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Dharma of the Living Dead: A Meditation on the Meaning of the Hollywood Zombie¹

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Abstract: This paper examines the religious implications of the modern zombie, which has achieved great popularity in the modern Western imagination. Today's zombie-craze can be traced from its roots in Haitian folklore through the 1960s counter-cultural revolution. The popularity of the zombie reflects the after-effects of the anti-authoritarianism of the 1960s. As holes appeared in what Peter Berger called the sacred canopy, previously held systems of meaning collapsed, leaving a growing uncertainty about life and death. In many cases, these holes were filled by alternative spiritualities and Eastern philosophy. I will demonstrate, using Martin Heidegger, how the modern zombie acts as a vessel for Buddhist teachings. As such, the zombie's popularity can be understood as a reflection of a present need to confront mortality and thus become an "authentic being."

Résumé : Cet écrit examine les implications religieuses du "zombie" moderne qui a atteint une popularité immense dans l'imagination de l'Ouest moderne. L'origine du zombi-vogue d'aujourd'hui peut être tracée à ses racines dans le folklore haïtien et la révolution contra-culturelle des années soixante. La popularité du zombie reflète les séquelles du sentiment d'anti-autoritarisme des années soixante. Avec l'apparition de déficiences dans ce que Peter Berger a surnommé "The Sacred Canopy", les préceptes de raison d'être d'antan se sont effondrés, créant une incertitude croissante en ce qui concerne la vie et la mort. Dans bien des cas, on a remédié à ces déficiences par des spiritualités alternatives et des philosophies de l'Est. Je démontrerai, utilisant Martin Heidegger, comment le zombie moderne sert de "vaisseau" pour les enseignements

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bouddhistes. De ce fait, la popularité du zombi peut être interprétée comme le reflet d'un besoin présent de confronter la mortalité et ainsi devenir un "être authentique."

Keywords

Buddhism, zombies, death, mortality, Heidegger, popular culture, film, horror, religion,

Mots clés

Le bouddhisme, les zombies, la mort, la mortalité, Heidegger, la culture populaire, le film, l'horreur, la religion

We are in the midst of a zombie-craze. Zombies have reached never-before-seen heights of popularity, appearing widely not only in film but also in comic books, graphic novels, literature, video games – major cities across North America have become home to organized zombie walks where sometimes hundreds of people dress as the risen dead and wander *en masse* creating gruesome flash-mobs.² Zombies first came to a wide public attention in the early twentieth century, especially with Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), which introduced the zombie to the monstrous roster of the 1930s' horror-movie-cycle. Alongside bigger, stronger, smarter, and more sympathetic creatures like King Kong, Mr. Hyde, Dracula, The Mummy, and Frankenstein's monster, the mindless, servile zombie paled by comparison. Still, zombies have remained a feature of cinema for over seventy years. Over this span, zombies have evolved considerably, going through their most radical transformation with George A. Romero's classic *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. This particular film and its four sequels have shaped the modern zombie and created their own sub-genre within horror fiction and cinema. Today's zombie-craze stems from Romero's own work and the recognition of the genius of his films. Critics have analyzed Romero's zombie films from a number of angles, including Marxist, psychoanalytic, and post-colonial, with at least one recent theological spin as well. Despite the range of interpretations given to these movies, there remains the matter of the zombie itself. Robin Wood, for one, discusses the first three of Romero's zombie films, noting with great interest the divergence of their meanings and pointing out that the zombie's meaning in each film changes *in relation to* the characters of the given film (Wood, 2003: 101–119 & 287–294). This creature continues to appear time and again, fitting any number of culturally specific ideological agendas. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari went so far as to say that, "[t]he only modern myth is the myth of zombies" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005: 335). I intend to analyze the zombie as a symbol in itself, a symbol that transcends the bounds of specific films.

The present paper aims to explain the zombie in light of its origins in Haitian Vodou, via African spirituality, and how this product of a particular culture has been adapted to modern times. In its original context, the zombie will be seen to have embodied a fear of slavery whether economic, political, or spiritual. In African traditions, creatures akin to zombies are often described in relation to forced servitude, an image further accentuated in the Haitian context (cf. Ackermann and Gauthier, 1991; Blier, 1995; Corzani, 1994; Geschiere, 1997; Niehaus, 2005). Through distinctly Christian symbolism, the zombie

can be seen to represent a subversive rejection of an enforced Catholicism – Vodou’s “antagonistic mentor,” in Jack Cosentino’s words (Cosentino 1995: 26). The transformation from a Haitian mindless slave to the flesh-eating ghoul of the modern cinema is a radical shift. That these new creatures are recognized as zombies, however, illustrates the importance of the earliest associations for a modern understanding of the creature itself. That the modern zombie grows out of the 1960s counter-cultural revolution will be seen as critical to the modern zombie’s retaining both the elements of slavery and anti-authoritarianism (and so, anti-Christian-ism). The associations with Haitian zombies have been supplemented by anxieties growing from the anomie resulting from a monolithic authority structure weakened by secularism, pluralism, and cultural relativity. Zombies, thus, have become slaves without masters, subject to their basest desires and without hope of divine salvation. An attempt will be made, then, to illustrate how these modern zombies can be viewed through a Buddhist lens which allows for a kind of salvation from death that does not require a supernatural theodicy. Relating Buddhist notions of life and death to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, this paper will demonstrate how the modern zombie acts as teacher, pointing the intelligent viewer towards an authentic awareness of one’s self in order to live with the reality of death as a successful member of society.

When Deleuze and Guattari refer to the zombie as the only modern myth, they come at it from a clearly Freudian-Marxist view, in which capitalism is the root of the so-called death drive. Though considering the zombie-myth shortly after the release of *Night of the Living Dead*, their ideas retain scholarly interest thirty years later (cf. Adkins, 2007). As people become de-humanized by commodification, they can increasingly look forward only to death. The zombie, then, comes to represent the de-humanized person oppressed by anonymous corporate overlords. Certainly, many modern zombie depictions, and especially Romero’s, lend themselves well to a Marxist interpretation. But this is not all there is to the zombie. For one thing, other movie monsters can often be equally seen as representations of the oppression of the anonymous corporation.³ Further, not all zombie images lend themselves immediately to such a reduction.⁴ This is but one interpretation of the *role* of the zombie in specific films. This notion of the zombie as slave does, however, have roots in its Haitian origins, and it is to these origins that we must first turn to get an adequate grasp of the creature’s meaning.

