

The Discursive Problematization of Death, Dehumanization and  
Sociocultural identity: An Analysis of *The Walking Dead*.

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## Abstract

The zombie is a significant cultural figure which is represented and produced as being symptomatic of and relevant to contemporary concerns about death and dehumanization. This thesis will focus on the ways that death and dehumanization are changing and being negotiated within popular cultural representations and discourses regarding zombies, particularly in Frank Darabont's television series *The Walking Dead*. The thesis will consider the way in which the figure of the zombie is representative of issues and discourses that are indicative of a problematization of the category of the human, and the notion of the transcendental. This will involve an examination of the changing narratives of the body, with particular regard to consumerism and the insistence of the body as a major site of the truth and value of the self, in contrast to the horrifying bodily form of the zombie. The thesis will also examine the way that dehumanization is problematized in *The Walking Dead*, where the human/non-human distinction is shown to be increasingly precarious and difficult to sustain. Further, the thesis will examine how the zombie is represented as manifesting the collapse of identity, as agents become alienated from the social discourses, narratives and values which constitute and categorize the subject.

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## The Discursive Problematization of Death, Dehumanization and Sociocultural identity: An Analysis of *The Walking Dead*.

The figure of the zombie and the zombie narrative have experienced a popular cultural revival over the last decade. While the zombie featured in George Romero's Living Dead films, commencing with *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968 and with *Day of the Dead* in 1985, it was in 2002, with Danny Boyle's film *28 Days Later* and Paul Anderson's film *Resident Evil*, that the zombie achieved significant popularity. Since then numerous blockbuster zombie films have been produced including a remake of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (Zack Snyder) in 2004 and *Day of the Dead* (Steve Miner) in 2008, as well as the production of *Diary of the Dead* (George Romero) in 2008, and sequels to *Resident Evil* in 2004, 2007, 2010 and 2012. Other popular zombie films produced since 2002 include *28 Weeks Later* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo), *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence) and *Rec* (Jaume Balagueró & Paco Plaza) which screened in 2007, *Quarantine* (John Erick Dowdle) in 2008, *Rec 2* (Jaume Balagueró & Paco Plaza) in 2009, *Quarantine 2* (John Pogue) in 2011, *Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies* (Richard Schenkman) and *Rec 3* (Paco Plaza) in 2012 and *World War Z* (Marc Forster) which was released in June 2013.

The zombie's significance in contemporary Western popular culture may be due to its ability to encompass and reflect sociocultural fears and anxieties. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz argue that the figure of the zombie can virtually stand in for a number of contemporary anxieties, for instance with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality, atomic weapons and the recent financial collapse (2011, pp. 9-11). Many discussions of the cultural function of the zombie focus on its role as an 'other', and its relevance to processes of dehumanization. The

most personalised anxiety associated with the zombie, however, is the issue of death and dying. This thesis examines certain aspects of the discursive status of death and the human in contemporary Western society, with specific reference to the figure of the zombie, and the zombie narrative in Frank Darabont's television series *The Walking Dead* (2010).

The figure of the zombie is symptomatic of contemporary concerns about issues relevant to death and dehumanization. This thesis will focus on the ways that death and dehumanization are changing and being negotiated within popular cultural representations and discourses regarding zombies. The thesis will also consider the way in which the figure of the zombie is representative of issues and discourses that are indicative of a problematization of the category of the human, and the notion of the transcendental. This will involve an examination of the changing narratives of the body, with particular regard to consumerism and the status and function of the body as a major site of the truth and value of the self. The thesis will also examine the way that dehumanization is problematized in *The Walking Dead*, where the human/non-human is shown to be increasingly difficult to sustain and precarious. Further, the thesis will examine how the zombie is represented as manifesting the collapse of identity, as agents become alienated from the social discourses, narratives and values which constitute and categorize the subject. Exploring discourses of death, dehumanization and sociocultural alienation are important as they are all tied to the construction and understanding of subjects. The way in which death is understood is both influenced by and impacts upon the dominant understanding of the self as subject. Further, dehumanization is only possible through a binary and boundary based system of subjectivity. In becoming aware of the narratives behind dehumanization one can re-

evaluate ethics as well as question the boundary based system of subjectivity.

The serial drama *The Walking Dead* will be analysed with specific regard to how the survivors and the zombies interact, how survivors interact with other survivors, the dialogue between characters, and the activities that the characters undertake. *The Walking Dead*, created by Frank Darabont, began airing in 2010 and is currently in its third season. The show is based on the monthly graphic novels created by Robert Kirkman (first published in 2003) which follow Rick Grimes and other survivors of a zombie apocalypse. The television series also follows Rick who awakes from a coma to a post-apocalyptic world dominated by 'walkers' or zombies. The series shows Rick, his family, and other survivors navigating through zombie dominated America. *The Walking Dead* has been chosen as the primary text of analysis primarily because it is a contemporary zombie story, commencing in 2010 and currently still airing. Further, as *The Walking Dead* is a television series, it differs from zombie films as it has more time to deal with complex issues and greater scope for character development.

The term 'zombie' is used in this thesis to describe a relentless flesh-eating person who only holds the brain-capacity to move and to consume flesh. This understanding of the zombie derives from Romero's conception shown in his zombie film series first created in 1968 with *Night of the Living Dead*. The zombies in *The Walking Dead* have the same traits as the zombies in Romero's zombie films. It is important to note however that the term zombie is never used by the characters in *The Walking Dead*. Rather, they refer to the zombies in a number of different ways, including 'walkers', 'geeks' and 'biters'.



I will draw from a number of cultural theorists including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Jean Baudrillard in order to discuss contemporary discourses and narratives of and about death, dehumanization and sociocultural alienation. Foucault's position that there is no core self and that identity is constructed in and through discourse will largely guide the analysis. Further, Butler's contention that the self is performative as well as Baudrillard's claim that sign systems and consumerism have come to play a significant part in identity formation will be utilised. Each of these contentions places emphasis on the importance of narrative and discourse. I will also draw from theorists who have examined zombies, such as English literature academic Kevin Boon who has discussed the zombie and its role in contemporary culture. Boon examines the zombie in relation to its ability to deprive the individual of his or her unique self and argues that the zombie leaves the individual as an abyss of nothingness (2011). Boon's contention supports the notion that the self is understood through narrative. In becoming a zombie one loses his or her ability to understand or negotiate narrative and therefore he or she cannot retain an identity.

The frequency of scholarly analysis of zombies is increasing; however there are only a few compilation books examining the zombie, including Shaun McIntosh and Marc Leverette's *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead* (2008), Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz's *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture* (2011), and Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro's *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (2011). Other analyses of the zombie are found in academic journals and books that have a wider focus on monsters such as Niall Scott's *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths of Enduring Evil* (2007) and Simon Clark's *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the*

*Undead* (2010). The focus of zombie analyses have been broad: particular issues examined include the zombies' ability to break boundaries and overcome binaries of dead/alive (Christie, 2011) and man/woman (Patterson, 2008); the zombies status as antithetical to the perfect, hygienic body (Dendle, 2007); and the zombie as representing those who are dehumanized and killed for the protection of the 'legitimate' subjects (Vint, 2011). Analyses have also been carried out on the horror of the zombie and why it is a terrifying figure. Boon contends that the zombie reminds individuals of their own mortality (2007), and Bishop employs Freudian theory, arguing that the zombie is frightening because it is uncanny (2006). Peter Dendle posits that the lack of dignity and direction of the zombie makes it frightening, as it reflects contemporary Western society where there does not appear to be any broader spiritual or communal purpose (2007). Other zombie analyses focus on the survivors of the zombie apocalypse, such as Nick Muntean who claims that the survivors are 'trauma zombies', as the ideologies which narrate their lives and identities have become so disrupted that they cannot maintain coherent identities (2011). Further, Sorcha Ni Fhlainn argues that mental breakdown and dehumanizing others leads survivors to a zombified state where there is no longer any ability for 'rational' thought (2011). There currently does not appear to be any literature which exists that carries out a full investigation of the zombie and zombie narrative as a symptom of contemporary anxieties around death and dehumanization.

This thesis will consist of four chapters, each with a particular point of focus. Chapter one will contain a wide-ranging exploration of the discursive position of death in contemporary Western society. This will include an inquiry into the most influential dominant discourses

on death in Western society from the Middle Ages onwards and how they have come to influence the contemporary discursive regime on death. Chapter one will also consider the impact of the dominant discourses of the self on the predominant understanding of death and dying. The narratives of Christianity and collectivism will be addressed here, particularly for demonstrating the way that the Christian conception of the eternal self has impacted perceptions of death, as well as for exploring how a more group-oriented environment, as opposed to individualist, can potentially ease the fear of death. This will lead to a discussion of the rise of the importance of the body and bodily norms, particularly through the development of biopolitics. Here two important themes to the thesis will be introduced – the sociocultural importance of the body and exchange value, as well as the segregation of people into categories of ‘human’ and ‘non-human’. The chapter will consider the increasing significance that the body has in encompassing the identity of the individual, particularly through sign values and symbols. This involves an intricate network of systems of categorization in which an individual’s value can be determined by his or her body and how it fits within the network of norms. These systems are violent in their inclusionary/exclusionary nature as they enable categories of human and non-human. This will lead to an exploration of how the category of the non-human is used to direct violence and fear of death and disease. A brief analysis will be integrated here regarding the zombie as both a ‘dangerous other’ and as an anti-thesis to the requirements of the body as communicated through biopolitics and consumer society. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of the contemporary dominant discourse of death and dying.

In chapter two the zombie and zombie narratives will be evaluated in terms of their relation to death. This will involve a discussion on how the zombie functions as a representative of death. This chapter will also explore how the zombie, particularly in *The Walking Dead*, encompasses and plays on contemporary fears of death, including anxieties around the loss of the soul and the afterlife established through the dominant scientific discourse of identity. As a part of this, the chapter will look at how the zombie acts as the embodiment of the non-self in death. It will also investigate the way that death and dying are positioned in zombie narratives and where this positioning lies in relation to the contemporary dominant discourses on death. The chapter will then evaluate the zombie as uncanny and as binary-disrupting. The zombie will be discussed in relation to how it constitutes a middle ground in relation to dead/alive, familiar/unfamiliar, and human/non-human. This will be discussed with reference to the changing way that death is understood in Western society as modern technology enables these strict boundaries to break down. The way that 'alive' is understood will be evaluated with regard to the survivors in *The Walking Dead*. Further, a discussion will be carried out on how death is negotiated by the survivors, with particular reference to suicide.

The evaluation of the zombie as a stand-in or representative for death will lead into chapter three, which will discuss the zombie as the dangerous other that death fears are projected onto, and the way that this exercise in effect occurs in contemporary society where some groups of people are presented as 'others' in contrast to those who are considered legitimate and human. This chapter will largely draw from Butler and will discuss the importance of the other in regard to technologies of self-making and the development and

maintenance of the subject. Utilising the figure of the zombie, the chapter will consider how associating a group of people with a negative trait or occurrence, as well as the labelling of these people, takes away possibilities for relating to them and legitimises violence toward them. This will also involve an examination of the segregation of zombies and the way that the survivors treat them and speak about them. This is particularly interesting in the way that it mimics race and class relations in contemporary Western society. *The Walking Dead* will then be analysed in regard to how the dehumanization of zombies becomes problematic in some situations and how the dehumanizers are arguably more monstrous than the dehumanized. Finally this chapter will examine the zombie in terms of its lack of subjectivity and its consequent ability to reveal systems of categorization, and consequently the dichotomies of human/non-human as not natural or inherent.

Chapter four will largely draw on Baudrillard's work to discuss the importance of the sociocultural in constructing identity. This will involve a discussion of the importance of capitalism and consumer society in producing identities, particularly through personal expression as consumer-object based. The chapter will examine how the body is understood and functions within, and how the zombie is left outside, this process. An analysis will be carried out on how identity is affected by the breakdown of the sociocultural through the zombie apocalypse. This will be discussed in relation to the collapse of capitalism and will involve an investigation into the way that the survivors of the zombie apocalypse in *The Walking Dead* negotiate this collapse. While the zombie apocalypse does offer a collapse of capitalism and the structures which organise consumer-oriented identities, the chapter will also discuss how the zombie itself actually mimics the conditions of capitalism. The chapter

will conclude with an evaluation of the ability of the apocalypse to denaturalize the systems of categorization which constitute contemporary identity.

The thesis will conclude by reviewing the problematics around death, the human and identity which arise in *The Walking Dead*. In particular, the conclusion will evaluate how the figure of the zombie and zombie narrative disrupts discourses and the potential impact that these disruptions may have on the discourses of death and the human.

## Chapter One: Discourses of and on Death

“Don’t get close to them, they’re not gonna be around forever” – Hershel Greene. *The Walking Dead*, season two, episode five.

### Introduction

The way that death has been understood and negotiated has changed throughout the history of Western culture. This chapter will provide a brief genealogy of discourses about death, demonstrating how the dominant discursive position on death and dying has changed and has transformed in the modern world. I will provide an account of the main theoretical concepts and works of scholarship that will be used in contextualising and analysing the discursive trajectory and form that death has taken in the contemporary culture. This will involve an examination of how the human and identity are understood and represented in cultural texts, most particularly the zombie genre and, more specifically, the television series *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010). In examining the prominent themes concerning death and the human, this chapter will introduce the overall themes that are covered in subsequent chapters. In the latter part of the chapter I will integrate the relevance of my text of analysis, *The Walking Dead*, demonstrating how the zombie covers the themes of the body, identity and death.

