

ZOMBIE CINEMA AND THE ANTHROPOCENE:  
POSTHUMAN AGENCY AND EMBODIMENT  
AT THE END OF THE WORLD

Phillip McReynolds (UNC Charlotte)

INTRODUCTION

The Anthropocene, the name for our current geological epoch proposed by Crutzen and Stoermer,<sup>1</sup> poses significant challenges to traditional humanistic conceptions of human agency and embodiment. The claim that these and other scientists make is that human beings as a species have, beginning with the industrial revolution, made an impact upon the biosphere on a planetary scale equivalent in magnitude and duration to those of (other) natural forces such as glaciation, plate tectonics, and asteroid strikes. On this view, human effects on the globe are of such a scale that they are no more subject to human control, intelligence, and agency than are other forces of nature. Human beings aren't so much actors as actants, producing far ranging effects in concert with other non-human actants.<sup>2</sup> Thus, ironically the Anthropocene, literally the epoch of the human, is the first posthuman epoch.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I argue that the cinematic trope I will call "the fast zombie" of recent zombie cinema serves as a figure for the posthuman in the age of the Anthropocene.<sup>4</sup> I trace the lineage of the cinematic zombie, the first movie monster nearly without precedent in non-cinematic art forms,<sup>5</sup> from the "voodoo zombie"<sup>6</sup> of the thirties and forties, through the "slow zombie" of George Romero and Romero-inspired films, to the fast zombie of the post-millennial era. As I will demonstrate, despite their differences, these monsters share a common lineage, common features, and collectively provide a fictional analogue to social and economic forces that have led to our current environmental crisis.

As we will see, the voodoo zombie of the early zombie movies such as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) serves as a signifier for slavery and colonization. The trope of the voodoo zombie, whether reanimated or merely drugged, stands in place

of the slave, deprived of agency and doomed to a life (or death) of alienated labor in service of a master, the voodoo priest. The slow zombie of the Romero films—*Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985)—also signifies alienated labor deprived of agency and subjectivity yet now presented as a shambling force under the control of no human intellect. This zombie represents a threat to the civilized order en masse as well as a fear of contamination. The work of the slow zombie is to reproduce itself through consumption. The figure of the fast zombie found in post-millennial cinema in films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *World War Z* (2013), and the remake of *Day of the Dead* (2008) signifies a fear of contagion occurring under deterritorialization,<sup>7</sup> abject masses swarming over borders and laying waste to the countryside by sheer force of numbers. It reflects the fear of powerlessness and lack of agency that appear to be part of the posthuman condition in the age of the Anthropocene while, at the same time, expressing a set of desires that seem to be more acute in our current epoch including a desire to become natural and to become more fully embodied. Post-millennial zombie pictures also represent a kind of hopeful apocalypticism that Susan Sontag characterized in terms of the aesthetics of catastrophe.<sup>8</sup>

What these different types of zombies share is, as Allen Ameron puts it, an excess of embodiment.<sup>9</sup> In this way they represent an antidote to the disembodied, technophilic posthumanism of the cyborg cinema of the 1990s and early 2000s. Whereas the latter represent the intellect dematerialized,<sup>10</sup> the former represent embodiment run amok. In addition, insofar as colonization and slavery provided the capital for the industrial revolution, which in turn is the direct cause of anthropogenic climate change, the evolution of the cinematic zombie marks a fictional trace of the human and posthuman forces that have brought about the Anthropocene.

#### DYING TO WORK: AGENTIAL ANXIETY AND THE CINEMATIC “VOODOO ZOMBIE”

When they first appeared on the silver screen, zombies at once expressed fantasies about absolute control and anxieties about loss of agency and autonomy. At the same time they performed bordering operations between the human and the less-than-human while problematizing these very boundaries. Although according to Peter Dendle the figure of a

voodoo zombie made its way into American popular culture by way of William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* which, in turn, inspired a Broadway play and the first zombie picture, Victor Halperin's 1932 *White Zombie*,<sup>11</sup> Ann Kordas points out that various references to zombi, which is a "captured soul" appear in the American press in various places in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, she writes that, "by the mid-nineteenth century, the word 'zombi' had...come to be associated in the minds of some Americans with a creature of African 'origin' that willingly performed services for whites."<sup>13</sup> Given this lineage, the fact that the cinematic zombie is more an object of fascination rather than fright is perhaps not surprising. Kordas argues that the reason that zombies became so popular in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America is that they represented a white fantasy figure: a docile (black) labor force that would never revolt, never demanded better working conditions, were insensitive to pain, and that could work day and night devoted entirely to carrying out the wishes of the zombie master.<sup>14</sup>

This raises the obvious question of why zombie pictures were (and are) classed as horror films rather than depression-era fantasy productions along with, say, the musicals of Busby Berkley or the films of Shirley Temple. The gothic elements of the zombie pictures are part of the answer to this question. The first film, *White Zombie*, after all, starred none other than Bela Lugosi, the very embodiment of the gothic genre in the twentieth century. The primary answer to this question, however, is that the object of terror is not the voodoo zombie, who is a figure to be pitied rather than feared, but the zombie master.<sup>15</sup> The zombification of black Haitians is, in these films, not a plot point. It is rather taken as a matter of course, as if this is merely an extension of the disempowered, abject lives of black workers. The plots of films such as *White Zombie* (1932), *Ouanga* (1935), and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) turn upon the zombification of whites, which is perceived as a violation of the natural order of white supremacy. The zombie master who typically is a creole, neither black nor properly white, represents illegitimate uses of power and the undermining of the social order.<sup>16</sup>