Stories of the dead returning to the realm of the living, either as spirits or walking corpses, exist cross-culturally throughout recorded history. The zombie specifically, however, derives from the historical context of Haiti and the African diaspora.⁵ Hispaniola, the island of which Haiti constitutes the western third (the eastern two-thirds being today the Dominican Republic), was originally a Spanish colony discovered by Christopher Columbus. From the early sixteenth century, the island received African slaves to aid in the colonization process. San Domingue, as Haiti was then named, was given to France in the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697. Spanish interest in the island waned, and San Domingue outstripped the Spanish Santo-Domingo (present-day Dominican Republic), its larger neighbor, in both wealth and population, soon after becoming the richest and most populous European colony in the Caribbean. Over the next century, the French imported unprecedented numbers of slaves to the island. By the time of the French Revolution, San Domingue was home to an estimated 500,000 slaves, who

outnumbered their French masters by a ratio of 10 to 1. The spark of revolution first flickered in Haiti in 1791 and took thirteen years to fully ignite, bringing independence from France in 1804. Haiti thereby became only the second independent nation in the New World, after the United States of America, and its first independent Black state. This massive, and successful, slave revolt struck fear into slave-owners throughout the New World, and in the United States in particular, affecting American attitudes towards Haiti to this day.

The slave population of Haiti, as large as it was, was composed of a wide array of African cultures. In the face of forced dispossession, the diverse groupings found common ground in their shared African identity. This shared identity was further cemented in a response to the forceful attempts at conversion made by the Catholic Church, legislated by the so-called *Code Noir* (cf. Breathett, 1988). Terry Rey and Karen Richman point out that a large proportion of the Haitian slave population had already developed a syncretized religious *habitus* merging Catholicism with traditional Kongolese spirituality (Rey and Richman, forthcoming).⁶ While the roots of syncretism can thus be traced to Africa, rather than it finding its origins in the New World, the conditions under which this syncretism was imported can be seen to further alter the currents of its development. The Haitian slave population combined Catholicism with the variety of traditions carried with them from Africa, creating the syncretism of beliefs now known as Vodou (the preferred spelling over the more popularly used Voodoo). With the revolution and independence, the Catholic Church pulled its priests out of the island nation and waged a war of words against the perceived heathenism of its people.

The Catholic anti-Haitian/anti-Vodou propaganda incited and encouraged the fears latent in American slave-holders. Stories of Haitian savagery spread throughout the United States, replete with tales of magic, child sacrifice, and cannibalism. James Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, published in the early twentieth century, reflects a repugnant colonial ignorance with long-lasting consequences. What ought to be a reliable academic source negatively describes the Haitian religion, stating: "Voodoo is devil-worship and fetishism brought from the Gold Coast of Africa by negro captives to the United States and West Indies. Its chief sacrifice is a girl child, referred to by the initiates as 'the goat without horns.' . . . , as p. 8 There is a regular priesthood to intimidate and rob the devotees . . ." (Owen, 1908-1922: 640). Depictions of Haiti as a Caribbean version of the "Dark Continent" heightened cultural anxieties towards the former slave colony, and eventually facilitated an American takeover of Haiti in 1915. The invasion was ostensibly carried out in order to protect Haiti from the Germans, but it did nothing to ingratiate Haiti in the American mind. Neo-colonial rhetoric referring to the lack of civility among inhabitants and their inability to rule themselves was used to justify the continued occupation of Haiti. A 1920 issue of *National Geographic* commented on the US occupation in an article titled, "Haiti and Its Regeneration by the United States." "Here," the magazine says of Haiti, "in the elemental wilderness, the natives rapidly forgot their thin veneer of Christian civilization and reverted to utter, unthinking animalism, swayed only by fear of local bandit chiefs and the black magic of voodoo witch doctors" (Rhodes, 2001: 73). Haitians did not take kindly to a re-imposed foreign rule, and civil unrest forced the Americans to withdraw earlier than had been originally planned. Haiti returned to self-rule in 1934, two years ahead of schedule.

Shortly before this withdrawal, Voodoo made its big screen debut with Bela Lugosi's performance in *White Zombie* (1932).

Before discussing its appearance in film, we must discuss the Haitian view of the zombie in the context outlined above. In African folklore, the zombie is a creature born of evil magic. A sorcerer, called a *bokor* (not to be confused with Vodou priests and priestesses, respectively termed *houngans* and *manbo*), is believed to have the power to create a zombie. The *bokor* can revive a recently dead person and turn him or her into a mindless slave by removing a crucial spiritual component of his or her being. Haitians believe humans to have two spirits, one higher (*gros bon ange*) and constituting the conscious self, or soul, and a lesser spirit (*ti bon ange*), which is responsible for basic bodily functions.⁷ Upon death, the *gros bon ange* leaves the body, though it may remain nearby for several days. If left unguarded, the body might fall into the hands of a *bokor* who can use his magic to trap the *gros bon ange* in a jar, tying the *ti bon ange* to the body, and thus allowing the body to be animated, but without the self within it. The animated corpse is thus a slave to the evil sorcerer for as long as it is needed. These sorcerers are thought to use their magical slaves to work for them, or to otherwise make their own lives easier. Often enough, when the sorcerers are finished with a given zombie, they might sell it to another slave-master or simply sell the animated corpse to a butcher for meat.

