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6 June 2020

Re-Humanizing the Dead or How Films Transform the Abject Zombie Figure

The zombie is an inherently abject creature as it not only disrupts the meaning of humanity, but personifies death itself. Before it takes even a single step, “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection” (Kristeva 4). The zombie’s deep entanglement with death as a literal “reanimated corpse” makes it one of Horror’s most frightening creations as viewers are forced to face their own mortality. Conceived from the real-life horrors endured by Haitian slaves, the zombie is the epitome of dehumanization and despair in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Its very conception fiercely calls out the monstrosity of humans as it embodies a fate worse than death:

From Martinique to Haiti, the worst fate imaginable for the inhabitants, whose ancestors had been captured, shackled and shipped out of Africa to the islands of the Caribbean, was to be turned into one of the living dead by the black magic of a Vodou sorcerer, and be forced to work at a sugar plantation at night. In the 1920s and the 1930s, when the zombie myth was imported to the United States the figure of zombie... [it also] underscored to Americans the rightfulness of their occupation of the barbaric and primitive state of Haiti. (Moon 170)

Initially appropriated and deemed monstrous in western culture, modern zombies have gradually pivoted back towards their sympathetic roots. The 2013 film, *Warm Bodies*¹ features a zombie as its main protagonist and narrates the story from his point of view, which calls upon the viewer to read the character empathetically. A 2010 Swedish short film, *The Unliving*² returns more directly to the zombie's origin of slavery, as it portrays zombies being exploited for manual labor, despite characters questioning their level of awareness. This paper aims to engage with the zombie on its own terms; through the examination of sympathetic portrayals I hope to reposition the zombie as a being³ of abjection in need of empathy. I do not mean to undermine the weight of violent depictions in more traditional Horror, as the zombie holds much power as a vehicle for societal metaphors and critiques. Rather, my intention is to strip down the zombie to its essence as a physical creature to better appreciate its potency for such symbolism, and to bring forth the meanings that its entanglement with death offers.

Born From Horror

With consideration to its initial conception and genre appearance, the zombie is first and foremost a being of Horror. While the Horror genre is infamous for its gory and grotesque nature, its brutal confrontations with humanity's deepest fears make it just as meaningful as its subversions. In fact, it is precisely the violence of Horror (and grotesque decay of zombies) that gives the genre its purpose psychologically:

¹ This film is based on the 2010 novel written by Isaac Marion. For the purposes of this paper, I will address the movie as its own entity. Timecodes will have the format of: h:mm:ss (hour: minutes: seconds)

² Timecodes will have the format of mm:ss (minutes: seconds)

³ I will use the words, "being" "creature" and "monster" interchangeably throughout this paper when referring to zombies.

We watch scary movies because they help us to release our anxiety and fears deep inside our conscious... they help us to “purge” our aggressive emotions. We also burn our negative feelings and worries about the real world and expel them by watching horror films.⁴ (Park 3)

So despite its countless appropriations and reinterpretations, the zombie consistently plays on fears of death, and specifically, the unnerving ambiguity between life and death that the Haitian slaves lived through in reality and consequently projected into their imagined zombie figure.

The death that zombies personify is a universal fear and their corporeal state of decay pushes this notion further as, “The concept of death is intricately tied to the human body. It is the body that dies. The body is corruptible; the body is the recipient of disease and subject to decay” (Moore 6). If Horror also functions as a “movement toward the development of anxiety, fear, and disgust, each of these banking on the exploitation of the grotesque and morbid,” (Grant 5-6) then the zombie’s inherent “corruptibility” serves as the perfect vehicle for “exploitation” in the genre’s context. Considering that, “monsters aren’t necessarily terrible because of what they are in themselves, but because of what they represent” (Grant 40), the zombie does not simply represent “a contained instance” of ambiguity, but a metaphorical confrontation of the transition