## Discursive Frames

The way that death is understood in society is dependent on the discourses which are active and hegemonic within society at the time. Discourses frame the world using particular terms and categories which are used to create notions of what is normal and what is abnormal.

The collection of dominant discourses in a society can be described as the episteme of that society. Tony Schirato, Geoff Danaher and Jen Webb describe an episteme as providing “the logics, narratives and dispositions through which subjects see, understand and relate to the world” (2012, p. 20). Epistemes are always changing and thus different ‘truths’ may be apparent at different times and in different cultures. These ‘truths’ may even contradict each other completely.

The power of dominant discourses lies in their ability to portray the created norms as natural and inherent. Through processes of naturalization, discourses produce a particular conception of the truth, and simultaneously make any other conception marginal or unthinkable. In this way discourses can make the world exclusively understandable in terms of certain categories and encourage the measuring of the world against certain norms.

While these ‘truths’ lack an ontological foundation, they are not false in relation to some authentic truth. Foucault explains that “an experience is neither 'true' nor 'false': it is always a fiction, something that is constructed, that exists only after it is made, not before; it is not something of “truth” but is made a reality” (Ransom, 1997, p. 57). Foucault uses the term ‘games of truth’ to describe these constructed truths (1997, p. 297). He asserts that an individual’s understanding of herself and her life is always “filtered through the ideas,



discourses and institutions that constitute society” (Danaher et al., 2000, p. 48). Games of truth discursively position individuals to see the ‘truth’ about themselves, their desires and their experiences and in this way help to produce an individual’s subjectivity (Danaher et al., 2000, p. 40).

## Discourses of Death

The dominant discourses on death have changed through the history of Western society, and this has meant that the way that death has been understood has also changed.

Importantly, the truth of death is strongly tied to discourses on the truth of the self. Phillipe Aries has attempted to trace the dominant truths of death throughout Western culture; he argues that traditionally in the West, particularly in the Middle Ages, death was largely tamed (1977/1981). Aries argues that individuals were aware of and accepted their death. This is because subjects were largely understood in terms of two dominant discourses and categories of identity - collectivism and Christianity. Within these discourses death was not understood as a final state.

Within Feudal collectivism the well-being of the community was acknowledged as primary, and there was little emphasis on the individual (Aries, 1972/1974, p. 28). The collectivist notion of death in the Middle Ages meant that death was not seen as an ultimate separation (Dollimore, 2001, p. 124). Aries argues that within collectivism man was not understood as separate from nature (1972/1974). Accordingly, in accepting the order of nature, one could

also have an acceptance of death: "In death man encountered one of the great laws of the species, and he had no thought of escaping it or glorifying it. He merely accepted it" (Aries, 1972/1974, p. 28). Zygmunt Bauman also emphasises the familiar and calm nature of death in earlier times, stating that the high occurrence and visibility of death meant that people did not need to be puzzled or unduly excited about death (1992, pp. 96-97). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that in the medieval period there was a particularly prominent folk conception of the body as part of a festive cycle of life and renewal (1986). Images such as the grotesque body were rejoiced for their celebration of bodily processes including birth and death in Medieval popular festivals (1986). In this way, the perceived naturalness and order of death framed it as innate and something that was not to be feared.

Within Christianity death was understood as a transitional state for the individual, in which the individual moved to another realm of existence. Aries explains that "the Christian is urged to look forward to death with joy, as if to a new birth" (1977/1981, p. 13). The influence of Christianity meant that there was widespread belief in the soul. Mike Featherstone wrote that "the Christian tradition glorified an aesthetics of the soul" (1982, p. 24). Everyday practices and choices were influenced by this widespread belief in the truth that each person had a soul. The idea arose that the soul was separate from the body and this elevated the soul as the important part of the person: "the soul then became the essential principle of the individual, his immortal part" (Aries, 1977/1981, p. 456). This influenced the belief that there was a core, unchanging and immortal self. The new dominant discourse was that "The soul is that incorruptible and ethereal element that death

has released from the heavy uncertainties of this life and that can now assume, in full consciousness, a destiny that was formerly murky and confused” (Aries, 1977/1981, p. 286). The idea that there is a soul and that the soul is immortal was largely influenced by the work of Plato, who claimed that originally the soul belonged to the train of one of the Gods and when it fell, it entered into material bodies (Young, 2003, pp. 13-15). The body could thus be seen as a sort of shell for the soul, which was believed to be the true person.

Within the discourse of Christianity, life was largely seen as a test for the immortal self to find salvation. Foucault asserts that during the fifteenth century, the self was seen as something that could be perfected through overcoming one’s desires (1984/1985). Both Christianity and Plato’s narratives adhere to the story of sin, fall and redemption. Consequently, life was understood as a time to prepare for the journey of one’s immortal soul and to find salvation (Aries, 1977/1981, p. 300; Kearsley, 1989, p. 35). Aries argues that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries death was something that people were urged to think about throughout their lives. Earthly life was seen as preparation for eternal life and people were invited to meditate on death (1977/1981, pp. 300-301). In this way, death became a means to living well. The soul was put at the forefront of life and death while the physical body was largely pushed aside; as Featherstone writes “the dominant ethos of Christianity was to denigrate and repress the human body” (1982, p. 24). Subsequently, the soul was seen as the marker of identity, most particularly with regard to one’s capacity to overcome one’s desires and to follow the moral imperatives of Christianity.

## Death as Problematic

From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the discourses around death and the self were called into question. Foucault argues that individuals can reflect on dominant discourses and truths and negotiate them through criticism, or more specifically, through “a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking and saying” (Foucault, 1997, p. xxxv). Conceptions of the truth can be critiqued, and this can problematize a discourse. Foucault contends that the rise in scientific and philosophical discourses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries lead to the questioning of Christian discourses. For Arnold Toynbee the decline in Christianity in the seventeenth century arose from the sixteenth and seventeenth century Western wars of religion, as well as the growth of the scientific attitude (1968, p. 124). A growth in scientific materialism meant that the idea of the soul started to diminish. Baudrillard claims that from the eighteenth century sensualist and materialist philosophies demolished the traditional spiritual dogmas (1970/1998, p. 135). By the nineteenth century, Julian Young asserts, Western culture ceased to be a religious culture (2003, p. 3). The questioning of the spiritual aspects of the human and the rise in scientific rationality created a range of problematics, especially for the meaning of existence. Toynbee explains that under the discourses of Christianity an individual’s position in life and in death is central and certain; however under science one’s position is reduced to apparent insignificance (1968, p. 124). Science did not offer an easy replacement to Christianity’s certainty around the meaning of life. Young (2003) explains that this resulted in a widespread nihilism whereby life is understood as meaningless.

## Biopolitics

For Foucault the moral uncertainty which arose with the decline of Christianity threatened governments with instability (Ransom, 1997). Aries states that as early as the eighteenth century the notions of hell and sin were abandoned and morality emerged as a social problem, rather than one of human nature, which could be dealt with by systems of supervision and punishment (1977/1981, p. 613). These problematics were arising at a time when governments were trying to both grow their populations in order to create strong nation states, as well as trying to keep their populations both productive and regulated. Cultural fields and discursive forms associated with the law, psychiatry, education and medicine worked to define and delimit the activities of individuals through controls over the body and bodily behaviour. Foucault terms these controls and regulations 'biopower' (1976/2008) and they have subsequently become known as 'biopolitics'. Commencing in the penal system, surveillance became the primary method through which to discipline and manage bodies. The theoretical form that this surveillance took was Bentham's notion of the panopticon, where a surveillance tower was placed overlooking the prison, and guards could potentially observe every move of the prisoner. The panopticon model meant that prisoners were constantly aware that they may be being watched, even when they were not. The constant possibility of the authority's gaze meant that the prisoners began to self-govern their own behaviours (1975/1995). Individuals thus became the subject of their own gaze. Through the gaze, individuals could judge themselves based on whether they fit in with the prescribed norms and rules of society.

Biopolitics was particularly important as the body became central to the question of the self. Biopower ensured that individuals were classified in terms of their bodies and their bodily capabilities. As a part of this, the government ensured that particular traits, appearances and behaviours were seen as normal while others were seen as abnormal (Foucault, 1976/2008). Subjects could then measure themselves and their own behaviours based on these established norms. These norms included performance measures such as the fitness level of people at different ages and the 'average' weight of a child, as well as the appropriate bodily etiquette for different situations. Individuals were labelled in terms of how their bodies met or did not meet these norms of society (Foucault, 1976/2008). This rendered identity and subjectivity primarily dependent on an individual's physical body. Foucault argues that a particularly clinical gaze arose during the end of the eighteenth century whereby bodies began to be ordered and understood within the logics of medical terms (1976/2008, p. 117). Bodies were now largely seen in terms of binaries such as ill/healthy, fit/unfit, and old/young.

The practices of classifying people as normal or abnormal were encouraged and proliferated through dividing practices (Foucault, 1975/1995). Those classified as abnormal could be disqualified as people and separated from society. These people could be segregated from the rest of society in a number of ways. Psychiatric institutions were built to separate and contain those who did not meet social norms and the sick were taken out of their traditional place of rest – the home (Aries, 1977/1981) – and put into hospitals. The separation of the sick from the healthy had particular importance for the role of death in society. As death disappeared more and more from the home in the Western world, it became increasingly

depersonalized. The hidden status of the unhealthy and the dying also depersonalized the individuals who were going through sickness, and stigmatized them. As a consequence of this depersonalization of death, sickness and death came to be something that was increasingly feared (Aries, 1977/1981; Toynbee et al., 1968). The stigmatization of the sick and their consequent 'othering' confirmed the status of the 'normal' as legitimate and superior.

### Discourse and Categories of Identity

Butler (1990) argues that the body and identity are arranged within systems of categorisation which individuals are required to adhere to. Butler uses the notion of gender to explain this point: when an infant is labelled girl or boy, the infant is given a particular identification and is enabled particular desires and performances while all other identifications, desires and performances become foreclosed (1990). These rules of identity, established through iterative norms, are presented as if they are natural and inherent, and any alternatives to these behaviours are rendered unthinkable or unnatural.

Butler contends that individuals seek to make themselves recognizable through norms and that norms work to sustain one's life in its intelligibility. However any account that one gives in discourse never completely expresses or carries the living self (p. 36). The account in discourse is not grounded in the individual alone; rather, it belongs to a sociality that exceeds the individual. Butler explains that any account of oneself conforms, to some

extent, to the norms which govern the humanly recognizable. Because of this, one is required to make herself substitutable to some extent in order to make herself recognizable. Here, “the ‘I’ must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story” (Butler, 1990, p. 37). As one is constituted by and must communicate within the set of norms, or system of categorisation, one can never give a full account of herself as she cannot narrate the origin or emergence of these norms.

### The Human and the Non-Human

Butler asserts that the function of naming, or being hailed and categorised into existence within the terms of the culture in which one is situated, is a form of symbolic violence (1997). Naming is not just violent to the subject due to its foreclosure of different choices and paths of desire, but also because it creates a human/non-human distinction. Butler (1993) and Lawrence Grossberg (1996) argue that the normative schemes of intelligibility that produce subjects require the simultaneous production of a group of abject beings. Performances, dispositions and desires which are not commensurate with cultural norms or categories are rendered unintelligible and consequently, not really human (Brady & Schirato, 2010, p. 105). One is obliged to follow the required deployments in order to be recognizable in society and to maintain his or her status as human. Abject beings do not constitute the category of subject and consequently designate the opposite of what it means to be human according to the normative scheme. Consequently, the abject constitutes the site against which ‘subjects’ can circumscribe their own claim to autonomy



and to life. As such, Butler argues that the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection (1993, p. 3). The status of the non-human enables society to project violence on this abject population. Butler gives the example of acts of war by the American military on Iraq in the name of freedom. She argues that the idea of freedom and the belief that the Americans are more 'developed' than the Iraqis, and thus hold a greater claim to constituting the human, gives them social permission to engage in extreme violence on the Iraqi people (2009, p. 129). Consequently Butler claims that it is necessary to re-think the way that the human is understood in order to establish what constitutes ethical conduct.

The practices and processes of dehumanization can be challenged through the process of critique, which can be prompted by a disruption in the normative framework. Hegel contends that subjects can become reflexive about themselves and their dispositions when they come across a contradiction (Brady & Schirato, 2010, p. 123). Foucault argues that the changes to norms across both time and places can demonstrate to subjects the arbitrariness of the universal claim of norms (2010, p. 124). Butler argues that calling into question the regime of truth is sometimes prompted by the desire to recognize another. The impossibility of recognizing another within the normative scheme can compel one to adopt a critical relation to those norms (2005, pp. 24-25). When adopting a critical relation to the norms that constitute oneself it becomes apparent that identity is not natural and inherent, and the human is not a wholly self-preserved individual. Rather the self is constituted by the sociocultural. Butler argues that "there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no 'I' that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral

norms” (2005, p. 7). It thus becomes evident that there is also no natural category of who constitutes the human or the inhuman.