The main victims of zombification in these pictures are not only typically white but are white women. Peter Dendle goes so far as to argue that these movies "served as a cinematic mechanism for raising awareness of gender issues and empowering women."<sup>17</sup> When the female leads of these films are zombified they become mere automatons whose existence is exclusively defined by their subservience to their (male) zombie masters.<sup>18</sup> In this sense *The Stepford Wives* (1975) can be seen as a kind of zombie picture.<sup>19</sup> However, as

Kordas notes, the women who become zombies in these movies typically fall victim to their fates because of some kind of sexual transgression.<sup>20</sup> In *I Walked with a Zombie*, Jessica is zombified after she plans to run off with another man. In *White Zombie*, Madeline kicks off the plot by befriending a man who is not her fiancé, a local planter who falls in love with her and so, in order to possess her, conspires with Murder Legendre (Bela Lugosi) to turn her into a zombie. Moreover, these women don't manage to free themselves from their subservient status. Rather, a male hero is required to defeat the machinations of the zombie master and restore the "proper" social order, hardly a model for feminist cinema. Indeed, on this reading, the voodoo zombie picture represents not just white, middle-class fantasy but white, male, middle-class fantasy. Even so, the voodoo zombie picture *is also* a horror film and as such it serves, to borrow Dendle's phrase, "as a barometer of cultural anxiety."<sup>21</sup> Specific anxieties represented by the Hollywood voodoo zombie include loss of memory, individuality, and autonomy. In the following I will analyze the ways that these particular anxieties play out in voodoo zombie cinema and how these anxieties relate to the discourse of posthumanism.

The cultivation of amnesia is a key feature of zombification in voodoo zombie cinema and, in fact, is a feature that carries over from practices of Voodoo. According to a typical account of zombi creation the bokor administers a special powder to the victim that either kills the person or creates a condition that is indistinguishable from death. After burial, a few days later, the bokor returns, disinters the victim, and reanimates it. Importantly, however, the victim is not yet a zombi. In order to complete the process the victim must be brought to its home in order to forget its former life. If this step is not completed, the victim will fall out of its trance-like state, remember its former life, and return to it. Zora Neale Hurston is emphatic on this point:

*This is always done. Must be. If the victim were not taken past his former house, later on he would recognize it and return. But once he is taken past, it is gone from his consciousness forever. It is as if it never existed for him...He will work ferociously and tirelessly without consciousness of his surroundings and conditions and without memory of his former state.*<sup>22</sup>

In order to become a zombi, a victim must be made to forget and interestingly, must be reminded of its former life to facilitate the forgetting.

That losing one's memory is fundamental to becoming a zombi (or a zombie) should not be surprising because, as Jennifer Fay argues, zombies "have their origins in narratives of erasure."<sup>23</sup> What she means by this is that the immediate context of *White Zombie* is the United States' military occupation of Haiti from 1914 to 1934, a context that goes unmentioned in the film. During the occupation, the Marines reinstated the practice of conscripted forced labor called *corvée*, which reminded the Haitians of the loss of sovereignty in the institution of slavery under the plantation system.<sup>24</sup> Thus the imagery of the Haitian zombies laboring in Legendre's sugar mill serves as a double image for both colonial slavery and neocolonial labor conditions. According to Fay, the film itself enacts its own sort of zombification insofar as the resolution of the story requires the forgetting of the forgetting, as it were. As Fay explains,

In the final scene, Legendre's zombie servants are tricked into jumping off a cliff. Then Beaumont, in a semisomnambulist state, tries to redeem himself by pushing Legendre into the ocean before taking his own life. Free from both her European witch doctor and her American necromancer, and with no "surviving" evidence of zombie slaves, Madeline suddenly—and against even the film's own voodoo lore—comes back to life from the dead. As the magic haze clears, she recognizes her husband's face and, smiling, wistfully declares: "I dreamed." Her memory of servitude apparently erased, it's as if her enslavement—and the occupation it elusively signifies—never happened.<sup>25</sup>

The forgetting of the conditions of labor is thus essential to preserving the conditions of labor under a modern administrative order. Thus, one significant anxiety embodied by the cinematic zombies of the thirties and forties is that of exploitation that is facilitated by an induced amnesia: losing one's autonomy by becoming insensitive to dehumanizing conditions.

After describing the necessity of induced amnesia, Hurston goes on to note that the zombi not only cannot remember; it also cannot speak. A zombi loses its power of speech unless, for some reason, it is given salt.<sup>26</sup> If we recall that for Aristotle, it is the possession of speech that distinguishes humans from other animals, this loss of the power of speech signifies the loss of reason, the feature that for Aristotle is essential to one's humanity. As Rosalind Hursthouse explains,

That no being can have speech without having reason is more “obvious” in ancient Greek than it is in English, for the word Aristotle uses, *logos*, means not only “reason” but also “discourse”, “saying” and “word”. So to say in ancient Greek that a creature has *logos* is to say, simultaneously, that it has reason and speech.<sup>27</sup>

So becoming a zombi means becoming something that is non-human insofar as it lacks memory and speech or reason while it continues to resemble the person that it once was. It is to become something that is not human but not quite inhuman either. It is this posthuman aspect of zombification that renders it troubling, more troubling than merely dying, because the zombi carries on in human form while being essentially inhuman.