⁴ I must clarify that it is not my intention to discuss the ethics or direct social or mental impacts of horror in depth. Other scholars have examined these questions thoroughly, especially since the zombie often serves as a metaphor for a particular social issue; the genre has certainly been exploited as a means of dehumanizing real people. In addition, watching horrific media has led to cases of PTSD in some people (Park 43-48) and “exposure to death through the media has been found to increase death fears” (Moore 11). On the other hand, “some observers have argued that the tremendous amount of exposure to death, dying, and the dead that we receive through our popular culture may make us more accepting of these phenomena” (Durkin 48). While I am not exploring these issues, I must acknowledge that I have chosen to read Horror’s purpose as a genre positively and that other perspectives which are more critical are worth taking into account.

from life to death as an overarching concept. To extend further on the zombie as a monster of horror:

Zombies should not be because they ultimately contradict themselves. They are, by most accounts, dead flesh that is nonetheless animated... While there is a biological imperative for the living dead to consume flesh, not meeting the demands of that imperative will not result in total annihilation. It is an endless hunger without remedy or consequence... The thing that makes a zombie a zombie... is a lack of meaningfulness. Its life has no purpose beyond consumption. (Grant 109)

Aside from its troubling ambiguity and “horrific” consumption of flesh, the zombie as an undead creature exists as a permanent threat to the characters. Its “endless hunger” in combination with its “lack of meaningfulness” not only makes it a difficult monster to deal with on a physical level, but to cope with psychologically for both the characters and audience. Much of the fear the zombie generates is not simply being attacked by one, but potentially becoming one. To lose one’s humanity is a fate worse than death, and the zombie symbolizes this further through its operation on basic instincts. “I think therefore I am,” defines humanity where, “I eat therefore I am,” denotes nothing more than primitive life and reduces man to his biological animality. This endless hunger and inability to be reasoned with in combination with the zombie’s intrinsic themes of death and abject state of ambiguity lends itself perfectly to monstrous portrayals in the Horror genre; thus its current cultural popularity and proliferation. However, while much of the zombie’s potency comes from this relationship to Horror, its status as an abject figure allows it to be recontextualized and explored in other genres.

Warm Bodies is classified as a “Romance/ Horror” which, like the zombie itself, is paradoxical. The focus on Romance over Horror is what gives the zombie its cathartic power in this film, as it recontextualizes fears of death into a romantic path that leads to a happy ending. From the outset, the film defies conventions of Horror with the ironic narration of the main protagonist as he asks, “what am I doing with my life? I’m so pale, I should get out more, I should eat better...”⁵ Such philosophical comments counter the zombie’s traditional lack of cognitive functions and immediately positions our zombie protagonist “R”⁶ as a relatable and empathetic character: he may be dead, but he faces the same struggles as the “living.” The comedic irony of R’s self awareness not only allows the audience to empathize with him, but also highlights his struggle of “living as a dead person” who desires to but is unable to overcome his ambiguous nature.

Light and playful music underscores R’s introduction, which denotes him as a more “harmless” zombie, or at least a less traditional one. He also has various pop songs which accompany him including, *Missing You* by John Waite, *Shell Suite* by Chad Valley and *Runaway* by The National. Traditional zombies are usually scored with ominous music, or fast paced action music to increase tension and anxiety in the audience. Scoring R with light hearted music and pop songs helps to situate him as a “friendly” zombie who can be related to, both in the sense that he is not (very) threatening and that he has cultural connections through pop music.

While the film makes light of and repositions the traditional conflict of the zombie narrative from dealing with the zombie as a monster, to confronting its ambiguity, it is still very much rooted in the Horror genre. With the zombie’s physical state in mind, “It is thus not lack of

⁵ Timecode: 0:00:27

⁶ “R” is the character’s name.

cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). The zombie is still an abject (and therefore fearsome) creature in *Warm Bodies*, but instead of using that abjection as a justification for fear and violence, the film follows a romantic and sympathetic path that weakens abjection through the gradual re-humanization of its zombie characters.