Reports of real zombies are relatively common in Haiti. Medical professionals in Haiti are accustomed to the appearance of zombies, believed to have somehow gained freedom from their captors. Louis Mars estimates that as many as a thousand new cases of zombification appear every year (Littlewood and Douyon, 1997). These real zombies appear to display various symptoms of mental deficiency or illness (Littlewood and Douyon, 1997), though physiological causes have also been determined, such as the potential use of a numbing poison that can induce a death-like state (Davis, 1988). Wade Davis, who discovered a poison that is said to be used to make zombies, also suggests that zombification plays a social role (Davis, 1988: 213–240). Davis argues that before a person can be subject to zombification, he or she must first be found to have broken some specific social norms, such as stealing the wife of another man, and thus it exerts a positive social control. The folklore of the zombie is intertwined with the social functioning of Haiti to the extent that actual zombies appear and laws have been put in place to govern them and their creation.⁸

The zombie-as-slave, while found in African tradition, takes on a more poignant significance given Haiti's role in the history of the slave-trade. Zombies are not feared in Haiti, but are rather the object of pity. Those believed to be zombies are taken in by relatives, sometimes adopted and cared for. Rather than the zombie itself, what is truly feared is the possibility of being returned to slavery, cast in the folklore as occurring through the powers of a sorcerer. As Deleuze and Guattari observed earlier, the zombie/slave is de-humanized and so loses its self-hood. For those who struggled mightily to gain freedom and so recognition as independent people in their own right, the prospect of losing self-determination again remains an ever-present fear; the American occupation of Haiti is a reminder of the possibility. The idea of becoming a slave can be equated with the fear of death in that both might represent a loss of freedom and ultimately of the self, and so the zombie is a person who has both died and become enslaved.

Given the Catholic history in Haiti, it is not surprising that some aspects of Christian symbolism would appear even in such a uniquely Haitian creature. Jack Corzani explains how this should come as no surprise, "since the West Indians generally associated the terrors of African witchcraft and the horrors of their American slavery with the demons of Christianity" (Corzani, 1994: 134). In comparing death with slavery, the zombie/slave is literally a resurrected body. The slave-masters of Haiti were not solely economic or political but religious as well. The Church in Haiti was yet another arm of European oppression. The notion of a Christian resurrection foisted upon the slave population represents the possibility, if the Christian doctrine of a final resurrection is correct, for a return to eternal subjugation. I am not trying to suggest here that all Haitians will have read the symbolism in this way, but rather only pointing out that given the circumstances, such a reading could have been made. Certainly, from the perspective of the Christian, the zombie blatantly smacks of blasphemy as a perversion of the resurrection. It is well worth noting that the traditional African zombie does not necessarily appear as a risen corpse, but more often is an enslaved spirit, called a *zombie astral*, much like a genie in a bottle (Ackermann and Gauthier, 1991). That the latter has all but disappeared in the post-Haitian zombie folklore is significant. Along similar lines, it is interesting to note that the idea that a *bokor* might sell a zombie for food is disturbing not so much for the fate of the corpse, but for the belief that eating the flesh of a zombie might prove fatal, or will at least make one seriously ill. Again, Christian symbols are recognized and rejected here. Communion is the central feature of Christian ritual practice, wherein the body and blood of Christ are eaten. In Catholicism, with the doctrine of transubstantiation, the eating of flesh and blood is taken literally. For Christians, this is a communion with Jesus Christ, the savior who died and was raised for the sins of humankind. In another perspective, this is the flesh and blood of a man who died and came back to life. It is no matter that the folklore provides an evil wizard as the source of zombification, as the symbols used to depict the zombie are patently Christian. Further, the repulsion caused by the idea of eating the flesh of a zombie suggests a surreptitious rejection of the core ritual of those self-same oppressors. For Haitians, then, the zombie can represent the monster of the loss of self through slavery and subjugation both physical and spiritual.

Through to the 1960s, zombies lurched across screens at the whim of many masters, sometimes the result of Vodou, but just as often the slave-masters were invaders from outer space, mad scientists, or even Nazis. What is especially important to note, however, is that throughout this period zombies remained enslaved by some master. With George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), this was eliminated, freeing the zombies on their own recognizance and unleashing the horror of the modern zombie that has swept all other monsters aside in terms of sheer popularity. Romero introduced several new details to the lore of zombies, and essentially re-created the monster, thereby establishing a new sub-genre of zombie-horror. Though my sense is that my reading of zombies can be applied across the zombie-genre generally, for the specific purposes of this paper I will focus attention on the post-Romero zombie, especially those most closely adhering to his "rules."⁹

R. H. W. Dillard (Dillard, 1973; Dillard, 1987) wrote what has been described as one of the earliest, and still among the most convincing, interpretations of Romero's classic (Waller, 1987). Dillard, among others, sought to come to some understanding of the

underlying meaning behind *Night of the Living Dead* and its popularity. Though Dillard makes some useful points, he ultimately misses the point of the significance of the monster itself. He acknowledges the importance of the fear of death, but glosses over this in favor of the fear of the dead themselves as more important to the film. Certainly, in Romero's vision, the risen dead are threats. They have returned to life without a master, save for their insatiable appetite for living flesh. Dillard begins with some discussion of the fear of the dead as a cross-culturally occurring human experience, which is certainly true. He points out that the risen dead unleash this "ancient fear" upon both the characters and audience members. He dismisses this fear as the central fear, however, pointing out that the characters quickly discover that the walking corpses have no real power and can be kept at bay with a torch and thwarted with a swift blow to the head.

