremitting that it’s indistinguishable from the purest paranoia. This is not a state of mind to bring out the best in our old, tired human nature.” (Rafferty,

“Zombie Resurrection,” *NYTimes, Book Review*, Aug. 7, 2011) After awhile, it’s the reason, frankly, they’re hard to watch and take in: the grim formula becomes wearying and poisonous—like having to read *The Lord of the Flies* over and over again.

There are some moving exceptions; I’m thinking of passages in John Lindqvist’s novel *Handling the Dead* where the living are plagued with memory and guilt, and don’t want to let go of the dead—the words “forgiveness” and “love” appear over and over again—they’re recurring, keening notes in this fascinating book. And I can still vividly recall the shock I experienced in watching *Shaun of the Dead*, where Shaun’s mother and step-father, infected by zombie bites, grow calm, still, and then speak and act with dignified and loving frankness just before they metamorphose into the ravaging undead. “Yes,” a character in Lindqvist’s novel thinks, “ultimately this is about love.” “*Love?*”

Here I want to end by turning the zombie apocalypse trope on its ear. Turn to the pictures printed in the middle of our orders of service. They’re taken from a BBC documentary broadcast last week that told what I think is an inspiring, true life, anti-zombie story.

For almost three years, beginning in Spring of 1992, Bosnian Serb forces encircled and laid siege to the beautiful city of Sarajevo. From the surrounding hills, they shelled the city and cut down its citizens with sniper fire. In particular, they targeted the university and the National Library which they reduced to smoldering ruins. Not only were Serb forces attempting to terrorize and kill civilians, they ruthlessly aimed to wipe out Sarajevo’s centuries-old multicultural history, memory and identity—its soul.

The zombies were in the hills. The infrastructure collapsing. And how did Sarajevans respond?—in the ways we’ve learned from Rebecca Solnit’s book on catastrophes that we talked about a couple of years ago—they responded like human beings, not zombies. The Gazi Husrav

Beg Library in Sarajevo housed a priceless collection of over 10,000 irreplaceable manuscripts of Islamic culture and of the history of the Bosnian people. In the face of remorseless bombardment and murderous sniper fire, Mustafa Jahic and his staff boxed up all of the manuscripts and then courageously carried them by hand through the streets, braving shells and dodging bullets in order to deposit them in places of safety.

All the manuscripts miraculously survived the three year onslaught. When asked why he risked his life to save them, Abbas Letumba Hussein, the Library's watchman said: "The city had accepted me. I had a duty to save the treasures of Bosnia. Of course it was worth risking my life." Looking back, Mr Jahic said: "these are the treasures of civilization and they belong to everyone. Books are our past, our roots; and without a past there is no present, no future. I believe that saving them was equal to saving human lives."

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There is one thing I will say in praise of zombies—they call on us to live and love before we die; to savor relationships, to take time to feel and think, and to see what Gerard Manley Hopkins called pied beauty, dappled things/

fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And ál trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled...
swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
whose beauty is past change...

May we live before we die so that the world, dire as it is, will lose some of its terrors. May it be so.