The Unliving takes a similar approach to *Warm Bodies*, as it quickly places zombies in a position of inferiority and essentially renders them harmless. Before displaying any footage, the film contextualizes its narrative with quotes from Nietzsche, “it is not the ill that constitute a threat against the healthy” and “the threat does not come from the strong. It is from the weak.” The ambiguity of the quotes parallels the zombie’s paradoxical state, and invites the viewer to question who the “ill/ healthy” and “strong/ weak” characters are in its world. With this framing, the viewer then evaluates the zombies in more humanistic terms of how they are integrated in society, as opposed to the traditional binaries of “human/ monster” or “alive/ dead.” *The Unliving*’s initial shots follow these themes of contrasts, as its establishing shot of a dull and destroyed post-apocalyptic city is juxtaposed with lively music and brightly lit scenes. The zombie figures who are usually “to blame” for bringing the apocalypse upon humanity are instead portrayed as weak and docile, as humans drag and shove them around without thought. Even the more violent zombies are no match against basic weaponry and brute force. In this post-apocalyptic world it is not the humans who suffer, but the zombies as they are exploited for manual labor, which is apparently necessary because society has specially structured itself

around said labor: Major Rotmeier⁷ says that the zombies (or “the unliving”) are needed because, “neither industries nor agriculture would be able to maintain its current output level [without the unliving]”⁸ and “we need them if we’re to create a functioning society.”⁹ Instead of the horror genre, “banking on the exploitation of the grotesque and morbid,” it is the human characters themselves who exploit the “unliving” in a very literal sense. In fact, the exploitation has become so casual in the film’s world that even the camera glosses over it. This is especially clear in a shot where Katrin¹⁰ looks out the car window and the camera follows her eyes to briefly examine a zombie carrying shopping for a woman, until she disappears from view and Katrin shifts her attention to look up at buildings¹¹. Even the opera singing zombie whose repair is highlighted over several scenes only experiences her “shining moment” on a small television screen in the corner of a bar; in addition, bright colors overlay the footage of her singing¹² to further obscure her zombie state in a sad attempt by the film’s inhabitants to mask her blatant exploitation.

In reference to the zombie’s origins, the film captures the ways in which the “dehumanized” and “abject” are easily exploited for labor, even if they are more human than the humans want to admit. So while the film purposely leaves the zombie’s level of awareness ambiguous and depicts them as disgusting and decaying creatures, their exploitation and dehumanized treatment elicits sympathy from the audience regardless.

A Cannibalistic Animal

⁷ She holds the most authority in the film’s world. However her morals and ethics are ambiguous, and other characters question her actions throughout.

⁸ Timecode: 7:19

⁹ Timecode: 26:31

¹⁰ The film’s main female protagonist.

¹¹ Timecode: 4:11

¹² Timecode: 23:00

While the zombie has been reinterpreted across many genres, one aspect that seems to remain consistent is its tendency towards cannibalism. The origin of its cannibalistic nature is closely tied to its early conceptions; Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead* was among the first films to depict zombies and he introduced the aspect of cannibalism. Argued by many to be the film that popularized zombies, it seems reasonable to assume that cannibalism became an integral part of the zombie's identity. In addition, the typical view of cannibalism closely parallels depictions of zombies, "The tendency, a priori¹³, even among such scholars of relativism, is to represent and relate to real or imaginary cannibals and cannibal cultures as less than human, animalistic and ruled by basic instincts" (Nyamnjoh 8). So while many films are open to questioning the awareness of zombies, cannibalism tends to be accepted as a given sign of monstrosity because of its strong associations with inhumanity, animalism and basic instincts.

While the zombie exists primarily as a creature of Horror, its cannibalism should not be written off as simply playing into the audience's fears of "being eaten alive," as it serves a much broader and more sinister purpose of signifying the zombie's "abject" and "inhuman" nature. Rather than a fearsome powerplay of "who gets to eat the flesh of the other," cannibalism was in reality, exploited as a narrative means to justify the dehumanization and exploitation of non-western peoples:

During the unequal encounters of the past between the West and the rest, for example, claims and accusations of cannibalism served as the perfect excuse for enslavement, colonisation, exploitation and forceful Christianisation and Westernisation... Cannibalism was then and now, 'the ultimate charge' that a