Even more troubling perhaps is the fact that, at least for Aristotle, a being without *logos* is incapable of recognizing good and evil.<sup>28</sup> A being that is without speech/reason lacks the capacity for moral judgment. We see this in the case of Madeline who is made to forget her love for Neil and seemingly performs any number of services for Beaumont with nary a qualm. Without attending to the speechlessness of zombies, Fay makes this point:

The unearthed body, like an animal and without a soul, is humanity’s mechanical nature come to life. Or, it is the biological remainder of politically and legally denuded existence. Already dead, the zombie can experience neither life nor death, nor is it beholden to categories of justice.<sup>29</sup>

Zombie existence is, in this sense, even in these early films, is, to use Agamben’s term, a kind of “bare life”,<sup>30</sup> a point made by Norris,<sup>31</sup> Stratton,<sup>32</sup> and Sutherland.<sup>33</sup> The early zombie cinema thus could be understood as already expressing anxieties about aspects of what has come to be known as the posthuman condition, one that is at a significant remove from the sense of that term as employed by Robert Pepperell<sup>34</sup> yet also expresses anxieties about border crossings between the human and the inhuman.

Thus the voodoo zombie can be understood as enacting the apotheosis of alienated labor under conditions of powerlessness and voicelessness that is found in slavery, whether that instantiated during the colonial era or in Nazi labor camps. A crucial feature of this enactment involves forgetting and historical erasure, which are necessary conditions for creating the Voudou zombi as well. We will return to the issue of erasure and history when we turn to “fast zombies” and climate change.

## THE ROMERO ZOMBIE AND THE CONSUMPTIVE LOGIC OF LATE CAPITALISM

With his 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* and its sequels, George Romero can be credited with single-handedly (re)inventing the zombie film. In that film and its sequels undead revenants roam the countryside in search of human flesh to consume.<sup>35</sup> Even so, it makes sense to ask whether Romero's monsters are zombies and whether they bear any relation to the earlier, "voodoo", zombie pictures. The undead revenants of the first film are not called zombies. In addition, they engaged in—indeed their main motivation was—anthropophagia, an attribute never attributed to cinematic voodoo zombies. And finally, apart from an oblique comment made by one character in *Dawn of the Dead*, there are no reference whatsoever to Haiti, black magic, or Caribbean culture. Romero himself has said that he was not inspired by the voodoo zombie pictures but rather took Richard Matheson's novel *I am Legend*<sup>36</sup> as a key source of inspiration.<sup>37</sup> That novel explores the idea of a society that comes after society and examines what the human might look like to posthumans. However, Matheson's character refers to the creatures as vampires, not zombies. While situating the movie within the discourse of posthumanism, it isn't immediately obvious that we should consider Romero's "zombie" pictures to be about zombies at all. I want to make this connection, however, because it is important to my larger argument about the connections between slavery and the Anthropocene and our ability to utilize zombies of all kinds as means to think about posthumanism in this context. Moreover, careful attention to significant features of Romero's zombies and the way in which the idea of cannibalism relates to the idea of voodoo give us good reasons to make this connection.

In "'They are not men...they are dead bodies': From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again," Chera Kee wonders about the relationship between the cannibalism of Romero's zombies and the apparent lack of connection between them and the voodoo zombies.<sup>38</sup> Kee observes that, "anxiety about Haiti in the United States translated into an anxiety about Voodoo, which was increasingly linked to cannibalism in the U.S. popular press to underscore supposed Haitian primitivism."<sup>39</sup> Haiti was after all, the world's first Black Republic, the product of a slave rebellion.<sup>40</sup> As David Inglis points out, much of the justification of slavery and of colonialism was the idea that blacks could not govern themselves. As a result, the idea of a Black Republic was anathema to the colonial order that extended into the neo-colonialism of the U.S. occupation. In order to justify foreign

(European and United States) management of Haiti's affairs it was necessary to depict Haitians as primitives.<sup>41</sup> Kee makes this point as well, arguing that the idea that Haitians practiced cannibalism, human sacrifice, and orgiastic religious rituals was used to underscore the primitiveness of the Haitians and therefore to justify their alleged need for outside governance.<sup>42</sup> Voodoo was central to the Haitian revolution and many chronicles from the early Haitian Republic claimed that Haitians eat or otherwise sacrifice their children in the context of Voodoo rituals.<sup>43</sup>

For reasons that are unclear—though perhaps there was too much publicity in the modern era under the occupation to sustain claims about Haitian cannibalism—the association between cannibalism and Voodoo had begun to recede at the time of the U.S. occupation but the association between Voodoo and the Zombie began to rise.<sup>44</sup> Kee reasons that “linking the zombie to Haiti simply traded the idea of an overt threat (cannibalism) for a fantasy marking the entire country as a nation of eternal slaves.”<sup>45</sup> The plodding, brutish figure of the voodoo zombie played the double role of ideological critique of alienation in modern forms of capitalism—the post-colonial sugar plantation and mill being a prime example of this in the Caribbean—and sustaining the practice of according identity to white westerners while treating Haitians as anonymous drudges.<sup>46</sup> It should not be surprising then that when Romero (re)invents the postmodern zombie he bestows upon it the practice of cannibalism in order to underscore its brutishness and the degree to which it is powered by animal or otherwise inhuman drives while at the same time eliding (though making use of) the imagery that had associated the zombie with voodoo.