Dillard criticizes some claims made by other critics at the time of the film's release who suggested that *Night of the Living Dead* was an anti-Vietnam-war piece (Dillard, 1973; Dillard, 1987). Just as earlier critics had linked *White Zombie* and other horror films to the angst of the time through the Great Depression, so too critics read Romero's film as a reflection of the uncertainties of its time. Certainly, there is something to be said for such an argument, but as Dillard points out, this tells us little about the uniqueness of Romero's zombies, such an analysis applying just as readily to other contemporary films. Similar kinds of explanations have been made of other of Romero's films. His first sequel, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), takes place in a mall, allowing for a scathing criticism of capitalism and consumerist society as the living *and* the zombies become mindless consumers wandering the mall's corridors. Steven Shaviro, sees "the life-in-death of the zombie [as] a nearly perfect allegory for the inner logic of capitalism, whether this be taken in the sense of the exploitation of living labor by dead labor, the deathlike regimentation of factories and other social spaces, or the artificial, externally driven stimulation of consumers" (Shaviro, 1993: 83). Such an interpretation gains credibility from the Haitian context as the rich are called *gros manjeurs* and the poor described as being eaten (Sheller, 2003: 146). Wood offers an excellent analysis of Romero's films ranging over racial and gender issues, as well as a psycho-analytic approach to family and sexuality (Wood, 2003: 101–119 & 287–294). The zombie as slave can be seen as symbolizing the slavery of the masses to masters corporate, political, or militaristic, and so on. Francis Gooding describes the range of meanings available when zombies are actors, referring here specifically to the original *Dawn of the Dead*:

Completely overdetermined in its meanings, it also contains an allegory of the emptiness of consumer culture; a picture of the doomed fantasy that the privileged can maintain their control of the world's wealth; a commentary on class and race distinctions; a morality tale about cruelty; manifestations of a lingering fear of communism, and so on. (Gooding, 2007: 27)

Certainly, such interpretations work, but they relate to the zombie only insofar as they focus on one aspect of its being.

Romero's zombies differ greatly from the established folklore of Haiti, or even of previous zombie movies. In fact, Romero did not originally use the term to describe his monsters, referring to them instead as ghouls, or the walking dead. That viewers and

critics labeled the creatures as zombies is important in its own right, illustrating a desire to attach Haitian notions of the zombie to the flesh-eating corpses devised by Romero. That viewers and readers now recognize the zombie not only in Romero's monster but in all manner of revenants is evidence that the aspect of the walking dead that points specifically to the zombie is crucial today.¹⁰ The actual inspiration for Romero's creatures is the vampires of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (Matheson, 1954).¹¹

Matheson's novel tells the story of the last living survivor of a plague that has turned the rest of humanity into vampires. Matheson's protagonist (Neville) secures his home during the day, when the vampires must hide from the sun, by placing garlic, mirrors, and crosses on the outside of his house. Further, Neville makes daily forays into the vampires' homes to drive stakes through their hearts. Nightly, monstrous, animalistic vampires surround his house calling out to him to surrender himself to them. The shock of the novel comes with the realization that in addition to these monstrous vampires who harass Neville, there is also a new breed of intelligent vampire who have adapted to life with the plague. For these intelligent vampires, Neville is seen as the monster as he indiscriminately destroys vampires in their sleep regardless of whether they are monstrous or intelligent. Gregory Waller points out: "As the vampire hunter, Neville is no more an embodiment of Good than the undead are an embodiment of Evil" (Waller, 1986: 258). More than simply a reversal of dichotomies, *I Am Legend's* greatest feat is in casting the protagonist who hides behind the traditional Christian defenses against vampires not as the hero but as unaware of his own status as villain. Though following the argument further would take the present paper far off course, it is also worth noting that Matheson is influenced by Theosophy and admits to finding ways to embed this metaphysical philosophy into his fiction (Matheson, 1993: 11). For now, the most significant implication of Matheson's impact on zombie lore comes from his revolutionary view of the Christian dominant order being overturned.

Romero transformed Matheson's creatures from vampires to what have come to be known as zombies. Instead of craving human blood, these new creatures desire human flesh. Romero's ghouls have none of the weaknesses of vampires. They are able to walk in broad daylight; are immune to garlic, and do not respond to any holy symbols. In removing the supernatural elements from the creature, Romero introduced a monster that was entirely human, and in so doing exploded the normal dichotomy of Us versus Them. Now, Them were Us. In a recent article, Francis Gooding places the zombie in the context of normalized states of life and death, and argues that the zombie in Romero represents a complete break-down in society as the result of the disintegration of roles for the dead and the living. In the West, "The dead must always die, and so must the living live; confusion is not tolerable" (Gooding, 2007: 29). In this way, Romero incorporates Matheson's exploding of black-and-white definitions of life and death and good and evil. Robin Wood believes that this effect of Romero's films "represents the most progressive potentialities of the horror film, the possibility of breaking the impasse of the monster/normality relationship . . ." (Wood, 2003: 108).

The rules for Romero's "zombies" were laid out in the first two of his films, and have been fairly well adhered to by zombie movies ever since. Basically, the recently dead have risen from their graves with the sole purpose of devouring the living. No certain explanation is given for the rising of the dead, though different movies suggest the likes

of radiation from space, nuclear radiation, toxic waste, a virus, or a punishment from God. A person bitten by a zombie will become infected and also transform into a zombie. The zombies have no special ability whatsoever (aside from their nature as un-dead), and are in fact normally limited in both physical mobility and mental aptitude. The walking dead will generally ignore all wounds inflicted upon them except that blows to the head which destroy the brain will cause the zombie to “die.” While survivors can usually outsmart the zombies and are able to physically handle a few at a time, attempts to destroy all zombies are fruitless as the horde simply keeps growing as more and more humans are transformed. Conrad Ostwalt recognizes the increasing popularity of apocalyptic films which focus on a secular end of the world, though his analysis of these ignores the zombie apocalypse (Ostwalt, 1995; Ostwalt, 2000). Ostwalt argues that the secular apocalypse is one that can be held off by human ingenuity and science, and so ignores the unavoidable end predicted in Jewish and Christian eschatology. Others, like Charles Mitchell, consider the zombie apocalypse to be within the realm of end-of-the-world cinema and, thus, unavoidable (Mitchell, 2001). The zombie apocalypse is one that allows for the success of no human ingenuity.¹²