¹³ A phrase used to characterize reasoning or arguing from causes to effects, from abstract notions to their conditions or consequences, from propositions or assumed axioms (and not from experience); deductive; deductively (OED).

group of people so labelled deserved not only the status of savages worthy of extermination, but that you who had labelled them thus were authorised to do the exterminating. (Nyamnjoh 12)

This same logic has been applied to the zombie figure: its “savage” nature “allows” humans to exploit and exterminate any zombie as they so desire. In this sense, traditional portrayals of zombies are highly problematic as they perpetuate this fictional narrative of savagery, with said “savagery” being the justification for violence against them. My intention is not to say that sympathetic portrayals are therefore more nuanced, but that the cannibalistic nature of the zombie is a complex and culturally rooted issue and deserves to be treated as such.

The intimate narration of R in *Warm Bodies* helps to communicate feelings that would otherwise not be considered when simply observing his cannibalistic actions. As he begins to tear apart and eat Perry¹⁴ he says, “I’d appreciate it if you might look away for a moment here, I don’t like hurting people”¹⁵ and rationalizes his instinctual cannibalism on a more spiritual level, “eating brains makes me feel human again, I just wanna feel what you felt, less dead.” While R’s actions are undeniably violent, his narration encourages the audience to re-evaluate their view of cannibalism. That is not to say that viewers should deem cannibalism “good” or “acceptable” but to question why it is “bad” and whether it functions as a useful signifier of inhumanity considering how human R comes across throughout the film. What matters is that R’s cannibalism is not simply a manifestation of savagery, but serves a spiritual purpose, regardless of whether the audience considers it justifiable.

¹⁴ Julie’s boyfriend. Once R eats Perry, Julie becomes R’s love interest.

¹⁵ Timecode: 0:11:15

However, *Warm Bodies* offers another type of cannibalism through its subset of zombies called “boneys” which merit further discussion. Boneys are essentially zombies that have drastically deteriorated both physically and mentally. Their lack of flesh and “bone-y” state strips them of any remaining notions of identity and they function entirely on basic instinct as R informs the audience that they will “eat anything that has a heartbeat.”¹⁶ Their operation on basic instincts and reliance on “primitive” traits such as smell and communication through roaring, signifies them as animalistic creatures. In this case, cannibalism seems to have potential as a signifier of animality, since the boneys appear much more animal than human or even zombie. In addition, cannibalism exists naturally in the animal kingdom and could therefore be labelled as another animalistic trait exhibited by the boneys.

At this point it is important to consider a distinction between animality and inhumanity. For the purposes of exploitative colonialists, these terms were essentially interchangeable, as “animalistic” behaviors including cannibalism were deemed to be clear signifiers of inhumanity. As seen with R’s nuanced depiction, *Warm Bodies* rejects this problematic line of reasoning and also offers a metaphysical complement to the boney’s “animalistic” cannibalism. Traditionally, zombies would feast particularly on the brain, which *Warm Bodies* does follow as discussed, however for the boneys, emphasis is placed on the heart¹⁷. Throughout the film, the heart symbolizes life and humanity: as the zombies become more human their hearts literally glow in their chests¹⁸, and with this circulation they can feel temperature, hence “*Warm*” *Bodies*. Like R, the boneys’ devouring of the heart is not merely a symbolic expression of animality taking over,

¹⁶ Timecode: 0:02:46

¹⁷ As seen from R’s quote that Boneys will “eat anything that has a heartbeat.” I reiterate the importance of this quote because R could easily have said, “that has a brain” or “that breathes” but he chose “heartbeat” which directly ties into the film’s emphasis on the heart as a signifier of life.

¹⁸ Timecode: 0:49:10

but a final attempt to taste and regain their severely degraded humanity. Again, this does not serve as justification for cannibalism, but rather to reject the notion that animality and inhumanity are synonymous, since “animalistic” behaviors can be rooted in humanistic desires.