### The Zombie as Other

The zombie is a particularly suitable figure for analysis when it comes to questions of what constitutes the human and how death is understood in contemporary Western society. *The Walking Dead* exemplifies Bauman’s argument that as a consequence of modernity’s coping mechanisms with death anxiety, there is a constant demand for the ‘dangerous other’ who is the carrier of both contagious and terminal disease (1992, p. 154). Modernity, Bauman argues, banished death and dying out of sight and replaced the anxiety around death with smaller, more manageable anxieties. Here death is organised as being populated with named and knowable objects and events. One could now focus the fear of death on the selected carriers of degeneration and disease. Subsequently these named parts to death could be managed and segregated, enabling society to do something about them rather than “stand idle waiting for impending doom” (Bauman, 1992, p. 52). Bauman argues that the result of this is that society could cast death and survival as problems (p. 52). This both reduces the gravity of death and narrows death down to a more level playing field.

Within *The Walking Dead* the zombies are represented as the dangerous other and they offer a way for the survivors to cope with death. The survivors constantly try to avoid the zombies, actively kill the zombies and hold deep concerns about becoming infected by the

zombies. In avoiding and killing the zombies, the survivors are able to feel as if they are being proactive against death. In using the zombies like this, Gerry Canavan argues that the “zombie fantasy should be primarily read as a hyperbolic re-enactment of the imaginary racial demarcation into life and anti-life that is crucial to the construction of the contemporary biopolitical state” (2011, p. 173). In this way “the zombie is a figure for those persons whose exclusion from ‘life’ secures biopower’s continued capacity for violence” (p. 173). The zombies presented in *The Walking Dead* are ruthlessly beaten and killed in the series for the protection of the surviving characters. The constant fear that the survivors have of the zombies plays on society’s fears of the decaying and unhealthy body, and the subsequent lack of exchange value that the walkers hold.

### Consumer Society and the Body

Baudrillard (1970/1998) argues that contemporary Western society is a consumer society. In consumer society, exchange is about the exchange of symbols rather than the exchange of physical materials. Products are consumable only once they are filtered, fragmented and reworked, into a material of combined, finite signs (1970/1998, pp. 125-126). In this way, objects have value due to the signs and symbols that they represent. People do not purely exchange commodities but hand over symbols, significations, services and information. This is also applicable to the body which is encumbered with symbols. The body in consumer society is a symbolic resource which can be used to represent wider cultural notions about the individual. Baudrillard explains that individuals’ must take their own body as an object

and are required to invest in their body to produce a yield (p. 131). The body in consumer society is manipulated as a signifier of social status. Through looking at the body, one can read a number of social meanings about the individual and identify the identity of the individual based on an analysis of the body. Health and beauty function as sign-value with the healthy body signifying prestige and the beautiful body encapsulating the idea of the desirable, fulfilled body. Here, the body enters a competitive logic and is used as exchange material. Baudrillard argues that the body has taken over from the soul as the privileged substrate of objectivization (1970/1998, p. 136). Importantly however, like the soul, “the body as instituted by modern mythology is no more material than the soul . . . it is an idea” (p. 136). It is not the physical body that exudes particular physical messages about the person but rather the sign values which give the body meaning. These sign values are always subject to change.

In consumer society, youth, health, fitness and beauty constitute cultural capital.

Featherstone argues that the closer one’s actual body approximates to these features, the higher one’s exchange value (1982, p. 22). In this way, Baudrillard argues that the body of the person has now become the individual’s most precious commodity, and an important marker of exchange value (1970/1998, p. 135). Within consumer society, individuals are encouraged to value themselves based on how young, fit and attractive they are.

Featherstone (1982) claims that the equation that youth = beauty = health is extremely prevalent in contemporary Western capitalist society. Justine Coupland suggests that women in particular are consistently persuaded that it is undesirable to age and that they must assume responsibility to stay young looking or to disguise their ageing (2003, p. 128).

Coupland argues that ageing is produced in the media as being distasteful, particularly the individual's own ageing (2003). Ageing is positioned as the enemy in consumer culture: not only does it diminish one's exchange value but it also signifies decline and ultimately, the dying body which is the ultimate loss of cultural standing. Stephen Katz argues that in the nineteenth century the aged body came to be understood as the degenerative or dying body (1996). Mike Hepworth argues that consequently the experience of ageing has been reduced to a single biomedical model of decline (2003, p. 90). Through the proliferation of anti-ageing products such as skin creams and non-fiction books such as Ray Kurzweil and Terry Grossman's *Fantastic Voyage: Live Long Enough to Live Forever*, as well as the proliferation of anti-ageing advertisements, consumer society encourages the discourse that ageing is a burden which needs to be overcome.

Featherstone (1982) and Baudrillard (1970/1998) both explain that bodily issues such as overweightness, uncleanliness, wrinkles and hair loss are all interpreted in consumer culture as signs of moral laxitude. The media portray these 'problems' as needing to be combated by the individual through medicines, cosmetics, fitness and sometimes even surgery. The individual who does not openly display that they are pursuing these 'solutions' is encouraged by popular media to be seen as lazy and irresponsible. Individuals are made to assume responsibility for the way they look. Baudrillard explains that "for women, beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative. Being beautiful is no longer an effect of nature or a supplement to moral qualities. It is the basic, imperative quality of those who take the same care of their faces and figures as they do of their souls" (1970/1998, p. 132). Here, salvation is now achievable through the care of the body, rather than through the care

of the soul; and in this way ageing becomes something which the individual is made to fear.

In these ways, the body has become central to the issue of identity. Baudrillard notes that the body today has taken over from the soul as mythic instance, as dogma and as salvational scheme: "The cult of the body no longer stands in contradiction to the cult of the soul: it is the successor to that cult and heir to its ideological function" (Baudrillard, 1970/1998, p. 136). The body has now become the defining marker of the individual. Anthony Synott asserts that "the declining role of institutionalised Christianity and the escalation of materialism and individuality have led us to a society where the living body has come to be identified as the site of the self" (Hallam et al., 1999, p. 127). Late capitalist society has encouraged an understanding of the self through the body by emphasizing that the look of an individual can define the individual. Death now signifies the ultimate ending of the individual, as it marks the cessation of the body. Baudrillard argues that due to this, death is the ultimate offence, and that the exclusion of the dead and death are at the very core of Western culture (1976).

The zombie encompasses death and acts as the opposite of what consumer society demands of the individual. It does not subscribe to hygienic principles, and secretes and excretes bodily fluids publicly, and it ages and decays and does not or cannot work on its own body in order to increase its bodily exchange value. As consumer society disposes individuals to accept that salvation is to be found through the care of the body and as the body has come to be the site of the self, the zombie signifies a terrifying representation of losing the self. The zombie's rotting corpse reinforces the reality of death, demonstrating

that the body will decay and revealing how it may decay. The zombie's emptiness and lack of memory or brain functions also demonstrate to audiences the reality of death. Thus in the zombie one is faced with a reminder of her own mortality and a reminder that her body will not always retain its cultural capital.

## Alienation

For Baudrillard, commodity logic has come to govern products as well as the entirety of culture, including sexuality and human relations. Everything is "evoked, provoked and orchestrated into images, signs, consumable models" (1970/1998, p. 191). Each of our acts are also orchestrated into consumable models and are encompassed with symbols and meaning. Baudrillard argues that these meanings originally built up around us a world that is in our image whereby the image demonstrated a real reciprocity between the world and ourselves. However this reciprocity waned and the symbols and meanings that each of our acts are laden with have become disconnected from ourselves. In consumer society, from the moment our works and our acts are produced, they fall out of our grasp and are objectivized, manipulated in terms of profit, and spectacularized, and in this way, our images fall into the commodity sphere (p. 189). Baudrillard contends that everything which we become dispossessed of remains attached to us in a negative way. The part of the self which is sold remains as a caricature of us and works as our continuation (p. 189). This phenomenon leads to the sense of concrete, social alienation.

Baudrillard argues that consumption has further transformed and is now a process of absorption of signs and absorption by signs. He argues that in commodity culture there is now no longer any separation between the self and the outside appearance or image of ourselves. This is because the individual being has vanished into the signs: she no longer produces her own reflection, rather she is absorbed into the order of signifiers of things such as social status (p. 192). In this way, there is no longer any 'subject itself,' Baudrillard argues that the subject is absorbed and abolished in the social order. The idea of the soul or the separate self has diminished, there is no longer any transcendence, instead there is only immanence in the order of signs. Consequently there can no longer be any alienation in the strict sense. The consumer plays out her personalization between signs and defines herself by the choices that she makes in the consumer market. Baudrillard notes that alienation is linked to the notion of a human essence. However commodity culture redefines the individual as constituted by a spectrum of signs and objects.

### Sociocultural Identity

Baudrillard contends that an individual's identity is constituted by and through the discourses, signs and values found in the contemporary, consumer culture dominated, sociocultural field. The figure of the zombie illustrates that one cannot sustain an identity without the sociocultural discourses and process of legitimization. The zombie is disengaged from the sociocultural and does not participate in any sort of negotiation of desires or mutual identification. The zombie is unable to interpret sign-values and is therefore unable



to participate in exchange. Without the capacity to negotiate with or play with sign-values, the zombie cannot be constituted as a subject and is not eligible to take on a social identity. The zombie signifies that one experiences death when one is no longer within the structures of the sociocultural, or as Joshua Gunn and Shaun Treat put it: “Concrete individuals are literally dead to the world . . . until they succumb to discursive structures that orient them as social subjects” (2005, p. 154). To have an identity, one requires others to respond to them and others to negotiate with. The zombie cannot participate in the sites of the social and thus pose a threat to these sites, and consequently pose a threat to what it means to be human.

To be removed from the sociocultural field is thus to experience a type of death. This is not just a social death whereby one can undergo a clean separation from the sociocultural.

Rather, Baudrillard suggests that one’s identity is intimately tied up, and indeed, constituted by the sociocultural, and consequently there is no remaining self or any residual transcendent self if this separation were to occur. A severing from the sociocultural results in a destruction of self-identity, as the zombie demonstrates.

## Conclusion

As a consequence of the discursive regimes of science, biopolitics and consumerism, death has become stigmatized. Both Aries and Bauman argue that society tries to ignore and push death aside (Aries, 1977/1981; Bauman, 1992). Aries suggests that contemporary society is

in the age of the invisible death, whereby death and the dying are segregated and death is not spoken about with any depth. He argues that death is no longer something that is dealt with as a family in the home and that instead the dying are segregated into hospitals where their death is dealt with in a medicalized way (1977/1981). Bauman argues that society tries to suppress thoughts of death and attempts to pinpoint particular issues as reasons of death and find solutions to these issues in attempt to defeat death (1992, p. 12).

Aries argues that the community is far less involved in the death of one of its members in contemporary culture, largely due to the reliance and trust in medical technologies to help the dying as much as they can be helped (1977/1981, p. 613). Subsequently the level of support individuals may need to deal with their impending death may not be available. Allan Kellehear remarks that in modern urban contexts dying is unknown and feared (2007, p. 180). This could be due to a lack of open communication about, and the segregation of practices around, death. Toynbee argues that the seventeenth century revolution in Western society's outlook brought with it a loss of belief in personal spiritual immortality, and this has made it difficult to face the fact of death in a composed manner (1968, p. 130). For Toynbee, this has meant that "human beings who are imbued with the spirit of pre-17<sup>th</sup> century Western Christendom find it easier than their descendants find it to face the fact of death frankly and robustly" (1968, p. 129). Death could now be an isolated place of anxiety for the individual.

In summary, it can be suggested that in contemporary Western capitalist society the body appears to have largely become the basis and truth of identity, and is also the source of one's cultural capital and exchange value. With the problematization of Christianity and the significant decline in collectivism, it becomes increasingly difficult to rely on the Christian and collectivist discourses of death and spiritual or community immortality. Therefore individuals can no longer rely on death simply being a place of transition, nor can they find comfort in the idea of holding immortality in the minds of their communal peers. Rather, death signals bodily decay, the loss of one's exchange value, and ultimate finality. This renders the position of death extremely problematic. The following chapters will draw on the themes of death, and the processes and discourses through which the distinction between the human and the non-human are produced and normalised. Chapter two will discuss how the zombie stands in for and encompasses contemporary fears of death. Chapter three will explore practices of dehumanization in more depth, and chapter four will examine the importance of the discursive and ideological structures that organise sociocultural life and the forms of symbolic violence it produces, and how the zombie constitutes a useful site for interrogating and denaturalising normative cultural politics.

## Chapter Two: Death in the Zombie Narrative

“Heaven is just another lie, and if you believe it, you’re an idiot” - Carl, aged twelve. *The Walking Dead* season two, episode 11.

### Introduction

The zombie is an important cultural figure and site for understanding how death is conceived and negotiated within the contemporary West. The figure of the zombie stands out from other cultural monsters in evoking anxiety about death, specifically with regard to the way it manifests the visual horrors of death. The zombie figure also demonstrates and plays on the contemporary anxiety over the loss of belief in life after death, and the concomitant sense that death is to be equated with inevitable and inescapable nothingness. The zombie narrative, then, is derived from and speaks to a series of questions and concerns regarding the meaning of life, and related issues such as the ethics of suicide. This chapter will explore how the zombie and zombie narratives, specifically in *The Walking Dead* (2010), represents death and encompasses contemporary fears of death. I will then investigate where zombie narratives lie in relation to the dominant discourses on death, particularly examining how they disrupt or augment these discourses. The chapter will commence with an investigation into *The Walking Dead* survivors’ negotiation with death.

## The Zombie and Death

The zombie is a figure which represents death, most noticeably in terms of its appearance.