Fear of loss of identity is an anxiety common to both voodoo and Romero zombies. Indeed, a running joke in Romero and post-Romero zombie pictures are the small idiosyncrasies that marked their former identities that only underscore the anonymity of the zombie mob. In these films you find nurse zombies, truck-driver zombies, stockbroker zombies. While superficially different they are all fundamentally anonymous in their desire to eat brains or other forms of human flesh. This magnification of anonymity through superficial identity shows up in Matheson's novel as well in the form of Ben Cortman, Robert Neville's former friend and vampire (zombie) neighbor whom Neville hunts during the day and who tries to eat Neville at night. In their nightly encounters Cortman repeatedly calls for Neville to come out of his house so that he can be eaten,



giving Cortman something of a unique identity. However, this uniqueness tends to underscore the (apparent) lack of individuality among the undead revenants of the novel.

This anxiety about preserving or asserting one's identity in the case of the Romero film by means of consumerism is a different sort of anxiety than that which faces the slave or the colonized, which is represented by the figure of the voodoo zombie in the earlier movies. In the latter case the main problem is that of alienated labor. While this is an issue that is treated in Romero and Romero-inspired movies as well (*Shaun of the Dead* 2004 is a noteworthy example), a separate issue is the problem of asserting one's individuality in a culture overrun by mass-produced consumer goods made possible by the industrial revolution. In this situation the only solution to mass consumption is more consumption, an activity that reproduces the consumer and threatens to overwhelm the planet, much as the zombie hordes overwhelm human society in the Romero and post-Romero pictures. In any case, this concern about identity expressed in both sub-genres tends to be heightened in the Romero films especially as it interacts with issues of consumption and reproduction.

Because it is undead, the voodoo zombie does not have to eat. The Romero zombie by contrast, though also undead, is driven by its desire to consume. In this way the cannibalism (or, more properly anthrophagism, since zombies don't eat other zombies, only humans) of Romero's zombies goes beyond the "normal" excesses of cannibalism because it is purely excessive consumption. The consumption of the Romero zombie serves no purpose whatsoever except to produce more zombies. If the implications of this idea for contemporary capitalist and consumerist society were not already obvious enough in Romero's first zombie film, Romero's second film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) is actually set in a shopping mall. It is there that the humans not only fortify themselves against the zombie hordes trying to get in but also satisfy their every materialist whim, raiding the now-vacant shops of the mall for the kinds of luxury goods that they were not able to afford when a money-based economy still held sway. In so doing they seek to individualize themselves in the way that many citizens of capitalist economies do, by distinguishing themselves by their patterns of consumption. However, the absurdity of consumerist ideology can only be underscored in the context of a zombie apocalypse.

I noted above that the only "purpose" of zombie consumption in the Romero films and Romero-inspired films is zombie reproduction. Zombies eat humans in order to make more zombies. This is a very different form of reproduction from the voodoo zombie films

in which it is the zombie master who reproduces himself by making zombies from humans in order to carry out his will. This difference represents a transformation of the anxiety of loss of autonomy represented in these two sub-genres. In the voodoo zombie movies, the zombie has lost its own autonomy. Even so, at least there is still someone in charge. In the Romero films, there is no longer anyone "running the show". In these pictures, zombies are self-reproducing, driven by a primal urge that is channeled through crowd dynamics. In this way we could say that the Romero zombies represent a further development of posthumanism, one in which the very notions of human agency and autonomy are undermined. In the voodoo zombie films the zombie master might be evil and up to no good, but s/he is still understandable on a human level. In the voodoo zombie world human motivations still count for a lot. By contrast, in the Romero and post-Romero films, human motivations tend to be usurped by more primal urges, such as the zombie's desire to eat and the humans' desire merely to survive.

This movement of human toward the inhuman is taken a further step in Romero's third zombie film, *Day of the Dead* (1985), in which seemingly the whole of the world (or perhaps just the North American mainland) has been taken over by zombies and the only survivors seem to be the inhabitants of a military-scientific outpost. In this film it is the humans who have been reduced to brutality and conditions of bare life. While the conflicts in the Romero zombie pictures among the humans have always been more fraught and full of tension than human-zombie conflicts, in the third film the humans are turning upon one another. Not only their treatment of the zombies but also their treatment of one another reveal the inhuman nature of the condition to which they have descended. Perhaps to highlight this point, by the third film the zombies—one of them at least—takes on human characteristics. "Bub", a captive zombie manages to master tool use and the rudiments of communication. He is even more sympathetic than earlier Romero (or voodoo) zombies as he appears to still possess human feelings in a way that the human characters of the film do not. This progression is, I should add, taken further in Romero's fourth zombie film, *Land of the Dead* (2005), in which the zombies actively cooperate and work together even as social hierarchy, exploitation, and capitalist structures are preserved among the humans. Moreover, this film comes to mirror Matheson's novel in which a new, nonhuman society has come to replace the human one.