In terms of *apocalypsis*, I contend that the zombie-craze represents the recognition of revealed truth in the zombie, however secular such a truth may be. The zombie apocalyptic offers a wide array of examples of human attempts to overcome the onslaught of the dead, but to no avail. Some have suggested that Romero puts forth a nihilistic, or at least extremely cynical, view of the world; it matters not what anyone does because ultimately we all die and become zombies. Furthermore, the human characters tend to come into conflict with one another in the face of impossible odds, often resulting in the facilitation of their own downfall. Dillard concludes that rather than a fear of death or the dead, what the viewer is to take away from zombie films is “the fear of life itself,” and ends his paper stating that in the face of life, “there is nothing we can do that will make any difference at all” (Dillard 1987: 22 & 28). Kim Paffenroth recognizes in this futility a criticism of selfishness rather than a fear of the world around us:

zombie movies appreciate and mock that uniquely modern and particularly American predilection, fierce individualism, as something that can sometimes temporarily save us in a crisis, but which can also doom us in the long run. [. . .] as the crisis continued, unless our individualism could give way to feelings of trust, sharing, and community, we would be doomed as our individual supplies of ammunition and food gave out and we fell to fighting ourselves. (Paffenroth, 2006: 21)

Paffenroth’s argument has support. The assertion has been made that the fear of the dead is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, universal human fears. Akop Nazaretyan recently argued that the fear of the dead actually played an evolutionary role in the development of society, suggesting that those early humans who feared the dead made more efforts to keep their own people alive and to foster a community, the alternative being a dog-eat-dog world where the living indiscriminately killed their own (Nazaretyan, 2005). In this light, the walking dead do represent a form of social control aimed at limiting selfishness and promoting community. As a Christian theologian, Paffenroth goes on to suggest that the moral of the zombie apocalypse is that “the only way for people to be really happy is

by loving God in community with other human beings, and not by selfishly loving and accumulating material possessions on their own" (Paffenroth, 2006: 22). Though he can be found to have some sociological and anthropological support for his general contention, Paffenroth seeks to demonstrate how such films can be applied to a (particular) Christian way of thinking. Though Paffenroth correctly makes the observation that the zombie embodies a lesson against individualism and selfishness, his desire to add God to the equation stems more from an ideology he brings to the material than it does from an analysis of the zombie itself. By way of example, when discussing *Night of the Living Dead* Paffenroth comes to the conclusion that, while the characters all end badly, the supremacy of faith in God is still established. Despite the fact that religious faith and scientific reason both fail to save the lives of the protagonists, faith does not promise to save the *physical* self and so, in the end, remains unscathed (Paffenroth, 2006: 41–43). However, both the Haitian Vodou origins of the zombie and the influences of the 1960s counter-culture would suggest a limited applicability of specifically Christian elements.

As was shown above, the zombie can be seen to represent a subversive rejection of Christianity and the idea of a final resurrection. In recognizing the implications of Haitian history on the zombie-as-slave, the associations with Christianity are unavoidable. Many of these same associations – a sense of the majority's oppression and a rejection of all forms of authority – appeared clearly in the 1960s. Unlike previous zombies, however, the modern zombie is raised under the control of no master at all in a completely God-less resurrection. Those who are raised remain the self-less, soul-less, corrupt bodies that they were at death (and perhaps were also in life). When Romero stripped Matheson's vampires of their weaknesses, he stripped the power of God to stop them. Paffenroth responds paradoxically to the state of godlessness in Romero's works (and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* [2004]) as a "sobering" reminder of what the world would be like without faith and hope. Though love and charity may appear in the films, "Without faith and hope, even love fails, because God, the only real and eternal object of all love, is not there to draw it upwards and complete it" (Paffenroth, 2006: 113). While Paffenroth does make some useful observations in terms of lessons against selfishness and hyper-individualism, his Christian reading ignores important details. For one thing, many characters in these movies *do* have faith and resort to prayer and holy symbols to no avail. This is not a world without faith that is being depicted, but a world where faith makes absolutely no difference. As Wood asserts, "the social order (regarded as in all Romero's films as obsolete and discredited) *can't* be restored" (Wood, 2003: 105).¹³

In fact, I would agree that the films at face value appeal to a faithless world-view. *Night of the Living Dead* came out in the midst of the counter-cultural revolution during a period in which all forms of authority were being overturned. Many critics have recognized the racial, feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-war, and generally anti-authoritarian stances in Romero's films. Few, if any, have paid much heed to the religious implications, however. When religion appears in these films, it is generally shown to be ineffective. *Night of the Living Dead* opens with a zombie attacking a girl praying in a cemetery. *Day of the Dead* (1985) includes a character who sacrifices himself to zombies while clutching his crucifix as he is devoured. *Dawn of the Dead* includes a one-legged Catholic priest who laments the power shift from recognized authority to zombie, as well as both a zombie-nun and zombie-Hari Krishna. The remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004)

includes an atheistic church organist, as well as a television evangelist who preaches God's wrath as the meaning behind the zombie apocalypse. And *28 Days Later* (2002) introduces the zombies infesting a church led by their priest in attacking the protagonist. In a post-modern culture, there is no reverence for religion.

Peter Berger describes a "sacred canopy" that covers society and provides meaning to all those who dwell under it (Berger, 1967). In the context of the West, a predominantly Christian theodicy lay at the foundation of social authority structures. The Enlightenment wore away at the authority held by religion, leading to an increasing tendency towards secularization. The legitimacy of not only religious authority but an increasingly secular public life came to a breaking point during the 1960s with negative public reactions to racial segregation, gender equality, and the war in Vietnam, among other things. Berger uses the term "nomos" to define society's norms. He explains that, composed by a constantly changing collective of individuals, the nomos is subject to change. A complete lack of stability, however, would result in chaos and anomie, and so religion bestows a sacred order upon the nomos (thereby forming the sacred canopy), thus legitimating it despite the tendency towards change. The 1960s represented a turning point as the prevailing nomos finally lost its legitimacy as a critical mass of society moved against it. The weight of public sentiment created a revolutionary spirit that fought against the mainstream, Christian-founded authority structures. Competing beliefs had progressively moved onto the stage, punching holes in the sacred canopy. With a lack of confidence in the old theodicy, people turned to new ideas to bring meaning to life. Many adopted some form of humanism, while others turned to alternative spiritualities, some of which had been imported as American interests in Asia grew. Asian religion had been attracting interest in North America since the late nineteenth century, though involvement in WWII and Vietnam and the exile of the Dalai Lama from Tibet raised awareness of Buddhism especially. A panoply of new religions formed in the wake of the canopy's rending. Many of these have been influenced by Eastern religions; others focus on innate human potential; some reject Christianity outright in favor of pre-Christian-inspired beliefs; while still others redefine Christianity itself. The common thread is a rejection of traditional forms of authority. Just as the Haitian zombie can be seen to represent the perversion of a rejected authority's resurrection, so too does the modern zombie indicate the rejection of the dominant authority and the resurrection that comes with it.