Contemporary zombies significantly resemble the decaying, dying or dead body. The zombie is an extremely visual monster, exhibiting rotting skin, open wounds and missing limbs, and exuding bodily fluids. Kyle Bishop maintains that the zombie, unlike other supernatural or undead creatures, is in an active state of decay (2009). Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad argue that zombies are not just dead, but hyperdead (2010, p. xi); that is, they are decaying and putrefied to an exaggerated and burlesqued extent. This is exemplified through the zombies in *The Walking Dead*, who are presented as hyper-decaying corpses (figure 1). In combining images of death and the status of being a monster, the zombie positions dying and death as unhygienic, disgusting and horrifying. Bishop argues that the zombie is particularly frightening because everybody's future involves physical decay and deterioration (2009). In this sense the zombie works to remind audiences of their own inevitable decay and death.



Figure 1: Zombie in *The Walking Dead* season one, episode one.

The zombie also resembles death in the way that its indiscriminate and arbitrary attack on humans is commensurate with the 'attack' of death on the living. *The Walking Dead* zombie relentlessly pursues any human that it comes across without judgement or consideration. Bishop explains that the zombie is a 'brain-dead' figure with no emotional capacity, and is therefore unable to be reasoned with (2009). This makes it impossible for victims to negotiate or to plea with the zombie. Even family members are pursued by those who have turned into zombies in *The Walking Dead*. In season two Andrea is required to shoot her zombified sister Amy in the head in order to avoid being bitten. Boon writes that "Like physical death, zombies show no favouritism and exercise no judgement" (2007, p. 35). Thus the zombie represents the inescapable force of death which makes no exceptions. The zombie cannot distinguish or discriminate with regard to who it is eating, or whether this is a 'good' person or a 'bad' person, reflecting the belief that how one acts in life may have no significant value, and that each person is equal in death.

## Death in Zombie Narratives

Death and dying are shown as having no great purpose or meaning within zombie narratives. Christie writes that in relation to *Night of the Living Dead*, “Americans identified with the film’s most shocking suggestion: death is random and without purpose. No one dies for the greater good or to further the survival of others” (Christie, 2011, p. 77). *The Walking Dead* offers a reflection on this contemporary position of death being understood as unnecessary and pointless, and further reflects the anxiety that one’s own life and death may indeed have no meaning or impact on the world. The characters are killed regularly, and there does not appear to be any reason for their deaths. They do not die to sacrifice themselves for others or for some ‘greater good’; rather they die because they could not escape death/the zombies. In season two, Dale, positioned as the moral group member, is attacked and killed by a zombie while he is walking by himself. Dale’s death does not produce any significant effect and the group continues as normal. It is also common to see birds and insects scavenging at the remains of corpses. This provides commentary on the significance of human death by both demonstrating a modern twist on the exhibition of the circle of life, and showing that the world continues to go on as individuals pass away.

The death of characters in zombie narratives, including that of main characters, has the potential function of giving the audience the unpleasant reminder that nobody is immortal and that everybody will die. In each season of *The Walking Dead* significant characters are continually killed, contrary to traditional television narrative structures where main

characters are usually kept alive. *The Walking Dead* is particularly radical in this sense, demonstrating how all people, whether 'significant' or not, can suddenly die. The ideal of transcending life and death is shown to be unrealistic by *The Walking Dead*. John Gray argues that in contemporary society "The hope of life after death has been replaced by the faith that death can be defeated" (2011, pp. 207-208). This hope is denied in zombie narratives, where the zombie virus and death always triumph over science. Stephen Greeley suggests that anxiety over death has increased since the Enlightenment, largely because advances in technology have not challenged the certainty of death (2012). The idea of technology transcending the human condition, and of overcoming human vulnerability to chance and death, is shown to be a naïve fantasy in the zombie narrative where everybody will die.

### The Soul and the Afterlife

In its role as a 'live' dead human, the zombie mocks the idea of an afterlife, demonstrating that even if there were an afterlife, it may not necessarily be a conscious afterlife, or an afterlife which gives life meaning or purpose. This reflects the contemporary diminishing expectations of post-death. Aries argues that hope in the afterlife has significantly waned, and belief in the afterlife has particularly decreased amongst youth (1977/1981, p. 573, 576). In season two, episode eleven of *The Walking Dead* the protagonist Rick's twelve year old son Carl displays his own lack of hope when Carol explains to him "You know, we'll see Sophia in Heaven again one day. She's in a better place". Carl replies to Carol "No she's not.



Heaven is just another lie, and if you believe it, you're an idiot". This is hurtful to Carol, who has lost her daughter Sophia. The idea that there is an afterlife is unconvincing for Carl: the people who pass away around him are not in 'heaven'; rather they are all around Carl, mindless and decaying as zombies. In this way *The Walking Dead* reflects a contemporary nihilistic lack of hope or promise in death that religion once assured.

The idea of the afterlife and the soul no longer fit with the contemporary dominant, medicalized discourse on death which is based on a brain-oriented sense of identity. This is reflected in the first season of *The Walking Dead* where the group join with a scientist from the Centre for Disease Control (CDC). The scientist, Doctor Jenner, places an image of a human brain on the large screen and shows how the brain changes as the brain's owner turns into a zombie. Shane questions what the lights represent and the doctor replies "It's a person's life, experiences, memories, it's everything. Somewhere in all that organic wiring, all those ripples of light, is you. A thing that makes you unique and human". As the image changes the doctor goes on to explain that "Those are synapses, electric pulses in the brain that carry all the messages. They determine everything a person says, does or thinks, from the moment of birth to the moment of death". Doctor Jenner explains the zombie virus to the group, noting that "It invades the brain like meningitis. The adrenal glands haemorrhage, the brain goes into shut-down, then the major organs, then death. Everything you ever were, or ever will be, gone". The image changes to a lifeless brain followed by small sparkles of light increasing. Lori queries the doctor as to whether the virus restarts the brain or not, and he replies that it only restarts the brain stem and basically "Gets them up and moving". Rick questions "But they're not alive?", and Jenner replies "You tell me". Rick

then observes "It's nothing like before. Most of the brain is dark", to which Jenner responds "Dark, lifeless, dead. The frontal lobes, the neo-cortex, the human part, that doesn't come back. The 'you' part. Just a shell, driven by mindless instincts". To Doctor Jenner, the individual exists only in the frontal lobes and neo-cortex of the brain. The medicalized view largely influences Jenner's perception of the self. For him, identity is something produced from within the brain, and when the brain is shut down or destroyed, then so too is the personality and the individual. This explanation of death and the zombie virus denies the notion of the existence of souls or an inner eternal essence, and refutes the idea that what differentiates humans and zombies is a soul.

In being absent of an active frontal lobe and a neo-cortex, the zombie acts as the embodiment of the non-self. The idea of the non-self or the absence of self is a particularly frightening aspect of the zombie. For Boon, the zombie is an 'other' which violently aims to divest the individual's unique self and to leave nothingness (2011, p. 56). Boon argues that the unique self has become the only sacred thing that the human has. Boon contends that in the West prior to the Enlightenment, truth was seen as something external, something that came from God. Early modern rationalism however, which sparked the enlightenment, mandated that truth came from reason and could be uncovered within the self (p. 52). Science became a primary source of truth; however there was a decline in faith of science once the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 (p. 55). This left the individual without an external locus of truth. Boon argues that because only the self was left as the source of truth, losing the self became the greatest fear.

As the zombie entails the complete finality of the self, it reproduces current beliefs about death. As implied by Doctor Jenner, the death of oneself has come to be understood as the complete finality of one's identity, with the concomitant loss of memories, beliefs and values. In dominant discourse, death has come to be understood as nothingness, as opposed to transcendence (Aries, 1977/1981; Cheyne, 2010; Glendinning, 2012). The zombie is ultimately the embodiment of the lack of autonomy and individuality that one has in death, as it shows "no signs of independent identity or understanding" (Webb & Byrland, 2008, p. 87). Boon writes that:

The potential loss of self leads to existential despair and dread. The idea of a human body absent of Sartre's figure, a body that is only ground, stirs the most primal, instinctual fear: the possibility that we could be absent from ourselves, that we could look into the body and find only absence, is ontologically terrifying because it denies humans that which makes us human (2011, p. 54).

Here Boon integrates Sartre's notion of negation whereby something can only be identified as not being something else, or, where the object being looked at can only be seen for its absence of something else (2011, p. 54), such as the zombie who can be seen as the absence of an identity.

## The Zombie and Autonomy

Not only does the zombie stand in for the loss of autonomy and self that is believed to occur at death, but it also encompasses the fear that humans are not autonomous even when they are fully alive. Simon Pegg suggests that the zombie represents the fear that individuals may be controlled by their biological functions (2004). In witnessing the zombie driven by its appetite for flesh, one can be reminded that their decisions are driven and influenced by hormones, appetite and biological drives. The sense of not being in control of one's own decisions and one's own future is a particular point of horror in *The Walking Dead*. By season two it has been revealed that everyone is infected with the zombie virus and consequently each person who dies will come back as a zombie. This entails the comprehension that one's future may entail being driven to attempt to eat one's own family and friends. The fear of not having control over one's self and one's actions is also presented through simply living in the zombie apocalypse where situations lead the characters to do things that they never aspired for themselves such as kidnapping and murdering each other.

By demonstrating the fallibility and disconnected nature of the body, the zombie reveals that individuals are not fully constituted and autonomous beings. The zombie emphasises the biological nature of the body to a grotesque point and its functions of leaking bodily fluids, excreting and secreting threaten the notion of the fully unified subject. It shows how the "human subject is fundamentally wet and meat-like" (Rogers, 2008, p. 129). Further, Natasha Patterson contends that "zombies are essentially expressions of the uncontrollable

body” (2008, p. 112). Barbara Creed argues that these images of the body disrupt the idea of the whole and proper subject and evokes disgust and loathing (2002, p. 70). This disrupting quality of the zombie enables it to be described as an abject figure: “that which does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’ . . . that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva as cited in Creed, 2002, p. 69). The abject, leaking body of the zombie is particularly significant in episode one of *The Walking Dead*. As Rick explores the hospital after waking from his coma he comes across a deceased body. The body is pale and her insides are torn open and her stomach is missing (figure 2). The woman’s body is leaking into the world. This image challenges the notion of the fully constituted subject and presents viewers with an image of their own inevitable and uncontrollable physical decay.



Figure 2: Devoured body in *The Walking Dead* season one episode one.

## The Ugly Death and the Invisible Death

The zombie's open and leaking body, along with the devoured corpses that it leaves behind, confronts audiences with the violent and gory nature of death. Aries explains that from the nineteenth century a new image of death began to arise, that of the ugly and dirty death (1977/1981, p. 569). Death and the dying body became something that disgusted the individual, and as a result the image of the corpse was kept hidden because it was now frightening, rather than calmly accepted as it previously was (p. 608). Death became something that was confined to hospitals in order to keep it out of the public eye (p. 570). Death, according to Aries, has become something that is hidden and not tolerated in public (p. 583).

*The Walking Dead* both works against this convention, providing audiences with gruesome images of death, and at the same time, reinforces the consensus in dominant discourse that death is dirty and disgusting, by framing it as such. In *The Walking Dead* the image of death is neither clean nor sterile; rather the corpses are grotesque and provoke disgust and fear of contamination (Figure 2). In season one, episode one, as Rick leaves the hospital he is surrounded by corpses wrapped in sheets (Figure 3). This image still presents death as ordered and segregated as the bodies are wrapped so that they are largely hidden, they are also ordered into rows. Further, there is a clear defining line between where death is permitted to exist and where it is not, demonstrated by the concrete wall containing the bodies. The scene is presented as horrifying, as demonstrated by Rick's reaction (Figure 4). As the episode continues, Rick comes across bodies and zombies on city streets, in homes

and in parks. In this way *The Walking Dead* disregards the criterion of the invisible death, putting death back into public places.



Figure 3: Corpses wrapped in sheets outside of the back of the hospital in *The Walking Dead* season one, episode one.



Figure 4: Protagonist Rick's reaction to seeing the mass of corpses displayed in figure 3.

The invisibility of death in contemporary society, according to Aries, has made death such a remote and strange phenomenon that it has now become fascinating (1977/1981, p. 608). This may explain the popularity of *The Walking Dead* and the willingness of audiences to watch the series. Alternatively it may be argued that *The Walking Dead's* overly gruesome and gory images of death may provide such a disconnect with the clean hospital deaths of contemporary Western culture that it may be distanced enough from the viewer's own pre-conceptions of death to make it viewable. Geoffrey Gorer contends that images of death have become 'pornographic'; that is, they are negotiated at the level of a perverse desire (as cited in Kears, 1989, p. 387). Michael Kears argues that "it is death, not grief, that commands attention" (p. 387). Gorer and Kears's contentions appear to be fitting for the general representation of death and corpses in *The Walking Dead*; however they do not work as well where the series deals with the death of a member of the surviving group.

While many images of death in *The Walking Dead* can be kept 'at a distance', *The Walking Dead* places a lot of emphasis on the emotional impact of a group members' death. The series represents the grief and despair experienced by the mourners of the victim. These moments are characterised by screaming, crying and expressions of great sorrow, placing the viewer right into the emotional experience of death. Further the viewer is subjected to the characters' personal challenges in dealing with their own potential deaths, and the question about whether or not to commit suicide. In emphasising grief over gore in certain scenes of death, *The Walking Dead* does not always enable viewers' emotional distance.