The Unliving focuses less on the consumption of flesh and more on the “infectious” element of zombie bites. The bite not only transfers the “zombie virus” but immediately turns the bitten human into an abject “other” even before they exhibit any symptoms. This is seen when Katrin instinctually points her gun at Johanne in suspicion that he’s been bitten and the scene cuts in such a way that implies Johanne will be killed¹⁹. In the following scene we learn that only Johanne’s collar was bitten, but his unhappy facial expressions and posture demonstrate the toll of his brief but horrific moment of dehumanization by Katrin. These moments capture the “authorization” of power handed to another person through the means of cannibalism despite Johanne being the “bitten” and not the “biter.” Katrin’s instinctual and cold reaction calls upon the audience to question who is the true monster: the cannibal or the one seizing execution rights over the cannibal? Katrin’s immediate need to kill the “unliving” and later confrontation with her own zombified boyfriend Mark comes across just as monstrous if not more, compared to the zombies’ uncontrollable and unconscious urges of cannibalism.

Tangible Personification of Death

While the zombie’s meaning as a creature comes from its ambiguity, the potency of said meaning derives from its state as a physically tangible being. Unlike ghosts and other ephemeral creatures of Horror, the zombie manifests on a purely physical level: it decays like a real corpse,

¹⁹ Timecode: 6:57

is subject to laws of physics (unlike ghosts that can pass through walls etc.), transmits its disease through bites and consumes flesh (as opposed to a soul). In this sense, the zombie's physical embodiment of death as a living corpse is what allows the viewer to "ground" death, "For early humans, death was a nameless and formless horror; participation in the act of killing allowed them to identify themselves with death, to give shape and form to death, and, in so doing, to begin to understand it" (Moore 6). Rather than killing people, characters kill zombies, but even without violence, they (and the viewer) can cope with broader concepts of death through the zombie's physical personification of death and state of decay.

As rotting corpses, zombies bring to light the biological condition of humans and their inevitable decay. With regards to Kristeva, this confrontation of borders is distressing in of itself, but film as a visual medium pushes this abjection even further with displays of innards and gore:

In many zombie movies, the gore is more prominent than the violence, and this is not an accidental feature of the genre... Few cinematic monsters (not even serial killers) so reliably offer the implicit promise of highly visceral scenes featuring dangling limbs, rotted flesh, open wounds, dripping fluids, and entrails spilling out. The zombies not only reveal human protagonists to be made of flesh, sinew, and bone by unraveling them unceremoniously, but wear in their own features the biological anatomy of the human animal... The creature represents an unsentimental study of our underlying composition and of our base biological needs. (Dendle 183)

The Unliving embraces this unceremonious display of human biology, but also critiques our "prettying up" of it. The zombies featured in the opening shots are covered in blood and

gore, with more spewing out as their brains are drilled into and prodded. However, once “programmed” for their intended task, they are made presentable. This leads to uncanny scenes featuring zombies dressed in full work attire, such as a bartender and opera singer. In addition, as Major Rotmeier states, drugs are used on the zombies to, “maintain [their] brain and motor functions”²⁰ and slow down their decay. Through these juxtapositions of the dead in “living” roles and their artificial “maintenance” *The Unliving* demonstrates the harm of perpetuating a death denying culture. While the zombies themselves are not natural, their decay is, and denying that is not only inhumane (as it is done for their explicit exploitation) but buys into the false illusion that “sanitizing” death is the equivalent of coping with it. While the characters presented sanitize death on a cultural level, the film itself takes an uncompromising stance and features uncomfortably intimate shots of diseased eyes and bloody faces. One close-up shot of a cloudy and twitching eye²¹ lasts for approximately five seconds, which is double the average shot duration of 2.5 seconds (Miller); this generates immense discomfort in the viewer and thus allows for the cathartic effects of Horror, while simultaneously feeling sympathy for the zombies’ exploitation.