What this godless resurrection also illustrates, however, is an utter fear in the face of death. The zombie is the dead. Becoming a zombie occurs at death. The mystery of death had, under Berger's sacred canopy, been effectively explained by the doctrine of resurrection and the judgment of the good and the evil. With the authority of that message disabled, the mystery of death, and with it the problem of evil, returns to the fore as a problem that requires solving. Ernest Becker described Western culture as "death denying" (Becker, 1973), but zombies do just the opposite – they force death upon the viewer relentlessly. The horror of the zombie lies, to a large extent, in the realization that each of us will die regardless of what we might do to forestall it, and that as a culture, we have now rejected our traditional source of solace.

Martin Heidegger described human existence as Being-toward-death (Heidegger, 1996). He described the individual Being (*Dasein*) as individuated by the knowledge

of one's finitude. Individuation can be seen as having two components: firstly, it serves to delineate the boundaries of the self and thus create an individual, but secondly, it also serves to create an individual who functions properly in society. The individual *Dasein* finds meaning only in relation to society and others, but it also finds form only through recognition of its own self. Society, for its part, seeks to ignore death as irrelevant to the big picture. Society, in denying death, then also denies the authenticity of the self that is defined by it. *Dasein* is torn by the individuation of the self, which requires an acknowledgment of eventual cessation and the need to find meaning in a society that denies death. Heidegger describes the authentic self as that which acknowledges its own finitude and incorporates it; the inauthentic self is one that denies death and flees it. The inauthentic self lives to please society, and so does not live as an individuated self at all. The authentic self is one that is both self and member of society. Becker's denial of death points to the inauthentic *Dasein*. More subtly, however, a belief in eternal life also flees from the acceptance of finitude and so prevents the individuation of selves. Paffenroth complains of a hyper-individualism in Western culture, but this is not what Heidegger intends by the individuated *Dasein*. The hyper-individual is similarly inauthentic in being unable to conceive of its own demise. It is this hyper-individual, or inauthentic *Dasein*, that finds horror in death and the godless resurrection of zombies. Essentially, the inauthentic *Dasein* flees from death and runs into the arms of society, thus failing to be individuated and become a fulfilled self. How, then, can one come to accept death authentically and avoid a self-less state of slavery to the fear of our own mortality and the societal denial of death? Heidegger's ideas mesh in some respects with Eastern philosophy, especially Buddhism, and much has been said about Heidegger's own interest in these philosophies (May, 1996; Parkes, 1987).

The core of Buddhism rests in the Four Noble Truths, central to which are the notions of attachment, impermanence, and suffering. The Buddha came to the realization that all things come to an end, and that all that we see as real is in fact impermanent and ever-changing. That reality is at all static is an illusion, and this impermanence applies to all things, including the self. The most important realization that one must make is that the self is impermanent and ever-changing. In Buddhism, there is no eternal soul, but only a constantly changing state of flux, a collection of aggregates that form and reform at every moment. I have the sense of having been the self-same person I was yesterday and last week. I may recognize some changes in my self over time, but there remains a sense of coherence through these changes that gives a sense of permanence. From the Buddha's perspective, however, the self that I am now is not the same self as was a moment ago, or the one that will be tomorrow. Subtle changes occur over time which make one moment's self different, if even slightly, from the next's. The self that I was even a moment ago has already changed and so is gone forever. Essentially, we move through a series of little deaths throughout life. Our final death is but another change like any other.

Of course, stemming from an Indian background, Buddhism accepts a belief in rebirth. At death, I will likely be reborn. The new birth that I will have will be as a significantly different self from the one I am now, but the self that I am now is significantly different from the one that I had upon my birth into this present life. In any event, birth, death, and rebirth represent an ongoing cycle (*samsara*) in which the self fluctuates, dying and being reborn in every moment.

That we are attached to permanency, especially of our selves, results in much suffering since we cannot grasp anything for more than a moment before it is gone and has been replaced by something new. When I accept the illusion of my own permanence, I am unable to accept its eventual end and so reject death. In the Buddhist world-view, my attachment to life will be enough to have me reborn. If I do not want to end, then I will be reborn upon death. Unlike a theory of resurrection that teaches that the resurrected self will be the exact same one that lived, Buddhist rebirth is simply a continuing process of changing selves moving through *samsara*. The self that I am, regardless of religious belief, is incomplete. I have wants and desires that require fulfillment. Though centuries of debate over the nature of resurrection have yet to reach a unanimous conclusion, the importance of the eternity of the *individual* remains central.¹⁴ Some, like Hans Küng, make the case that in losing one's self in the presence of God one in fact gains the fulfillment of the self. According to Küng, "[b]y entering into the infinite, the finite person loses his limits, so that the present contrast of personal and impersonal is transcended and transformed into the *transpersonal*" (Küng, 1984: 112; italics in original). On the other hand, what remains important for the average Christian is that the self that one recognizes in the present life remains so in the next. As the former Archdeacon of Durham, Michael Perry, puts it: "Unless John Jones knows that he has survived and that he is still John Jones despite the traumatic experience [death] through which he has gone, no meaning can be given to the word 'survival'" (Perry, 1975: 9). Regardless of doctrines suggesting some perfection of the self through resurrection, the importance of the individual remains paramount. From a Buddhist perspective, however, all suffering is caused by attachments and in order to get over my attachment to things I must literally get over my self. In the Buddhist context, the self must be completely overcome. In Heidegger's terms, *Dasein* must incorporate its finitude and in so doing become completely individuated. A self without end is not a self at all. The end provides the defining limit of the self. In such an individuation, the self can be realized with an end and so life lived accordingly as an authentic, albeit temporary, Being.