## The Zombie as Uncanny

The zombie is differentiated from other monsters in its ability to conjure up mixed emotions. One way in which the zombie does this is in its appearance as a familiar human being, often appearing in the form of a previous surviving character. In this way, the zombie constitutes a particularly traumatic image of death as it intertwines the familiar with the unfamiliar in a terrifying way, demonstrating Freud's notion of the 'unheimlich'/'uncanny' (1919/2003). Bishop contends that the true manifestation of the uncanny occurs "when a repressed familiarity (such as death) returns in a disturbing, physical way (such as a corpse); the familiar (heimlich) becomes the unfamiliar or uncanny (unheimlich)" (2006, p. 200). Freud writes that "to many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts" (Bishop, 2006, p. 200). The zombie constitutes the uncanny, particularly the first zombie that appears in *The Walking Dead*. In episode one of season one, Rick hears somebody walking nearby, and ducks underneath a car. The audience is shown Rick's perspective from beneath the car, and are presented with a young girl's legs scuffing along the pavement. The girl is wearing bunny rabbit slippers and leans down to pick up a teddy bear off the ground (figure 5). Rick runs after her and tries to get her attention. Rick calls after her, "Little girl? Little girl? Don't be afraid, I'm a policeman". The child stops and slowly turns around to reveal herself; she is a zombie with gashes on her face and blood dripping from her mouth. She gives Rick a blank stare and starts to come after him (figure 6). This scene is particularly uncanny as it intertwines the familiar idea of the innocent child who needs protecting with the image of

death in the form of a decaying dangerous monster. The familiar intertwined with the abject results in an uncanny image which provokes an un-objectivized fear.



Figure 5: Young girl picks up a teddy bear off the pavement in bunny rabbit slippers. Season one, episode one of *The Walking Dead*.



Figure 6: Young girl reveals herself to be a zombie, an uncanny picture in season one, episode one of *The Walking Dead*.

The sense of the familiar intertwined with the unfamiliar is also demonstrated extremely well in Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* where the main character Neville is confronted by his wife as a zombie. In viewing her, Christie argues that Neville is witnessing a drastically altered, referential and revised body which is both unfamiliar and horrifically familiar (2011, p. 73). This is the same effect that the young girl zombie appears to embody. For Bishop, all zombies are uncanny as they are familiar due to their human-like appearance whilst very unfamiliar in every other way (2010). Bishop contends that when the uncanny represents a manifestation of death, its psychological effect becomes decidedly terrifying (2010). The idea of a moving corpse is especially unfamiliar and frightening; this is particularly the case because the corpse is often understood as an unhygienic object, or for Bishop, a breeding ground for disease (2010). The corpse is thus already a terrifying thing, and the zombie raises the terror by pursuing healthy individuals.

### The Zombie as Third Space

The zombie breaks and moves beyond the natural in its status as a resurrected corpse; however it still constitutes elements of the familiar. This makes the zombie a particularly strange figure. Marc Leverette notes that the zombie's strangeness may be a key component of its horror: he writes "Perhaps there is nothing so frightening or monstrous as becoming something that is neither this nor that" (2008, p. 193). Zombies have the appearance of humans, and are often the same humans that were living a few moments ago. However their lack of consciousness and social identity render them not the same person. It thus becomes difficult to say that the zombie is not the person it was a moment

ago, but it is also incorrect to classify it as the same. It is also difficult to classify the zombie as human or non-human, rather it tends to inhabit a third space.

The zombie can also be located, simultaneously, within and outside of the dead/alive binary, as it has the status of being both dead and alive at the same time. Through problematizing the boundaries of dead/alive, the zombie can unsettle how 'dead' and 'alive' are understood and classified. Christie argues that the zombies' status as being both alive and dead enables us to rethink the foundational philosophies which have informed our interactions with birth, life and death (2011, p. 68). The zombie essentially destroys the ability to think in terms of the binaries of body/soul and dead/alive which defined the old Cartesian model. According to Christie, the zombie incarnates "our discomfort with that boundary space that exists in us all, that objectness of our inherent material makeup whereby we transition from human to post- (as in no longer) - human" (2011, p. 71). The zombie points to this in-between boundary space by existing in an imaginary region between being/presence and non-being/absence. Leverette argues that the zombie "offers an unnerving commentary regarding the potential liminality of being human" (2008, p. 186). For Leverette, the horror of the zombie does not lie in the fact that it is an Other which contaminates and infects; rather it is to be found in the fact that it retains some aspect of humanity. Leverette argues "[the zombie] undergoes a kind of queering to serve its horrific function" (2008, p. 187). In its role as a problematizing figure the zombie thus increases its horror.

The zombie is a figure which transcends a number of dichotomies, playing on the anxiety of contemporary advancements in the human, including the blurring of boundaries such as human/machine, female/male and dead/alive. For Martin Rogers, the zombie acts as a type of post-human or an evolved version of the cyborg because of its binary destroying nature (2008). Rogers argues “zombie films exemplify these fantasies of disembodiment because their generic identity is so slippery: they look very much like a horror film but are often motivated by anxieties over science and technology” (2008, p. 122). He contends that:

the zombie film is a chimerical subgenre: both in the genetic sense of the word *chimera* (a hybrid organism) and in the mythological form of the monstrous chimera: zombie films hybridize science fiction (technological anxiety), horror (body anxiety), and paranoia (social or individualistic anxiety) (2008, p. 124).

The zombie’s blurring of boundaries is particularly characteristic of contemporary society in which boundaries are increasingly breaking down. Modern technology has enabled humans to continue living and surviving without their full brain functions, and even without essential organs. Furthermore diseases such as dementia enable individuals to remain physically alive, while their mental powers have been vitiated. Psychological continuity and memory in particular has consistently been considered as primary to personal identity. Julian Baggini notes that it is memory which connects our current selves to our past selves, enabling personal continuity (2011, p. 48). It can be argued that dementia sufferer’s lack of recognition or response and loss of memory renders them as having a reduced form of personal identity. The dementia patient thus effectively mimics the zombie in blurring the

question of (non)identity as well as the line between dead and alive.

Both the dementia patient and the zombie represent a modern shift in attitudes towards death. Muntean argues that death is no longer understood as somewhere that we go, but rather as something we become (2011, p. 83). In contemporary society death is something that increasingly occurs over time, often long periods of time in the case of dementia as well as old age, where disease and degeneration are gradual. Aries argues that the time of death has become “both lengthened and subdivided” (1977/1981, p. 585). The medical system has enabled significant delays to the moment of death for the dying patient, often assisting them in having only an artificial life (p. 585). Aries contends that death is now seen as a ‘business loss’ for the doctor, whose mission in life is to control death (p. 586). The zombie plays on these life-extending measures, mimicking the circumstances of many of these dying people as identity-less and arguably already dead.

### Survivors in *The Walking Dead*

It could be said that the survivors in *The Walking Dead* are within a state of undeath and unlife, just like the zombies. Indeed, Kirkman illustrates in his graphic novels of *The Walking Dead* that the survivors are actually ‘the walking dead’ (figure 7). The social worlds of the surviving characters have been destroyed, including their jobs, families, friends and social status, along with all of the socially constructed rules and laws that governed their lives. Their aim is to simply survive in the zombified world, an aim which hardly constitutes living according to character Lori. Muntean explores this idea in relation to *On the Beach*, a 1959

film situated in a world where a global nuclear war has killed most of the earth's inhabitants. Muntean states that "[the characters'] lonely, doomed postapocalyptic existences offer no source of hope or meaning: the characters' psychic annihilation precedes their physical destruction, and life itself becomes a state of waking death" (2011, p. 82). The characters in *The Walking Dead* are consistently faced with this predicament as they question their own purpose and meaning. Meghan Sutherland writes that within the zombie genre "death asserts its immanence in the living and life asserts its immanence in the dead" (as cited in Christie, 2011, p. 79). In this way it is clear that *The Walking Dead* challenges the dichotomy of dead and alive in the representation of both the zombie and the living.



Figure 7: Rick exclaims “We *are* the Walking Dead” in Robert Kirkman’s comic book series *The Walking Dead*.

Zombie narratives demonstrate that ‘alive’ is an idea in discourse which is laden with particular rules and expectations. In relation to *Dawn of the Dead*, Kim Paffenroth quotes the characters Rookie and Riley. Rookie says “There’s a big difference between us and them. They’re dead. It’s like they’re pretending to be alive”. Riley responds “Isn’t that what we’re doing – pretending to be alive?” Paffenroth argues that alive is here formulated as an “imperfectly attained goal or process, toward which both living and undead strive, with varying degrees of success” (2011, p. 23). This reflects the characters in *The Walking Dead*, who are also presented as if in process of attaining the goal of living.



The question of whether one is 'truly' alive or living is intimately tied up with the question of whether or not to commit suicide. The characters regularly consider this question. In season two, episode two, Andrea exclaims "I don't know if I want to live, or if I have to or if it's just a habit". Further, in the final episode of season one the characters are faced with the option of committing a quick and painless group suicide at the CDC, or alternatively, venturing back out into the streets with the zombies. Doctor Jenner tells the group that the only thing out there is "A short brutal life and an agonizing death". For Doctor Jenner suicide is the preferred option. The perceived hopeless state of the world, combined with the passing of one's loved ones and the inevitability of death anyway, convinces a number of characters that suicide is the 'sane' path to take. For these characters the collapse of their societal and ideological structures, paired with the world being populated with a mass of people that they cannot identify with and that they must hide from and avoid, is reason for their suicide. Jacqui tells her friend T-dog: "I'm staying! I'm staying sweetie!" and T-dog tells her "That's insane!" Jacqui illustrates her notion of sanity asserting "It's completely sane, for the first time in a long time. I'm not ending up like Jim and Amy. There's no time to argue and no point. Not if you want to get out. Just get out. Get out". As the clock ticks down for facility wide decontamination to occur, Doctor Jenner muses that it "Sets the air on fire. No pain. An end to sorrow, grief, granted". Death becomes a valid option when there appears to be no meaning or hope and when one's possession of control over their mind is under threat.

Suicide is a constant theme in *The Walking Dead*. In season two teenage girl Jill attempts suicide. Jill is in shock after a number of zombies have been released from the farm's barn, including her mother as a zombie. The zombies are massacred by the group as they walk out

of the barn, and Jill's mother is killed too. After the massacre Jill cuts her wrists using a piece of glass from the bathroom mirror. She laments "It's just so pointless". *The Walking Dead* takes the audience out of their existing world and into the zombie world which appears similarly meaningless, just in a more obvious way. As the characters question the meaning of their own existences, they demonstrate that there is nothing greater, transcendental or all-encompassing in the zombie world, or offered by the dominant discourses in the non-zombie world, to give life meaning. For Tariq Moosa "The true terror, fear and dreadfulness of the horror genre is best seen if we realize that horror is not a glimpse into someone's dark imagination, but a bridge into corners of everyday life most of us would rather not think about" (2012, p. 235). *The Walking Dead* is horrifying in this respect due to its ability to point out the instability of life's meaning and the revelation that suicide is not such a far-fetched or 'insane' option.

## Comprehending and Dealing with Death

For the other characters the aim is to put off death for as long as possible, to ignore it and to disguise themselves in order to avoid it. “We’ll be fine, as long as we stay quiet” Morgan tells Rick (season one, episode one). The characters are constantly hiding from the zombies who will bring about their death. In season two they hide beneath cars as a crowd of zombies wander towards them. Darryl and T-dog hide beneath corpses in order to hide themselves from the zombies. In the evening the group have a strict rule about keeping their fires low so not to attract zombies to their camp (season one, episode three). The characters are aware that they will all die; however they maintain that they must hold it off for as long as they can. Carol begs Doctor Jenner “Let us keep trying, as long as we can” when he threatens to keep them all enclosed in the CDC building while facility wide decontamination occurs. Rick tells his son “People are gonna die. I’m gonna die, Mum [will]. Best we can do is try to avoid it long as we can” (season two, episode twelve). In these circumstances life is positioned like a game where living is the goal. Importantly, the characters who appear to want to live the most are those who have family surviving with them, offering them continued meaningful relationships which make their lives worthwhile. Aries argues that the individual’s fear of death has been replaced by a fear of one’s own dying, devastating loved ones (1977/1981, p. 610). This may explain why those with other family survivors exhibit a strong need to stay alive, while those without loved ones such as Jacqui and Doctor Jenner are content with embracing death.

Martin Heidegger argues that while we know that we are all going to die, we understand this fact only inauthentically (1927/1962). Death is understood not as a concern of one's self but as a concern only of some distant descendant of one's present self (Young, 2003, p. 115). In this way, one does not have to comprehend the full reality of having to die. For Heidegger our lives are lived within the confines of 'average everydayness' which provides "a constant tranquilization about death" (1927/1962, p. 298). Perhaps it is because some of the characters in *The Walking Dead* have been thrown so violently outside of their everyday lives, and into a world where death is so blatantly imminent, that they may indeed be shown to have a greater acknowledgement of their own deaths.

Schopenhauer argues that there exists a tension between the desire to live and the desire to die. For Schopenhauer the will to life is the most basic force or drive in the universe and is responsible for all that lives; however it is also the 'original discord' as it is marked by want and lack (1844/1966, p. 333). The individual is always desiring and is thus always filled with a sense of lack. It is only within death that the individual can find peace in not wanting.

Jonathan Dollimore draws on Schopenhauer to argue that we live only in the fleeting *present* and satisfaction only ever lies in the *past* or the *future* (2001, pp. 174-175). Whether our desires are met or not, the result is never rewarding according to Schopenhauer who asserts, "Dissatisfaction leads to pain and suffering, satisfaction to 'a fearful emptiness and boredom'; indeed 'life swings ... to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents'" (as cited in Dollimore, 2001, p. 175). This leads to a constant contradiction. The zombie reflects this ever-desiring and never-satisfied state in its continued lust for flesh. The zombie effectively demonstrates Schopenhauer's point by

showing that even once desires are met and goals are attained, not much difference is made to one's condition. The zombie continues to lust for flesh regardless of whether it has just eaten. While anxiety may exist over losing the self, losing the self may also be desirable as it offers the promise of ridding the individual of on-going desires, thus rendering death potentially appealing.