On a physical level, *Warm Bodies* fails to embrace the power of Horror in confronting our biological reality as mortal beings. Its zombies are so human-like that in one scene²², R simply takes a shower and receives a make-up makeover to successfully pass as “human.” Even the boney which represent the next “inevitable” stage of decay are largely sanitized with their grey and goreless texture. However, while sanitized, the zombies are still literal walking corpses and that cannot be undermined. Instead, *Warm Bodies* chooses to confront death on a

²⁰ Timecode: 3:17

²¹ Timecode: 1:10

²² Timecode: 1:11:18 - 1:11:50

metaphysical level, which can be seen through the inappropriate use of the word “exhume²³.” It initially appears during R’s first dream where Julie says, “we’ll exhume the whole world,”²⁴ Perry then critiques her for using exhume in the wrong context, however once awake, R continues to use it in the same way. What Julie meant to say was along the lines of, “revive the whole world” but instead the use of “exhume” focuses on the literal state of the zombie as a corpse to be “dug up.” In addition, it references how characters refer to the zombies as “corpses” throughout the film and thus emphasizes the physical relationship that zombies have with death.

The confusion towards the use of “exhume” in the film serves to directly parallel the ways in which death is mishandled in reality. The conflict between the physical and metaphysical conception of death is a real and universal one, “It is the physical corpse that rots away, whereas the soul, according to many belief systems, is set free and lives forever” (Moore 6). Because zombies tend to be depicted without souls, the only option is to revive them on a physical level through “exhuming.” However, as *Warm Bodies* points out, focusing purely on the physical is inappropriate. To counterbalance this, the film literally revives the zombies. Because *Warm Bodies* is ultimately a Romance film (alongside Horror), this could be read as avoiding taboos associated with sex and death. Considering that, “The anxieties associated with sex in all societies have also been linked to the fear of death” (Moore 7), love exhibited between a human and zombie would generate disgust on the highest level, and that is without even discussing the zombie’s animalistic qualities. However, on its own, this reading diminishes the gradual humanization of R throughout the film before he became a fully “biological” human, and so it is not the only purpose of his transformation. On a metaphorical level, their revival symbolizes the

²³ transitive. To dig out or remove (something buried) from beneath the ground (OED).

²⁴ Timecode: 0:54:36

rehumanization of death itself. If death, “violently represents the strange state in which a non-subject, a stray, having lost its non-objects, imagines nothingness through the ordeal of abjection” (Kristeva 25), and has been grounded through its embodiment as a walking corpse, then the subsequent transformation of said corpse into a human, fully realizes death as not only a tangible “subject” but a humanized “nothingness.” Death does not only have to represent our finality, but can be recognized as integral to the human experience.

Rehumanization through Cognition

Throughout this paper I have implicitly discussed the cognition and potentially spiritual aspects of the zombie, however it is necessary to touch on this topic head on, as cognition not only serves as a hallmark of sympathetic portrayals, but is often considered to be a defining feature of humanity. As previously discussed, the possibility for or explicit expression of consciousness has the potential to redeem even the most savagely coded behaviors like cannibalism:

The biggest barrier to sympathy for this particular type of undead has been that, unlike vampires, zombies do not traditionally display signs of cognition or feeling. Given that even monsters who are not anthropomorphic can be pitied if they show human-like feelings, the first and key step towards the socialisation of zombies, to their re-appropriation as figure[s] of alterity and social exclusion, has been to give them an incipient consciousness. (Reyes 95)

The Unliving explores the implications of cognition through a constant questioning of the mental capacity of its zombies, with lines such as, “we don’t know anything about their level of

awareness”²⁵. This ambiguity is pushed further when we see an infected Mark pointing a gun back at Katrin after she failed to shoot him²⁶. In addition, the film ends without a resolution: its final shot depicts Mark walking away before a cut to black, leaving the viewers to question what his fate will be as an “unliving.” While the zombies offer no dialogue or narration such as that seen in *Warm Bodies* to clarify their internal feelings, they are certainly much more than mindless creatures relying on basic cannibalistic instincts.