Anxiety is not all that is at play in the Romero and Romeroesque "slow zombie" pictures. Just as the voodoo zombies represented a fantasy figure in the form of the ideal

worker or the possibility of work without labor,<sup>47</sup> the Romero zombie is also a figure of desire. In this sub-genre the zombie represents a fantasy of simplicity and solidarity. A zombie's needs are, after all, quite simple, in contrast to the temptations and frustrations of contemporary human life. Moreover, zombies (for the most part) seem to get along with one another. When one becomes a zombie one is overtaken by the Dionysian urge to become one with the mass, to lose one's identity in the zombie swarm. Thus, in the Romero films the temptation is not to own or create zombies and thus obtain free labor, but to become one, and to have one's "work" become greatly simplified.

We see this desire at play in *Night of the Living Dead* when Barbara is confronted at the farmhouse by her brother (now zombie) Johnny. Johnny is now part of the zombie mob and Barbara, who has been in the nearly catatonic state of a trauma zombie since the incident at the beginning of the film in which Johnny was killed, doesn't have to traverse a great deal of psychological space to become an actual zombie. Undoubtedly this process is made easier by the fact that life in the farmhouse isn't very pleasant, not only because the farmhouse is beset by zombies but also because the humans in the farmhouse aren't very pleasant to each other. Thus, it is the easiest choice for her to give into her filial ties and join her zombie brother in post humanity. While it is true that one tends to find humans giving in this explicitly to zombification in other Romeroesque zombie pictures, the trenchant critique of human society can only raise the question of whether the effort to preserve that society is worth it. Moreover, since, in the Romero films at least, there isn't very much hope that human society will be preserved, one wonders whether one might as well go ahead and give in to one's zombie future. In this section I have argued that the Romero and Romero-inspired zombies give voice to anxieties that have arisen in late capitalism, specifically loss of autonomy and individuation. I have also called attention to the connection between alleged Voudou cannibalism and zombie anthropophagia, a relationship that both links the Romero zombie to its classical Hollywood predecessor and ties anxieties about labor and consumption to their colonial and late-capitalist contexts.

#### CLIMATE CHANGE, THE ANTHROPOCENE, AND THE EPOCH OF THE POSTHUMAN

Since 2002 when Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer proposed the term "Anthropocene" to replace the term "Holocene", which had been proposed by Sir Charles Lyell in 1833 and

adopted by the International Geological Congress in 1885, to designate our current geological epoch, humankind has been forced to reevaluate its relationship to the life of the planet as a whole.<sup>48</sup> This is because the term “Anthropocene” calls attention to the idea that human activity is now for the first time altering the climate on a planetary scale. In the past, nature typically had been conceived as a relatively fixed and independent backdrop against which the dramas and comedies of human history unfolded, unaffected by events taking place on stage. The “environment” was just that, a ground to the figure of human activity. Now, however, the very distinction between nature and culture has been thrown into question with the realization that not only is humankind a part of nature but that nature itself is being (and has been for some time) radically transformed by human activity. This turn of events, no less significant for our concepts of “the human” and “nature” than the Copernican revolution or the discovery of evolution by natural selection, threatens to destabilize and transform our understanding of what it means to be human. At the very least, as a number of authors have pointed out, the Anthropocene and anthropogenic climate change raise challenges for and call for a rethinking of human agency. For the aggregate of individual human actions to effect changes on a geological scale suggests that human beings have become a force of nature, no less sublime or any more manageable than tectonic collisions or hurricanes. While some thinkers – Bill McKibben, for example – interpret this development as heralding “the end of nature”, a time when no place on the planet is unsullied by the imprint of human beings, another, equally, if not more plausible interpretation is that we have entered the era of the posthuman.<sup>49</sup> The image of human beings as a natural force transcends, even undermines, the vision of humans as rational, rights-bearing subjective agents that emerged in the Enlightenment. As such, the zombie picture appears to be an ideal vehicle for the depiction of these anxieties and their associated desires, this time speeded up even as geological time appears to be both extended and foreshortened by the emergence of the Anthropocene.

As I have argued, voodoo and Romero zombies embody anxieties about loss of agency albeit in different ways. In the voodoo zombie film the zombie’s autonomy is stolen by the zombie master. Human agency remains in the story, it’s just that the autonomy of the master erases that of the zombie. In the Romero zombie film, zombies also lose their autonomy, overtaken as they are by an all-consuming desire for human flesh. In this case, however, no one is responsible. In the Romero films the cause of the zombie epidemic is

never explained. Rather, the cause of the outbreak remains a subject of speculation. Various possible causes are entertained: is it an effect of gamma rays or an interaction between the atmosphere and the tail of a comet? We never find out, but it doesn't really matter because causality is beside the point. Humans lose their agency and in doing so become inhuman.