## Conclusion

In its ability to demonstrate the hopelessness of life, the zombie is a figure which embodies the contemporary nihilism of Western society. The zombie is a frightening creature in that it reflects contemporary fears of death. In positioning death and dying as unhygienic and horrifying, it reinforces the discourse of death as negative and frightening. A primary source of horror for the zombie is its binary breaking nature. In being undefined, the zombie simulates the current position of death and disease where individuals can straddle the status of both dead and alive. In this way the zombie encompasses contemporary changing attitudes to death as an on-going process, and being dead as something we become over time. Further, the zombie plays on the fear that death will entail the complete loss of self, leaving only an abyss of nothingness. The zombie genre exhibits and plays on the idea that there is no universal meaning or transcendence, that nobody dies for a reason, and that death is inevitable and inescapable. *The Walking Dead* however identifies the family as a secure meaning to life, with characters choosing against suicide in order to continue living

with their families. *The Walking Dead* offers a world of meaning through the family, but it is a world where meaning, value and ideology have only a precarious status.

### Chapter three: Dehumanization in the Zombie Narrative

“That’s not my little girl, it’s some other thing” – Carol, commenting on her daughter as a zombie. *The Walking Dead*, season two, episode seven.

#### Introduction

Zombie narratives are useful for demonstrating how the processes and practices associated with dehumanization are played out, normalised and justified: the zombie is without intellectual capacity, feelings, ethics, value or individuality. This chapter will examine how the zombie in *The Walking Dead* represents the ‘other’, and also how this discourse of the other can be problematized. The chapter will examine how this othering is intimately tied in with the production of subjects, referencing gender in particular. The chapter will explore how the violence of dehumanization is applied not only to zombies, but also to survivors beyond the core group who are positioned as others and are consequently dehumanized. By way of extension, this chapter will also look at how *The Walking Dead* can be read in relation to contemporary discourses and narratives of the terrorist.

## Subjectivity and the Other

The concept of the 'other' is intimately bound with technologies of the self and self-making. In order to gain, have and maintain an identity and a subject-position, an individual must be recognizable and intelligible within systems of categorization which are closely tied up with a binary logic of 'us' and 'them'. These systems of categorisation classify subjects according to things like gender, age, class and religion, and it is these things which enable the emergence of an 'I' (Butler, 2005, p. 7). An individual is not considered a subject if she is not recognizable or intelligible within the systems of categorisation. Butler argues "[there is] no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take" (2005, p. 17). Those who do not fit into these categories are not considered or recognized as subjects, and are effectively rendered 'abject' and are othered. The status of these people as abject and other is what demarcates them from subjects. The abject is a necessary position that reinforces the authorised position of the subject. Butler writes "the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection" (1993, p. 3). Identification is thus also about non-identification, whereby one comes to recognize oneself as 'this' because one is not 'that'.

Julia Kristeva (1980/1982) suggests that the distinction between determining 'us' and 'them' is established through ejecting something from one's own identity and re-estimating the value of it. This entails a repulsion of the ejected something and a labelling of it as 'other' (1980/1982). Jane Caputi writes that effectively "What is disowned, feared, and denied in



the self is projected onto another being or group . . . The other is then stigmatized and warred against” (2004, p. 14). The individual projects the repelled part of his or her self on to the other so to make that other become synonymous with the repelled feature. In encompassing this repelled aspect, the other condenses a particular threat to the individual. By establishing the other as ‘not me’ and in encompassing those qualities which one wishes to dissociate one’s self with, the other signifies the opposite of what it is to be human. In this way, Butler argues, others constitute the site against which subjects circumscribe their own claim to autonomy and to life (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Subjects require this subordinate other to legitimise their own lives as liveable and right.

This boundary between the subject and the other is something that is entirely constituted from and through discourse. Judith Halberstam maintains that in this way, the other is an imagined community (1995, p. 14). Discourses of categorization and order are central to all sociocultural regimes and entities. Mary Douglas suggests that order is created through defining boundaries and difference; she writes that “It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (1969, p. 4). Simultaneously, the other can only exist where there is a clearly defined boundary. The idea of a clearly defined boundary requires the subject to be impermeable and completely stable. Butler demonstrates the impossibility of clearly defined boundaries, asserting that this would involve the sealing of surfaces, which eventually entails the individual filling up with and exploding with the excremental filth which it seeks to expel and ignore (1990, pp. 133-134).

## Dehumanization and the Zombie

An example of this process of boundary making and othering is the way that zombies are labelled, spoken about and treated amongst survivors in *The Walking Dead*. In season one, episode one, Rick has just awoken from a coma and has found the world around him to be in a post-apocalyptic state. Rick witnesses Morgan shoot somebody and later accuses Morgan of murder. Rick tells Morgan, "You shot that man today", and Morgan replies, "Man?" Morgan's son interrupts "Weren't no man". Morgan asks his son, "What the hell was that out your mouth right now?" The boy corrects himself, "It wasn't a man". Rick asserts "You shot him, in the street, out front. A man". Morgan replies to Rick "You need glasses, it was a walker". Morgan has positioned the zombies as 'not men' and has labelled them 'walkers' in order to make it clear that they are 'not us' and to consequently authorise and legitimize the violence used against them. In positioning the zombies as other, Morgan is also positioning them as threat, and therefore he transforms his violence from being classified as murder into being categorized as self-defence. Rick is ready with a baseball bat, but asks Morgan "Are you sure they're dead?" before he can begin smashing zombies with his bat, confirming that they can be classified as 'dead' rather than 'men'. Through labelling, one can come to understand a group of beings as something fundamentally different from oneself, and this process dehumanizes the group. While 'walker' is the most common term for zombies in *The Walking Dead*, they are also labelled 'lurkers', 'roamers', 'lame-brains', 'creepers' and 'geeks'. This practice can be related to the practices of racism and the hateful naming of groups of people according to a particular feature, which results in dehumanization and violence toward the group.

In labelling an individual as 'other', a range of suppositions are made about that individual, and these suppositions override any potential for the individual to be considered sentient, valuable or comparable to the self. Ni Fhlainn maintains that the removal of individual thought is a common way that narratives of dehumanization are maintained (2011, p. 140). The operation of power at the level of othering makes a distinction between subjects and others by positioning others as 'zoe' – bare life, just bodies, as opposed to 'bios' – political citizens (Agamben, 1942/2005). The lives of the zoe are considered expendable, while those of the bios are deemed worth living. As the zoe is positioned as simple biological life as opposed to full human life, they are essentially framed as active but dead bodies, just like the zombie. The zombie is the ultimate metaphor for the zoe, being framed as a creature who has no consciousness and who is primarily reducible to drive and instincts. The zombie is framed as an active body but without intellect, thought or culture, acting as the perfect encompassment of the zoe. Foucault argues that "In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable" (1997, p. 256). Foucault suggests that within the regime of biopower, particular lives are fostered while others are left to expire (2003, p. 241). Foucault contends that under biopower the imperative to kill is acceptable if it results in "the elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race" (2003, p. 256). Subjects that the state wants to protect are 'kept safe' from others who may threaten the health of the subjects. Sherryl Vint argues that the logic of the state was that "the more you kill, the more you foster life" (2011, p. 162). In this way biopower has authority over death.

The zombie represents the death and decay which threatens the human. The zombie is the face of mortality and death, and of non-transcendence. Boon argues that “Zombies are in direct opposition to the living. They embody physical corruption, thus reminding us of our own mortality” (2007, p. 34). Kristeva suggests that when faced with the corpse we are presented with everything that we throw aside in order to live. Death and dying are put aside in order to allow value to be placed on everyday circumstances and situations. For her, the corpse is the utmost of abjection when not hidden by God or science (1980/1982). When seen without the discourse of religion, where the body is framed as simply one part of the person, or without science where the body is understood in terms of a biological machine, the corpse can be horrifying. Without religious and scientific discourses, death and mortality become apparent as a real, concrete threat. The zombies’ ability to remind survivors of and to encompass death, and consequently to act as a threat to life, justifies the violence committed upon the zombie.

While the zombie is associated with death and mortality, other dehumanized individuals are also associated with ideas or features that are largely understood as negative. The other is always given negative associations. Butler explains that the face of Osama Bin Laden has been produced as the ‘face of terror’. This association completely removes any sense of precariousness or vulnerability from Bin Laden’s representation. This removal also takes away any form of identification that others may have with the face. Subsequently, these representations are created to provoke an identification of ‘not me’ (2004, pp. 141-142). The zombie is the face of the empty self and the decaying body. No identification is possible with these faces, and it is this removal of identification which demonstrates the process of

dehumanization (Butler, 2004, p. 145). The zombies in *The Walking Dead* are framed as 'not us', and as predators which enables the survivors to not have any empathy or any identification with them, and to justify killing them in the name of the group's survival.

### Segregation and Dehumanization

The zombie's state of death and decay requires that it be actively segregated from the survivors. The segregation and seclusion of groups of people who provoke thoughts of death has been a common practice in Western society. Michel de Certeau writes that "The dying are outcasts because they are deviants in an institution organized by and for the conservation of life" (1980/1984, pp. 190-1). In season three, episode three, of *The Walking Dead* a large group of new survivors are introduced. The survivors live in Woodbury, a walled community that enables them to be separate from zombies. The walls are governed by individuals with guns, bow and arrows and other weapons which are used to kill zombies that come near the walls. The leader of Woodbury, the governor, explains that the zombie bodies are retrieved once they have been shot because the odour of decay would disturb the people in the community. The complete expelling of a group from a society, as with the zombies, reinforces its position as abject.

The characters in *The Walking Dead* parallel soldiers in a war in terms of their unsympathetic and robotic-like impulses to kill the zombies. In season three, episode one, the central surviving group, led by Rick, find a prison which they want to use to set up their

community. The prison is full of zombies which the group eliminate in order to be 'safe'. The entire group join in on brutally smashing in the zombies' faces and heads with metal pipes, knives, wrenches and crow bars. There does not appear to be any remorse or sympathy on any of the characters' faces; they present the killing of the zombies as nothing more than a chore. Maggie communicates pride in her slaying of the zombies even exclaiming "See that?" to the rest of the group, grinning, after penetrating a zombies skull with a knife. At times the violence toward the zombies is treated as comical, encouraging the audience to enjoy the beatings and the massacres, rather than recognize them as negative, vicious acts. One particular scene framed as comical is in season two, episode two, where a zombie slowly rises and groans. Survivor Darryl looks over to it expressing frustration and tells it to "Shut up", and shoots it in the head with an arrow. The zombie clumsily falls back and dies. The zombies are not offered any sympathy or regret from the survivors, reinforcing their dehumanized status.

The different ways that the bodies of deceased zombies and members of the group are treated demonstrates and reinforces the way in which certain lives are considered valuable and others not so. For Butler "Normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, what will be a livable life, what will be a grievable death" (2004, p. 146). In *The Walking Dead* the lives of the surviving group members are positioned as mournable, while those of the zombies are not. The bodies of zombies are lumped together and burnt, while deceased members of the group are given individual burials with service. In season one, episode five, Glenn notices Daryl begin to drag a non-zombified body over to the fire and stops him, he states, "Hey hey woah! What are you guys doing? This is for geeks. Our

people go over there! Our people go in that row over there". Glenn yells "We don't burn them". "We bury them. Understand?" Glenn points, "People go in that row over there". Glenn makes a clear distinction between people and not people, classifying zombies, or geeks as he calls them, as not people. Those who are unworthy and who are bare life or 'zoe' are not given the same level of empathy or grief that is required to halt violence against them.

While the survivors justify killing the zombies to ensure the survival of their seemingly autonomous identities, the zombies are *required* to eat the flesh of the living in order to keep existing. This dynamic reflects contemporary capitalism where the wealthy maintain and advocate the system of capitalism in the name of their own freedom and ability to continue living affluent lives, at the expense of the poor who require the food of the affluent in order to live. The zombie apocalypse enacts a class revolution in this sense, where the poor, struggling for food, turn on the affluent, and pose a real threat to their possessions (namely their own bodies) and to their free lives. K. Silem Mohammed contends that the zombie mass are "in many ways indistinguishable from the living poor: they are hungry, unruly, and unattractive, and no one wants to become one of them. They are no longer really even truly scary, so much as a grim, intractable nuisance" (2010, p. 94). The zombie also mimics the poor in that they outnumber the wealthy. The zombie in zombie narratives pinpoint who the powerful are behind the logic of biopower, demonstrating how the affluent create narratives around the poor in order to justify a system of violence which enables the wealthy to become wealthier and the poor to become poorer and hungrier.