While *Warm Bodies* uses R’s narration as a literal window into his thoughts, the film also explores cognition on a more philosophical level. This is demonstrated in the plane scene²⁷ where R plays a vinyl record and comments that it has “better sound” and feels more “alive” compared to other music players. This moment is not only significant because it demonstrates “human feeling” at a core level that transcends verbal thoughts, but because R reacts in an explicitly humanistic way to an auditory cue. Media such as *The Walking Dead* which depict more traditional zombies tend to emphasize the importance of “not making sound” because it will trigger an instinctual reaction in zombies to attack. This was also seen explicitly in the 2013 blockbuster film *World War Z*, which features a scene where zombies react so aggressively to music that they pile on top of each other to scale a wall. Like his insurmountable yet spiritual cannibalism, R’s appreciation for music demonstrates cognition on a human level that surpasses a biologically induced reaction. In regards to Reyes, R’s cognition anthropomorphizes him and thus allows the audience to empathize and connect with him.

Having described the importance of cognition as a means to anthropomorphize and humanize zombies, I must stress that it is not the sole defining feature of humanity. In fact, the

²⁵ Timecode: 26:09

²⁶ Timecode: 24:48

²⁷ Timecode: 0:33:09

disproportionate value that society places on cognitive ability can lead to the dehumanization of people. Parallels of mental disabilities can be made with R's slow and stuttering speech, especially since he is only fully realized as a human after mastering his body on a physical and cognitive level. While I do not believe the film intends to imply that R would be "less human" if his speech did not improve or if he retained other "zombie" defects, I must acknowledge that his human state is not representative of "human-ness" itself. As zombies demonstrate, humanness cannot be reduced to biology and I do not think it is productive to reduce it to cognition in its place. Instead, I believe it would be more productive to view humanity as a social construct, with biology and cognition being regarded as subparts that are each used to humanize and dehumanize people who do not fit the societal or cultural norms (both within their own culture, and across cultures). As the zombie's origin of slavery demonstrates, the definition of humanity changes according to those who hold power; so while I think it is useful to explore concepts of humanity through the lens of cognition, I must recognize that humanity is much more complex and socially dynamic than the few aspects I have explored in this paper.

Conclusion

As creatures of Horror, zombies hold the immense weight of death within their abject bodies. Their confrontational grotesqueness and gore pushes viewers to evaluate their own biological mortality and subsequently experience the cathartic effects of Horror; and as seen in *The Unliving*, even sanitized zombies can be embraced as embodiments of death. But horror does not have to be the endpoint of such explorations. Monstrous and savagely coded behaviors like cannibalism can be depicted from a place of humanity and contrasted with the real monstrosities

of human apathy; and as *Warm Bodies* demonstrated, cannibalism can even be reimagined on a spiritual level. The largest driving factor of rehumanization in both films is the incorporation of cognition in zombies; and while cognition is not the only defining feature of humanity, its inclusion serves to give an anthropomorphized anchor for the audience to latch onto. But even if the zombie's abjection cannot be overcome through cognition because of their inherent ambiguity, at the very least, the narration-induced empathy and explicit exploitation of zombies demonstrated in *Warm Bodies* and *The Unliving* respectively, position the zombie in desperate need of empathy:

Unlike other monsters... the zombie is the only one that is depicted as a captive, a prisoner, and a servant of others... Being a somnambulistic creature utterly devoid of independence, freedom and will, the zombie is the most miserable and cursed among [monsters of horror]. (Moon 173)

While the zombie has and will continue to evolve within and outside of the Horror genre, its embedded history cannot be forgotten. Its dehumanized existence calls out the injustices of slavery, and like its cannibalism, its subservient and pathetic nature should not be written off as monstrous features, but examined and questioned. *Warm Bodies* and *The Unliving* are only two examples of sympathetic portrayals which I believe to be productive, but many exist that take the zombie's embedded characteristics for granted and offer no additional insight or commentary. Likewise, the zombie's deep entanglement with death can transcend fear and offer commentary on the ways in which we push death away culturally. Most importantly, their depiction does not have to stop at inhuman monsters, or dehumanized animalistic creatures; as ambiguous and abject beings, zombies transform death itself for, "the abject is the equivalent of death" (Kristeva

26). If zombies can be rehumanized and embraced, so can the death that they embody. But if there is one thing to learn from zombies, it is that death is not merely an endpoint, but something deeply entangled with humanity itself.

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