The zombie resurrection illustrates the rebirth of the self that fears death. The protagonists struggle tooth and nail to avoid becoming one of the dead, but all of their efforts ultimately fail. Attachment to life forces them to fight, but fighting for life does nothing to avoid rebirth. In this case, the rebirth as zombie emphasizes the suffering inherent in the cycle of *samsara*, birth and death. The zombie seeks only the fulfillment of its craving for flesh, an insatiable and fruitless hunger. A scene in *Day of the Dead* drives home the pointlessness of the zombie appetite as one captured zombie continues to try to eat despite the fact that its internal organs have been removed and so the "food" simply drops to the floor upon being swallowed. Just as the living fight for their lives, so too do the zombies strive for nourishment, both to no avail. So, the pointlessness of craving and attachment are plainly illustrated. The zombie presents a mirror to the self and the attachment thereto. So long as we remain attached to this life, we have only further suffering to look forward to in the next.

There exist varying Buddhist practices of meditation focused upon death or the dead body.¹⁵ The goal in these efforts is to drive home the reality of personal impermanence and in so doing expose the pointlessness of attachment to any kind of permanent self. The Buddha himself became enlightened upon his encounter with the finitude of death; after

meeting first an old man, then a sick man, and a finally a corpse, Gautama realized the impermanence of life and the suffering of being attached to it. Therefore, the meditation on death can provide an effective means to the cessation of attachment. One form of the meditation on death simply has the individual sit alone in private to contemplate the fact of his or her eventual death. The effort is to remind one's self that death will come to everyone, including oneself. Another form, which corresponds closely to the act of watching a zombie film, is the meditation on the foulness of the corpse.¹⁶ Here the meditator is instructed to sit next to a corpse, perhaps one awaiting cremation, and meditate over its state. The gory details of the body's corruption are central to the meditation. Alan Klima quotes the description of one Buddhist nun: "This body opens up for you to see. You see bodily ooze. Clear ooze like in the brain; thick, filmy ooze and clear ooze. The body splits open into intestines, intestines the size of your wrist, *na*. Liver, kidneys, intestines, the stomach, you can see it all" (Klima, 2001: 554; cf. Klima, 2002). Certainly, such imagery is ever-present in zombie cinema. The Pali canon (Buddhist scriptures) teaches the meditator to consider the dead body, and to think: "As this [my body] is, so that is; as that is, so this is," and further, "Indeed this [my] body is of this [foul] nature, will become like this, and cannot escape this" (Bond, 1980: 247).¹⁷ Through observing the corpse and realizing the connection to oneself, the meditator can realize both the impermanence of things as well as the suffering inherent in attachment to the body. The foulness of the body is meant to powerfully bring home the fact that the body is in a state of perpetual dying, even throughout what we consider life. As Klima notes, "the corpse in its gory, abject, and repulsive state is the most desirable aesthetic" (Klima, 2001: 562). Such meditations force the mindful to become aware of their own being-towards-death, and by accepting it realize the truth about life. Effectively, the finitude and impermanence of the self suggests that the death that one fears is in reality occurring every moment. Death is a reality not only in some unforeseen future, but is happening as we live in this very moment. I am dying, I will continue dying, and I have been dying since I was born. The more I want life, the more prolonged my dying will be. By accepting the absence of a permanent self from one moment to the next, one can overcome the fear of death and so actually live free of dying.

It is worth noting that stories of animated corpses exist in a Buddhist context as well. For instance, Tibetan Buddhism includes the possibility that a corpse may be revived as what is called a *ro-langs* (Wylie, 1964; Walter, 2004). This can happen either through the conjuration of a shaman or from possession by an evil spirit. Tibetan Buddhism incorporates a complex series of rituals surrounding the death of a person in order to facilitate that person's transition from this life into the next world, leading to probable rebirth, but potentially leading instead to *nirvana* if the individual is able to overcome attachments. The possessing spirit represents a kind of rebirth that remains filled with cravings and so needs to incarnate by stealing a body that has recently become free, so to speak. The horror of these creatures is two-fold: on one hand, there is the fear of the invading spirit, recognized as being filled with craving, and so it is much like the zombie of Romero; on the other hand, there is also the fear for the safety of the deceased as one's spirit might be threatened by this turn of events and so may not have a successful rebirth. Here, as we have seen in other cases, there is not only the fear of the zombie's master (in this case, the invading spirit), but also the fear of becoming a zombie (in this case directed towards a

loved one for fear that they may suffer further by not being able to move effectively towards *nirvana*, or at least a better life).

Two Chinese stories are also worthy of note, from the eighteenth-century Chan Buddhist writer Yuan Mei. The first, “Two Scholars of Nanchang” (Francis, 2002: 138–139),¹⁸ tells of two friends who studied together. The elder of the two died, leaving his younger friend in mourning. During the night, the elder scholar visited his friend while he was in bed. At first afraid, the younger scholar was convinced that the ghost’s intentions were benevolent. He came to console his still living friend but also to ask that he repay some unpaid debts for him. The elder scholar, having delivered his message, intended to leave, only to have the younger scholar ask for just a little more time since they would likely not see each other again, the one being dead and the other alive. At this request, the elder scholar’s face began to change, becoming ugly and decayed. The younger scholar once again became frightened and demanded that his friend leave him. Instead the corpse stood staring, and then chased the younger as he stood and ran. The corpse chased him until the younger man escaped over a wall. While he lay at the bottom of the wall, the corpse simply looked at him from the top, drool dripping on him from its dead mouth. In the morning, the young man was found lying in the street, and the corpse of his friend was found on the other side of the wall.