## Dehumanization as Problematic

There are times in *The Walking Dead* when the zombie's status as other is called into question. Earlier in the series, in season two, the survivors meet with another group of survivors who live at a secluded farmhouse. The farmhouse occupants, the Greenes, do not subscribe to the dehumanization of the zombies. When the character Glenn calls the zombies in the barn 'walkers', farm resident Maggie asserts that she wishes Glenn would not call them such. Glenn asks Maggie what she calls them and she replies "Mum, Shaun, Mister and Misses Fisher". In continuing to call the zombies their human names, the farmhouse residents give them identities and challenge the idea that they are an enemy. Further, the Greene family do not commit acts of violence on the walkers. The Greenes capture zombies and lock them up in their barn where they are fed live, injured chickens. For the owner of the farm, Hershel, the zombies can be likened to sick humans. When Dale approaches Hershel about the zombies locked in the barn, Hershel tells him "I saw the broadcasts before they stopped. Saw the irrational fear, the atrocities, like the incident at my well". Dale replies "We put down a walker". Hershel clarifies to Dale "You killed a person". Dale asserts "Well if you watched the same broadcasts I did, you saw walkers attack, kill, they're dangerous!" Hershel argues "A paranoid schizophrenic is sick too. We don't shoot sick people". "My wife and step son are in that barn. They're people". The introduction of these characters problematizes the groups' understanding of the walkers as others by presenting an alternative view. Further, when a member of the group becomes a zombie, the status of the zombie as other becomes problematic. The zombie breaks the



binary logic of us/them in these circumstances as it becomes difficult to treat a member of the group in such a dehumanized and empty way.

Butler argues that in questioning how to treat an other, one is exposed to the workings of the system of classification because one finds that the other only functions as an other within the systems of categorisation (2005, p. 25). Foucault contends that the very fact that there is an outside to the limits of the subject – an other – is reason for enabling the subject to achieve a level of desubjugation (Brady & Schirato, 2011, p. 125). An awareness of the fact that there is an outside to subject categories leads to a questioning of these systems of categorisation (Butler, 2005, pp. 24-25). This leads to a questioning of who constitutes 'us' and who constitutes 'them'. The farmhouse residents' challenge to the categories of 'us'/'them', leads to this questioning of categories of identification.

For the farmhouse residents, the zombies still constitute others, but not to the point that they are understood by the core surviving group. While the farmhouse residents do not kill the zombies, and enable them to retain their human names, they still hold a superior position to them, controlling them and segregating them by locking them in the barn. For Hershel, these people are still not entitled to freedom because they are ill and in need of a cure. Thus there still remains a clear subject-object division between the survivors and the zombies. The farmhouse residents are understood by the other survivors as simply needing to learn that zombies should be killed.

Dehumanization of a group of beings appears to be a gradual process in *The Walking Dead*. While in season two Maggie and Hershel understand the zombies as sick humans and refrain from killing them, by season three, the farmhouse residents display just as much a lack of sympathy and show just as much rage toward the zombies as the survivors in the central group do. In the first few episodes of season one, Rick also appears to display sympathy with regard to the zombies. In season one, episode one, before Rick kills one of his first zombies, he tells it "I'm sorry this [being turned into a zombie] happened to you". In episode two, Rick and Glenn plan to cover themselves with zombie remains in order to disguise their own scent so that they can walk amongst the zombie mass without being detected as humans. As they are about to hack at the zombie corpse, Rick produces a wallet from the corpse's pocket. Rick reflects on the zombie's life as a man and tells the other survivors "He used to be like us. He's an organ donor". As the season continues Rick becomes less and less sympathetic toward the zombies and eventually ceases to show any sympathy toward them whatsoever. It appears that as the characters witness more and more of their friends and loved ones transformed by zombies into zombies, and as they become increasingly under threat by the zombies, they also become more unsympathetic and more violent toward them.

To some extent *The Walking Dead* challenges the division between us/them by demonstrating that the survivors can be more monstrous than the zombies. As the series continues, Rick becomes more aggressive. He displays moments of intense rage toward the zombies and toward other living beings. Over time he shows less emotion, minimal compassion and more aggressive behaviour. At times, Rick's appearance and movements cannot be distinguished from that of the zombies. In season three, episode five, after Rick's

wife Lori has died, he leaves the group and slaughters zombies. Once the zombies have all been killed Glenn finds Rick breathing heavily and covered in blood. Rick's eyes are wide and glazed over, he is sweaty and does not speak. Rick has become the monster in this narrative as he fails to be able to emote. Further, Rick commits acts of violence on any potential threat to his immediate family, whether or not the outsider is a zombie. While the zombie's violence is an incorporating action, Rick's violence is an eliminating action: he kills his victims so that they completely cease to exist. Zombies do not kill their victims in this sense; they simply integrate them. Jen Webb and Sam Byrnam write that "The act of violence that removes the horror and threat of the zombie reconstructs me, the human, as zombie – a being that is only body, without empathy, without respect for life" (2008, p. 91). Rick's primary aim for survival and labelling all outsiders as threat has taken the humanity out of him.

Overall, the survivors are shown to commit acts of violence more frequently than the zombies. Canavan argues that "what separates 'us' from 'them' in zombie narrative is always only the type of violence used. *They* attack *us* (like 'animals', 'savages', or 'cannibals') with their arms and mouths', while we attack them back with horses, tanks and guns" (2010, p. 442). The zombies' weapons are their own bodies, whereas the human subjects' weapons are those associated with 'civilized' men. The survivors do not just kill zombies, but kill any other survivor who poses a threat to them. Rick murders two survivors from outside of the group in season three without pause as they appear to threaten him. The survivors watch each other to ensure that they are safe, making sure others in the group have not been bitten or scratched by zombies, and ensuring that they are obeying the rules of the group. Boluk & Lenz suggest that it is often other people, and not the zombies, who pose the

greatest threat in the zombie genre (2010, p. 143). The survivor's actions blur the distinction between the zombie as monster and the survivor as monster. Webb and Byrnan contend that in all of the horror that occurs to the survivors in zombie narratives, they become "all dark inside" just like zombies (2008, p. 86). It thus becomes clear that there is no inherent set of actions or characteristics that define one group from another; rather, the boundaries are constituted by and through discourse. Where contradictions arise, boundaries can be revealed as not natural or inherent, and this revelation enables change to become possible.

### Dehumanized Survivors

The survivors use a dehumanizing discourse to describe and frame not just the zombies, but also other survivors. In season three, the governor of Woodbury has taken Glenn and Maggie hostage from the primary surviving group. Rick, Darryl, Oscar and Michonne venture to Woodbury to rescue Glenn and Maggie. In doing so, the governor's troops try to shoot them. Rick and Michonne find Glenn and Maggie and they manage to escape Woodbury. Oscar is shot and killed and Darryl is captured, and Woodbury suffers some casualties. The governor frames the primary surviving group as a threat to the walled community. In season three, episode eight, he gathers the survivors from Woodbury together and addresses them as a whole: "I should tell you that we'll be okay, that we're safe and that tomorrow we will bury our dead and endure, but I won't, cause I can't. Cause I'm afraid. That's right. I'm afraid of terrorists who want what we have. Want to destroy us. Worse, because one of those terrorists, is one of our own". The governor turns around and points his finger at Merle, a member of Woodbury. A man is brought out with a cloth covering his head and the

governor reveals the man to be Darryl. As the governor presents Darryl he exclaims “This is one of the terrorists. Merle’s own brother”. He then asks the community “What shall we do with them huh?” The Woodbury residents respond in unison yelling “Kill him!” The governor confirms with the crowd “What do you want?” and they fervently yell and point at Merle and Darryl “Kill them now!” By using the discourse of the terrorist, and presenting these individuals as threat, any humanity or identification with these individuals is removed and the governor gains the approval and the energy of the crowd to murder Darryl and Merle.

While some of the survivors are subject to dehumanization in *The Walking Dead*, it becomes apparent that all of the survivors are marginalized others in the zombie world. The majority of the population have become zombies, outnumbering the survivors. Mimicking a class revolution, it is the once autonomous, free and wealthy citizens who are forced by the poor into either joining the mass and giving up their autonomy, or fleeing into hiding. Canavan argues that in locking themselves up in a prison, the group of survivors are displaying a reverse colonisation whereby the zombies take over and the group must be segregated and isolated should they not assimilate into the mass (2010). It is now the primarily white, Western human who becomes the other, forced to conform to the mass and become a zombie or to hide. For Rogers “The tables have turned: the dominant human animal becomes synonymous with shit, vomit, detritus. The human body has become obsolete; viral, nonhuman, or formerly human substrates are the new order, and it is the nonviral that is forcibly expelled” (2008, p. 128). The human has become an error to be corrected, to be expelled from the city.

The zombies willingly incorporate the survivors. Canavan argues that for zombies “violence is not a *casting out*, but rather a *drawing in*” (2011, p. 201). The zombie does not work on the logic of inclusion/exclusion which the state or the survivor community does, but rather offers an alternative organising order. Unlike the survivors who completely destroy the zombies, the zombies aim to assimilate them. Boon writes that the zombie “does not vanquish the enemy, it recruits them” (2007, p. 35). This is a new order where everybody is accepted and nobody is subjected to the violence of foreclosure. There is no law in the zombie world, no rules and no boundaries. Canavan describes this new world order as ‘utopia’ (2011, p. 202).

### The Zombie and Subjectivity

The zombie world is a type of Utopia because it frees the individual from systems of categorization. Butler asserts that the terms of recognition which seek to ‘fix and capture us’ restrict us and hinder our ability to live life (2005, pp. 43-44). We are limited by the discourse which we use to reflect upon and speak about ourselves (2005, p. 121). For Butler, there is a certain ethical violence which demands of the individual to be self-same and consistent with one’s identity at all times (2005, p. 42). As a part of this, one is only enabled to present herself within the discourse of the humanly recognizable and within her available subject position. In speaking and acting within these regimes, one becomes the site “for its relay and replication” (2005, p. 125). Butler writes “subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never choose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (as cited in Brady & Schirato, 2011, p. 20). Individuals are

restricted by their subject-positions not only in terms of how they can speak about and understand themselves and others, but also by being restricted in the types of their performances and desires. Butler contends that there is violence in being addressed and being given a name as one is subject to a set of impositions and rules of behaviour, while other behaviours and desires are cut off or foreclosed to the individual (2004, p. 139).

A subject can only be a subject through ideology and discourse. Gunn and Treat argue that the subject is not a drone who is animated by ideology, but is rather “an individual whose self-consciousness and understanding depend on ideological structuring” (2005, p. 152). Butler also holds this contention, arguing that the subject comes to exist only through interpellation (2005). The modern zombie, Gunn and Treat argue, is de-possessed, as opposed to the original zombie who was controlled by another entity. Modern zombies are not self-conscious, thus they are pre-ideological; they are outside of any cultural discourse of which to understand themselves or anything around them. Gunn and Treat write that “Concrete individuals are literally dead to the world . . . until they succumb to discursive structures that orient them as social subjects” (2005, p. 154). Louis Althusser asserts that we only recognize ourselves as ‘selves’ through ideology; without it, there is no self. Althusser contends that “there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects. Meaning, there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject: meaning, *by the category of the subject* and its functioning” (2000, p. 31). It is only through the subject that ideology and discourse can function, and only through ideology and discourse that an individual can exist as a subject.

In this way identity does not exist without discourse, for example, in relation to gender identity, Butler argues that one is not a gender in the sense that there is a gendered core or essence to one's self; rather, one is always performing gender and is thus always becoming gendered (1990). One's gender identity is thus "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1999, p. 33). The zombie demonstrates exactly this process, revealing that there is no identity prior to ideological subjectification. The zombie does not and cannot perform a gender. Zombies cannot be differentiated as they all walk and eat in the same way, regardless of their sex. As the zombie cannot perform and cannot be interpellated, it has no subjectivity.

Because the zombie is not interpellated it cannot fit into the cultural structuring of gender. Patterson argues that zombie films stand out amongst horror films in their treatment of gender. For Patterson, zombies are one of the least gender-specific monsters (2008, p. 108). In *The Walking Dead* the majority of the survivors are allocated tasks according to their gender roles. It is mainly the men who hunt and fight the zombies, and only women do the cleaning and home-making. There are exceptions however; in emergency situations where the whole group is being 'attacked' by zombies, the female survivors kill the zombies alongside the men. Further, the characters Andrea and Maggie both regularly pursue the zombies beside the men in the group. However gendered boundaries do still exist. Andrea and Maggie are both often spoken down to by the male members of the group, and told what to do. Further it is always a man who is in control of the surviving group. Rick authorises his eleven year old son Carl to take charge of the group, should the males not return from an outing, regardless of the fact that there are much more experienced, middle-



aged women in the group (season three, episode one). Becoming a zombie means being placed outside the cultural binaries of, and the rules associated with being, male or female. Patterson contends that Romero's zombie films in particular (such as *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985)) enable female audiences to imagine the collapse of gendered bodies (2008, p. 114). She argues "Ironically then, the viewing position I take up in relation to the zombie spectacle is ultimately one of self-annihilation as I participate in my own ideological destruction as Woman and Feminist, because these categories are meaningless when confronted with zombie invasion" (2008, p. 114). In this way for female audiences, the state of the female zombies offers more freedom than the state of the female survivors. The freedom that the zombies offer in this sense is the same freedom that death offers.

In destroying the process of subjectification, the zombie also remains outside binaries. For Patterson, "Binaries are subject to annihilation in the zombie film; distinctions such as good/bad, black/white, man/woman, body/mind, and so on are not easily identified in the zombie creature, and these categories become increasingly futile" (2008, pp. 114-115). In this sense, the zombie offers freedom from distinctions of class and race, as well as gender. The zombie lies outside of binary dichotomies because it cannot be interpellated. Their liminal position occurs because they cannot and do not respond to or exist within the cultural structures of identity binaries.