In the post-millennial or "fast zombie" picture, the situation is different. There is usually a cause and that cause is usually us. In the case of *28 Days Later* (2002), for example, the cause is the "rage" virus, a human-created virus that has been deliberately introduced into chimps who then escape their cages and infect first the scientists and then the general population. The cause of the zombie outbreak in this case is human activity: meddling with the forces of nature and abuse of our nonhuman neighbors. However, there is no mad scientist analogue to the zombie master at the center of this plot. The villain in this case is technology run amok. Human technology and bureaucracy have gotten out of control. Humans are the cause but they cause the outbreak without effective agency insofar as no individuals are seen to be responsible.

This experience of human causation without agency depicted in this film is the fictional analogue of our experience of climate change in the Anthropocene. Humans are the cause of climate change but insofar as human activity has taken on the qualities of a force of nature, humans no longer seem to be in control. Post-millennial zombie pictures are fast zombie pictures because they depict human beings like forces of nature. The de-individualization evident in the voodoo or Romero zombie film has been put on steroids. In *World War Z*, for example, waves of zombies pile upon each other and wash over the walls of Jerusalem like a swarm of bees or ocean waves washing over a sand castle. Individual reason, responsibility and choice have completely given over to group dynamics. Zombie hordes appear to be governed not by free will as much as the strange attractors of chaos theory. Moreover, the lesson seems to be that even if individuals do make choices, those choices are irrelevant upon a large scale (notwithstanding the hopeful dynamic introduced by individual heroism and small group cohesion, which I will discuss shortly). This is the model of humanity given to us by second order cybernetics and it is a far cry from the humanism of Enlightenment rationalism.

Post-millennial zombies represent another anxiety that is embodied in the swarming nature of the fast zombie and that is the fear of contamination under deterritorialization. Since Romero, zombies have represented anxiety about contamination and the task that

faced the humans was how to throw up effective barriers to prevent the spread of the epidemic.<sup>50</sup> While this might have seemed like a reasonable hope in the sixties, seventies, and even into the eighties when the Romero films were made, it seems to be an increasingly remote possibility in an age of instant communication, fast air travel, and globalization. It also means that there is nowhere to escape. In contrast, when previous civilizations collapsed, humanity continued along because civilizations were local. Today we have one civilization and its fate is a fate that will overtake us all. Moreover, the flows of people, goods, and information increasingly show the futility of trying to police boundaries and borders.

Additionally, the zombie horde, of the fast zombie picture swarming over borders and barricades in a flow that is too fast to stanch represents a northern and western anxiety regarding the abject in a global society. I have previously called attention to the use of the zombie in othering the non-white worker, de-individualizing her and remaking her in the picture of a natural slave. In the post-millennial zombie picture this othering process is extended. As John Stratton puts it, "Zombies provide a monster for our time because they express our anxieties over the relationship between bare life and the modern state."<sup>51</sup> Stratton argues that the zombie represents the kind of bare life lived in many parts of the world and produced, in large measure, by globalization. Globalization, in addition to creating conditions of abjection, also creates the "problem" that we can't erect effective barriers to keep the abject from entering into and contaminating "our" world. The terminology used to describe asylum seekers and economic refugees is evoked in the image of the fast zombie swarm in recent zombie films:

Terms such as 'wave' and 'flood' use the water reference to conjure up some overwhelming and amorphous force. They are dehumanizing expressions that identify the asylum-seekers as a mass rather than as individuals.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, Stratton continues, anxiety about bare life is not just about keeping those who are subject to it out. Rather, the fear is that under current economic conditions, "we" might become subject to it as well:

At the same time, in the modern state, bare life is the basis for the treatment even of citizens of the state. The zombie is the mythic expression of racialized bare life striving

to enter the state but, at the same time, the zombie is the condition that awaits all of us from whom the state withdraws protection...In the neoliberal version of that state, where rights are dependent on what people within the border of the state can offer to its economic wellbeing, the degree to which one is reprieved from bare life depends on one's economic worth.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, fast zombies embody the anxiety of becoming othered ourselves by processes that seem to be, at least for practical purposes, beyond anybody's control.

Just as the earlier sub-genres represented desire and fantasy as well as anxiety, so too does the post-millennial zombie picture. In the first place, the lack of agency and posthumanism represents a kind of escapism in the face of cataclysmic events. If humanity acts as a force of nature, then I can't personally be held responsible for what is happening. As Margo Collins and Elson Bond put it, in the post-millennial zombie picture the "threat from the reanimated dead has supplanted individual conscience and volition with a collective but (usually) uncalculating malice."<sup>54</sup> At a global scale, events are too big and too impersonal for anyone to be held accountable, either for bringing the situation about or for not doing anything about it. Forces of nature simply cannot be controlled. If humanity has become a force of nature, humanity cannot be controlled. This is in some ways an extension of the desire to give in we saw in Barbara in *Night of the Living Dead*.

There is another, associated desire literally embodied in these films that relates directly to the naturalization of the human. Collins and Bond call attention to the fact that post-millennial life is one of hyperconnectivity. We tend to interface more with screens and information than we do with bodies and things. Information, to put it in Katherine Hayles' terms, has become disembodied.<sup>55</sup> As such, the hyper-embodiment of the fast zombie represents a relief from this dematerialization. If inhabitants of a global technoculture have become all mind and no body, zombies represent an antidote to this insofar as they are all body and no mind, pure carnal desire.