A second story from Yuan Mei, “An Artisan Paints a Zombie (*jiangshi*)” (Francis, 2002: 141–142),¹⁹ tells of a son who hires an artist to do a portrait of his recently deceased father. The painter agrees and once he begins his painting the father’s corpse sits up in his bed. The painter determines to keep painting, and the corpse begins to imitate his actions, moving his hand in the air as if the corpse were painting as well. Rather than running as the young man in the previous tale did, the painter freezes and waits for help to arrive, in response to which the corpse simply sits frozen in the same position as the painter. The corpse is returned to a dead state once again when some passersby bring brooms with which to sweep away the evil influence.

Both of these stories reflect both traditional Chinese belief and Buddhism. Traditionally, the Chinese have believed in multiple spirits. The *hun* is the seat of consciousness and the *po* the animating principle, which can be loosely compared to the Haitian conception of *gros* and *ti bon anges*. Without the *hun*, an animated corpse has no self. More interestingly for our present purposes, however, is the *raison d’être* for each of these zombies. In the first story, the elder scholar appears out of compassion for his younger friend and also out of duty, for he asks his friend to take care of some unpaid debts for him, both of which are common tropes in ghost stories. The elder friend transforms into a walking corpse once the younger friend asks him to stay longer. Here, the elder scholar can be seen exercising the Buddhist virtue of compassion (for his friend) and perhaps a Confucian sense of duty (the repayment of debts), but things go wrong when the younger scholar is compelled to ask for more time due to his attachments to his friend’s earthly existence. The lesson to avoid attachment is here taught by the dead friend’s transforming into a rotting corpse and pursuing the young man through the night. Just as modern Hollywood zombies thrust themselves at a death-denying audience, so too the corpse here forces its message on the young man. In the second story, again the problem stems from attachment to the dead. The son here wishes to immortalize his father in a portrait. The beginning of the said portrait causes the corpse to rise. It is attachment to the

deceased that results in its re-animation. Reinforcing the relationship between the living and the dead, the body then mimics the painter as if it is his reflection. The painter and the corpse are not unlike each other, just as the one meditating on a corpse will come to realize: "as that is, so this is." When corpses rise of their own accord in a Buddhist context, the cause can clearly be seen to be attachment, the root of all suffering. The fear of the re-animated corpse stems from a refusal to accept the connection, an attachment to the comfort of ignorance.

The modern zombie-craze, then, can be seen as growing out of a 1960s counter-cultural depiction of life in the face of impending death without the sacred canopy of a formerly Christian authority. In its place, the risen corpses force the living to recognize their own mortality and in so doing recognize the impermanence of the self. The modern zombie as zombie illustrates an enslavement to attachments and cravings. Just as the Haitian zombie signifies a loss of the self in slavery to a foreign master, the modern zombie signifies a loss of self in the very pursuit of its existence. The self does not exist in a permanent state, and so does not exist in the way that we typically wish. By attachment to this dream of immortality, we force ourselves to be reborn in a perpetual state of zombified craving. Whether this takes the form of capitalist consumerism or some other fetishization, the root remains the attachment to the empty non-existent self. By confronting the zombie, and so confronting our own mortality, we can come to accept finitude and thus become authentically individuated Beings unconcerned with selfish but impossible yearnings. As selfless Beings, society can thus function effectively, and its individuals need not suffer for, literally, naught.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the anonymous readers and the editor of *Studies in Religion*, Francis Landy, for numerous suggestions that greatly improved this paper.
2. One discussion list for such events can be found online at: <<http://www.zombiewalk.com/>>. Cited Nov. 18, 2008.
3. Aliens are commonly employed in this regard, as in John Carpenter's *They Live!* (1988). Annalee Newitz includes robots, cyborgs, and serial killers alongside zombies as monstrous embodiments of a capitalist society (Newitz, 2006).
4. Even Romero's *Day of the Dead* does not specifically lend its zombies to a corporate or capitalist critique, but levels its attack on militarism and scientism, or perhaps Western society on the whole. But even an attack on Western society generally, though Western society is, among other things, capitalist, does not equate to an attack on capitalism itself.
5. Bellegarde-Smith (2006) remains a valuable resource on the history and culture of Haiti.
6. I am grateful to Terry Rey and Karen Richman for granting me permission to read their unpublished manuscript.
7. The terms are sometimes reversed, depending upon the source (Ackermann and Gauthier, 1991).
8. Interestingly, since the 1960s similar reports of zombies have been reported in West Africa. Though originally at the root of much of traditional Haitian belief, the zombie is a new form coming back to the source from Haitian Vodou (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 1998).

9. I have targeted my interpretation even more precisely elsewhere in a close reading of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* itself (Moreman, 2008a).
10. For instance, that repository of all things pop-culture, *Wikipedia*, includes a reference to the Epic of Gilgamesh as containing the earliest reference to a zombie. Reading "zombie" into such occurrences of walking corpses simply illustrates the importance of zombieness. See "Zombie," *Wikipedia*, online: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zombie>>. Cited Nov. 18, 2008.
11. In addition to inspiring Romero, Matheson's novel has now also been made into three movies: *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007). For a review of the latest, see (Moreman, 2008b).
12. Those zombie films that do provide succor to the living are typically comedies, such as Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and Andrew Currie's *Fido* (2006).
13. Though Wood is here specifically talking about *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), his observation applies more broadly.
14. Paul Badham offers a highly digestible overview of a wide range of modern theological opinions on the subject (Badham, 1976).
15. For a good overview of such forms of meditation in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition, see Bond (1980). See also Conze (2003, especially pp. 86-106).
16. Buddhaghosha outlines what are termed the Ten Foul Objects of meditation, which include the various forms of decaying corpse found in zombie cinema (*Visuddhimagga* 110-111).
17. Bond here cites first the *Smyutta-Nikaya* (203) and secondly both the *Digha-Nikaya* (2.295) and the *Angutta-Nikaya* (3.324).
18. Francis here cites *Yuan Mei quan ji*, vol. 4, p. 3.
19. Francis here cites *Yuan Mei quan ji*, vol. 4, pp. 93-94. It is worth noting that the term "jiangshi" is sometimes also translated as "vampire," though the creature behaves like neither zombie nor vampire as conceived of in the West.

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