Another feature that distinguishes most post-millennial zombie pictures from Romero and Romeroesque films is their hopeful nature. *World War Z* is set in the years after the zombie apocalypse in which society is being rebuilt. In other pictures there is typically some (reasonable) hope that somewhere someone has survived and that human civilization can be rebuilt. The Romero pictures offer little if any such hope. The most that is offered is the symbolic fact that Francine, who is pregnant, manages to escape the mall.

Where she will go is unclear and with each Romero picture the situation becomes only direr. What should we make of the hopeful apocalypticism of the post-millennial zombie films? I think that this can be best understood in terms of what Susan Sontag calls “the aesthetics of disaster.”

In an essay entitled “The Imagination of Disaster,” Susan Sontag begins an analysis of the aesthetics of catastrophe by describing the key elements of “the typical science fiction film”.<sup>56</sup> At some point, the following occurs, with minor variations:

In the capital of the country, conferences between scientists and the military take place...A national emergency is declared...All international tensions are suspended in view of the planetary emergency. This stage often includes a rapid montage of news broadcasts in various languages, a meeting at the UN, and more conferences between the military and the scientists. Plans are made for destroying the enemy.<sup>57</sup>

Interestingly and perhaps not surprisingly this narrative element of science fiction in the twentieth century appears as a key element in the dominant narrative of science fact, at least in the way that climate change gets presented. The idea is this: in climate change humanity faces an existential crisis of such great proportions that the only rational thing to do is to suspend all other conflicts and concerns, which pale in comparison, in order to unite, nationally and internationally, to solve this problem.

Regarding the aesthetics of catastrophe, Sontag remarks that, “the lure of such generalized disaster as a fantasy is that it releases us from normal obligations.”<sup>58</sup> It can be refreshing to imagine clearing away one’s everyday conflicts and obligations with one fell swoop, even if that swoop imagines laying wholesale waste to society at large, potentially requiring the deaths of millions of people. The suffering and destruction are, in many of these films, recuperated by the final peace and unity achieved after the worst has occurred and the problematic situation is resolved. Sontag observes that in these films, “Some scientist generally takes sententious note of the fact that it took the planetary invasion to make the warring nations of the earth come to their senses and suspend their conflicts.”<sup>59</sup>

But the problem with climate change, one that prevents it from conforming to the simplicity of the apocalyptic fantasies of science fiction films is that it is not, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, “a one-event problem...because it defie[s] rational and optimal solutions...because it impinge[s] upon too many other problems to be solved or



addressed at the same time.”<sup>60</sup> Climate change cannot be addressed by sweeping away or setting aside all the other national and international conflicts that trouble us today because *it is not separate from them*. Rather, it is composed of them. For this reason climate change resists what Mike Hulm, a climate researcher, calls a “global solution-structure”. “Solving” climate change means solving all of the political and philosophical problems with which we have long struggled and that define us as human beings:

What is the ultimate performance metric for the human species, what is it that we are seeking to optimize? Is it to restabilise population or to minimize our ecological footprint? Is it to increase life expectancy, to maximize gross domestic product, to make poverty history or to increase the sum of global happiness? Or is the ultimate performance metric for humanity simply survival?<sup>61</sup>

These are problems that would have to be solved in order to address climate change on a global scale and, not coincidentally, these are problems that we are not likely to solve once-and-for all—certainly not with a one-size-fits-all answer or on a global scale—if we are ever able to solve them. Post-millennial zombie pictures indulge in a fantasy of apocalypticism in order to disrupt the anxiety that accompanies our felt lack of agency.

In this article I have tried to show a lineage and developmental relationship between the three sub-genres of zombie picture along with specific anxieties and desires that each illuminates or gives voice to. Each deals with anxieties turning upon the question of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in related but different ways, each relative to a specific era and problematic. The voodoo zombie picture expresses anxieties and desires from the context of slavery and colonialism. The Romero zombie picture takes this work and expands upon it, adapting it to concerns of late consumerist capitalism. Finally, the post-millennial zombie picture addresses issues of posthumanism involving agency (or its lack) and other issues that emerge with the recognition of the Anthropocene. Now, interestingly, each sub-genre of zombie cinema marks a fictional trace of the social and economic forces that gives rise to the next. Robin Blackburn makes the case that it was slavery, echoed in the voodoo zombie picture, that created the wealth that gave rise to the industrial revolution, the results of which are the focus of the anxieties and desires embodied in the Romero zombie picture.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, we know that it was this process of industrialization that has brought about the Anthropocene, concerns

about which I have argued are marked in the post-millennial fast zombie picture. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornburg have recently argued that we should explicitly consider the connection between climate change and capitalism, a connection that they suggest gets buried in the concept of the Anthropocene.<sup>63</sup> I have argued that the fast zombie is an appealing figure in the context of the Anthropocene in part because of its ability to naturalize the human and to dilute and defer responsibility. Moreover, the fast zombie picture enacts the process of double-forgetting that has been crucial to the zombie throughout its literary history, from slavery through industrialization, post-colonialism, and capitalism, right up to our present moment, which has come to be known as “the Anthropocene”. Thus, while each type of zombie film represents concerns specific to its own era, the evolution of the zombie picture from the depression and wartime voodoo zombies through the post-millennial fast zombies of recent cinema mirrors economic and political developments with the corresponding eras. What I have also tried to show is how the cinematic zombie in various forms is a cultural representation of and provides a way of reflecting upon various issues related to posthumanism and what it means to be human.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Latour, “Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 151-180.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions that have improved the article. Any errors that remain are my own.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Lauro and Jeffrey Cohen also discuss zombies in relation to ecological questions though neither explicitly addresses zombies in relation to climate change or the Anthropocene. Sarah Juliet Lauro, “The Eco-Zombie: Environmental Critique in Zombie Fiction,” in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, ed. Stephanie Boluk et al. (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 54-66. Jeffrey Cohen, “Undead (A Zombie Oriented Ontology),” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23 (2012), 397-412.

<sup>5</sup> Chera Kee, “‘They are not men...they are dead bodies!’: From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again,” in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, ed. Deborah Christie et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 20.

<sup>6</sup> In this essay I use the term “voodoo” to mark the cultural (mis)appropriations of Afro-Caribbean “black magic” that provide the backdrop for early twentieth century zombie pictures and “zombie” to designate the movie monster that is the center of these pictures. By contrast I will use the term “Voudou” to refer to the Haitian religion and “zombi” to refer to the captured spirit or body that is created by Voudou priests or bokors.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (No City: Picador, 1965), 209-225.

<sup>9</sup> Allen Ameron, “Zombie Media: Transmission, Reproduction, and the Digital Dead,” *Cinema Journal* 52 (2012), 80.

<sup>10</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Dendle, "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Kordas, "New South, New Immigrants, New Women, New Zombies," in *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*, ed. Christopher M. Moreman et al. (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Dendle, "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety," 48.

<sup>18</sup> Ouanga renders this interpretation problematic, however, insofar as the zombie master is a woman.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Boon classes the eponymous wives of *The Stepford Wives* (1975) as "tech zombies." Kevin Boon, "The Zombie as Other: Morality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age," in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, ed. Deborah Christie et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 58.

<sup>20</sup> Kordas, "New South, New Immigrants, New Women, New Zombies," 27.

<sup>21</sup> Dendle, "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety."

<sup>22</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990), 183.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Fay, "Dead Subjectivity: White Zombie, Black Baghdad," *The New Centennial Review* 8 (2008), 83.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>26</sup> Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 183.

<sup>27</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, *Ethics, Humans, and Other Animals: An Introduction with Readings* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 63.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Fay, "Dead Subjectivity," 92.

<sup>30</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Norris, "Giorgio Agamben and the Politics of the Living Dead," *Diacritics* 30 (2000), 38-58.

<sup>32</sup> Jon Stratton, "Zombie Trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life, and Displaced People," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14 (2011), 265.

<sup>33</sup> Meghan Sutherland, "Rigor / Mortis: The Industrial Life of Style in American Zombie Cinema," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 48 (2007), 64-78.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Pepperell, *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 84.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Matheson, *I am Legend* (New York: Tor Books, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> "Interview: George A. Romero on Diary of the Dead," Mariana, McConnell, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Interview-George-A-Romero-On-Diary-Of-The-Dead-7818.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Kee, "'They are not men...they are dead bodies!'"

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> David Inglis, "Putting the Undead to Work: Wade Davis, Haitian Vodou, and the Social Uses of the Zombie," in *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*, ed. Christopher Moreman et al. (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>42</sup> Kee, "'They are not men...they are dead bodies!'" 10-13.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Comoroff and Comoroff discuss the way that this fantasy is at play in reports of zombies in contemporary South Africa. Also worth noting in this context is that in the Haitian context zombification is a rare form of punishment that is reserved for those who achieve great wealth at the expense of or apart from the rest of the community. Thus, in that context "actual" zombification is punishment for being too successful at zombie capitalism, that is, miraculously achieving great wealth without great labor. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony," *American Ethnologist* 26 (1999), 279-303 and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (2002), 779-805.

<sup>48</sup> Crutzen and Stermer, "The Anthropocene."

<sup>49</sup> Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*. Literary representations of this fear of contagion and contamination go back much farther and literary tropes regarding these anxieties are often found in zombie films. See Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz, "Infection, Media, and Capitalism: From Early Modern Plagues to Postmodern Zombies," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10 (2010), 126-147.

<sup>51</sup> Stratton, "Zombie Trouble," 277.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>54</sup> Margo Collins and Elson Bond. "'Off the page and into your brains!': New Millennium Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypses," in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, ed. Deborah Christie et al. (New York: Fordham, 2011), 188-89.

<sup>55</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

<sup>56</sup> Sontag, *The Imagination of Disaster*.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>60</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43 (2012), 13.

<sup>61</sup> Mike Hulme quoted in Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies," 13.

<sup>62</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997).

<sup>63</sup> Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The geology of mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1 (2014), 62-69. Malm also makes this argument in a shorter essay, "The Anthropocene Myth," *Jacobin Magazine*, March 30, 2015, accessed September 26, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/anthropocene-capitalism-climate-change/>. These critical comments are based upon the work in historical materialism on "fossil capital" published, for example, in Andreas Malm, "The Origins of Fossil Capital: From Water to Steam in the British Cotton Industry," *Historical Materialism* 21 (2013), 15-68.