A final way that the zombie remains outside subjectivity is through its drive for constant pleasure and self-gratification. For Clark, the zombie is a metaphor for the struggle with

Freud's repressed instincts of Eros and Thanatos (2010). Clark argues that contemporary civilization decrees that the body should be used as a tool of labour first and foremost, which pushes bodily pleasures to the side. Zombies use their bodies primarily for pleasure, seeking out flesh unremittingly. In becoming a zombie then, the individual is "released from the tension of civilized human life" (2010, p. 202). Clark concludes that essentially the zombie bite condenses the destructive impulses of Thanatos and the pleasure seeking urges of Eros. Thus the zombie is essentially free by balancing these two impulses.

The zombie's position as being outside of discourse poses the threat of personal dissolution; one's own subjectivity comes called into question as the categories of identity are broken down. Butler contends that the absence of narrative spells a threat to life and poses the risk of a certain kind of death, the death of a subject (2005, p. 65). Discourse offers the individual the fantasy of self-transparency, an image of self as discrete and autonomous. Discourse is required in order to be a subject, and consequently to maintain the image of the self as unified and whole. The idea of having one's identity collapsed may overwhelm the prospect of freedom because of identity disintegration.

The zombies' demonstrate that the primary difference between them and the survivors is that the survivors are social beings who are interpellated while the zombies are not. This draws attention to the ethical problems that arise with processes of dehumanization. Butler argues that we cannot work out ethics based on the subject; instead we need to ask how we are formed within social life and at what cost (2005, p. 136). It is only culture which determines that one group of being's desires, goals and most importantly, lives are more

important than those of another group's. As subjects are constituted entirely by cultural norms, the question of killing zombies becomes problematized as there is no ethic beyond a cultural relativism or arbitrariness determining which beings deserve to live and which should die. It is the labeling of others as monstrous that results in monstrosity. It is only the dehumanization of others that motivates the dehumanizers to commit violence.

## Conclusion

Narratives and discourses are deployed with regard to certain groups of people in order to dehumanize them. The zombie is portrayed as encompassing death and decay and the terrorist as encompassing terror, which is further demonstrated in their very naming. In being associated with a negative feature or idea, groups of people have their precariousness and capacity for individual thought taken away from their representation and are dehumanized. The construction of narratives of dehumanization work to sustain the power of the dehumanizers and justify violence toward the dehumanized. The boundary between the constructed 'us' and 'them' is shown to be unstable and unfixed, as individuals are both unstable and unfixed. The zombie displays a type of revolution against the dehumanizers, rejecting their boundary-based system and accepting all individuals. The zombie is effectively outside of the process of subjectification. The threat of identity dissolution that the zombies offer is equivalent to the threat of identity dissolution in death. By existing outside identity and systems of categorization the zombie reveals dehumanization as also constructed and the ethics involved in it as untied to anything inherent or universal.

## Chapter four: Sociocultural Identity

“Unless I’m missing the signs, the World seems to have come to an end, at least hit a speed bump for a good long while” – Jacqui. *The Walking Dead*, season one, episode four.

### Introduction

The figure of the zombie and the zombie apocalypse threaten the structures and norms which constitute society. The death of millions of people brings about the collapse of government, religion and the education system. The zombie apocalypse results in the total collapse of formal structures of power and authority, and neither the government nor the military are able to provide or guarantee the rule of law or to rebuild society. This is accentuated by the removal of the logics and imperatives of capitalism and practices of consumerism, upon which sociocultural identities were largely based. In contemporary culture the heavily fashioned, commoditised and accessorised body stands in for and communicates identity and value: the body is largely understood and read by way of sign systems that presume and naturalise the value of consumerism and consumer-enhanced identity. The figure of the zombie is antithetical to these sign systems: it is a decaying, unhygienic and contagious body that attempts to bring all other bodies around it into the same state. The zombie also threatens the sociocultural because it constitutes a rejection of conventional social relationships. The zombie does not adhere to the binary structures which establish identity and cannot or will not negotiate with others. The zombie cannot

understand exchange value or sign systems and so cannot participate in the social. The zombie threatens to take away sociocultural identity in two main ways: first, it literally seeks to turn the human into 'something else' - effectively a body without meaning or value; secondly, the zombie apocalypse destroys or denaturalises the sociocultural structures, categories, narratives and forms of value on which society and sociocultural identity is predicated.

### Sociocultural Identity

The subject is constructed through sign systems. Webb et al write that “while people think that they are employing various modes of communication (‘sign systems’ such as written and spoken language, or bodily gestures), in fact those sign systems produce them, and their activities, thoughts and desires” (2002, p. 33). These sign systems establish how people perceive the world, primarily through systems of categorization. For Paul Ricoeur, identity is established through stories told by the person about themselves and their lives, stories told by others about them and wider social and cultural narratives (1988). The way an individual creates his or her own story can only be developed within the relevant sign systems.

Baudrillard suggests that in contemporary society the main repository of stories about the self, and about one's identity, value and place in the world, are derived from late capitalism and in particular from the notion of the self as a desiring subject. Baudrillard argues that we create our identities based on this play with consumerism:

Thanks to thousands of marginal distinctions and the often purely formal diffraction of a single product by means of conditioning, competition has become more aggravated on every plane, opening up the immense range of possibilities of a precarious freedom – indeed, of the ultimate freedom, namely the freedom to choose the objects which will distinguish one from other people (1968/1996, p. 199).

It is through consumption that personal freedom can be pursued and thus through consumption that one establishes one's identity. Baudrillard argues that individuals pursue self-fulfilment through consumption (p. 201). Importantly, the individual transcends consumerism through 'self-expression'. Baudrillard writes that within consumerism "Free to be oneself" really means free to project one's desires onto commodities" (p. 203). In this way, the subject 'fills in' their identity with acts of consumption. The subject is enabled self-actualisation through consumption, not simply of products but via the cultural capital the products bring. Within consumer society, Baudrillard argues, the aim is to "allow drives . . . to crystalize upon objects, which themselves thus become capable of negating the explosive force of desire" (1968/1996, p. 203). For Baudrillard this transforms freedom of being into freedom of ownership. The latter freedom 'reconciles' the subject with the self and society, enabling the social subject.

Baudrillard contends that the system of consumption creates categories of status whereby groups of subjects can be identified by a particular set of objects (1968/1996, p. 208); in this way, categories of objects come to produce and define categories of people. Subsequently hierarchies of products and objects replace distinct values as a group's ethos. Status is a

particularly social phenomenon, acting as a social tie and a normalised language. Baudrillard writes “In a world where millions of men and women pass one another every day without being acquainted, the code of ‘status’ fulfils an essential social function by addressing people’s vital need for knowledge of others” (1968/1996, p. 214). For Baudrillard, human, social and political relationships are “produced in the same way as objects” and have become objects of consumption (1970/1998, p. 172). Pierre Bourdieu argues that each social agent is situated within a ‘social space’ which is characterized by a number of positions in relation to one another, such as a boss and servant. These divisions and distinctions of social space are also expressed in physical space: Bourdieu uses the example of suburbs divided by class (1997/2000, pp. 134-135). An individual’s class, status, and often even political standing and religious beliefs can be recognised and pin-pointed based on one’s choice of car, clothing style and home location.

### The Body and Normativity

In contemporary Western society the body has largely become the site through which the self is produced and recognized as a subject. This is largely a result of consumer society which encourages individuals to have an acute consciousness of their bodies. Rui Gomes argues that in consumer society the body has become understood as the site of personal freedom through consumer personalisation (2010, p. 86). In this way the body has become a consumer object, to be invested in to produce a yield (Baudrillard, 1970/1998, p. 131). Baudrillard suggests that the body as an object is not understood in terms of its corporeality, but rather as a cultural fact; in particular, the way that the body operates

socially and the mental representation of the body are cultural (p. 129). Here it is the symbols that the body evokes, rather than the concrete flesh that make the body a consumer good. Women are required to shape their bodies in terms of templates of beauty while men are required to shape their bodies in terms of athleticism (p. 132). An individual holds cultural capital if their body is commensurate with what is designated as beautiful or desirable. As one's body declines, so too does its exchange value, and consequently there is an increasing discourse that 'ugliness' and ageing are disgusting and immoral (Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Coupland, 2003). The anxiety around bodily decline is exemplified in the trend of life extension becoming increasingly more important than the idea of spiritual immortality in the popular mind (Aries, 1977/1981, p. 604).

This negative positioning of the ageing and declining body is intertwined with the fantasy of the perfectly hygienic body. Baudrillard argues that there is an obsession in society with hygiene whereby the body is fantasized as being sterile and in a state of asepsis, free from disease and infection, as if a faultless object cut off from external aggression (1970/1998, p. 141). This is enforced through the requirement for bodies to undergo what Gomes terms 'hygienic purification' before they are allowed to appear in public spaces (2010, p. 85). This involves the preparing of the body by washing, shaving, plucking, deodorising and at times, covering with make-up to appear smooth and even-toned. This preparing of the body gives the illusion that it is healthy and under control. Because the body has become the site of subjectivity, sickness and death have become the biggest threats to the self (Gomes, 2010, p. 101). Thus keeping the body 'fit' has become increasingly important in society. Coincidingly, pollution and disease are regularly monitored in a fight to ensure the bodily



integrity of individuals. Gomes comments that this involves increased monitoring of the biological effects of foods, effects of intake of the air and so on, as well as the segregation of the elderly and the sick (p. 101). The elderly and the sick are framed as the contaminated and polluted bodies and are the staples from which to differ oneself. In this way, hygiene aims at a negative definition of the body (Baudrillard, 1970/1998, p. 141).

The zombie acts as the ultimate antithesis to the hygienic body, threatening healthy bodies with contamination. Dendle comments that the zombie sums up everything that is unacceptable about the body in consumer society, including ageing, leaking bodily fluids and skin issues (2007, p. 53). Due to this, the zombie evokes the fear of losing the 'good' body. Unlike the active participant of consumer society, the zombie has no agency to protect their bodies from decay. Further the zombie cannot purchase hygiene products or clothing to ensure that its body meets the bodily standards of consumer society. Because it cannot participate in these social activities and customs, the zombie as outsider and other is a source for understanding the importance of culture in producing and constructing identities. Without the social capacity to understand cultural capital and exchange value, the zombie is not enabled an identity through its body.

The deformed bodies and uncontrolled shambling movements of the zombies reveal the social importance of bodily norms and bodily inscriptions. Bourdieu (1997/2000) argues that narratives and templates of femininity, masculinity, class, age and race are inscribed in the body. Through habitus one learns how to speak, how to move and how to look in a way that is socially appropriate to their position as male or female, lower class or upper class, youth

or elderly and so on (1997/2000). The zombie is neither willing nor able to learn in a bodily manner, and in this way the zombie constitutes a site of reflexivity with regard to the play of the habitus and the social rules which govern individuals.

In being unable to learn bodily, the zombie exposes the body as pure flesh; and in being disorganised bodily, the zombie destroys the constructed categories of the body. Patricia MacCormack argues that zombies are reconfigured body become flesh. She suggests that “Flesh refers to the body that has lost significations as a hermeneutic entity where markers of gender, race, and even sexuality can be read on the body as a text” (2008, p. 89). In leaking and oozing, the zombie further draws attention to the body as flesh. The zombie in particular is without bodily organisation as it often leaks organs and has missing body parts. MacCormack argues that the body without organs “describes the project of resistance to the ways in which our flesh is organized and regimented both in form as meaningful anatomy (genitals fix gender; skin colour, race) and function (gender infers sexuality; organs are either appropriate or inappropriately used for pleasure)” (2008, p. 97). In this way the zombie not only refuses the cultural narratives and capital placed on the body, but also problematizes the way that the body is categorized and understood. One cannot focus on the face as the essence of the person if the face is distorted or runs into the rest of the body. The zombie disrupts any notion of gender as it is indistinguishable in its gender. MacCormack writes “It is not the body per se that is destroyed and dishevelled in horror films; it is the majoritarian body and its identifiable desires” (2008, p. 100). The zombie challenges the socially accepted norms of gender, behaviour and the body in particular, denying the claim that these norms are ‘natural’.

## The Breakdown of the Social

Webb, Schirato and Danaher make clear that signs, values and meanings derived from specific social systems "mean nothing in themselves; they only 'mean' insofar as they are a part of a sign system, and can be related to other signs in that system" (2002, p. 34). As signs only have meaning in relation to other signs in culture, a breakdown of the social order can lead to a dismantling of all of these signs and forms of relations. In Tony Vinci's analysis of Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* (2009) he quotes Topher who comments that "we live in the Dollhouse, which makes us dolls" (2011, p. 233). Because we exist within the social structures, we are animated by them. With the collapse of the social structures, or the dollhouse, this animation is interrupted. The templates of the desiring subject offered up by consumerism are displaced in the zombie apocalypse. Further, the zombie apocalypse destroys the logic of consumerism that one is permitted and required to surround herself with products to enrich existence and give pleasure (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 202). Paffenroth explains this by noting that "Consumerism is only enjoyable with the necessary social context to make one's consumption noticed and envied by others" (2011, p. 21). This cannot be done in the zombie apocalypse where survival has become the primary goal. The survivors of an apocalypse are required to only pursue their basic needs. In *The Walking Dead* the survivors do not loot or take luxury goods, they gather things that they need only. Aalya Ahmad writes of the zombie apocalypse that "the senseless accumulation of consumer goods becomes not only obsolete, but also sinister" (2011, p. 136). In this way, the survivors of the zombie apocalypse have the 'freedom' of defining themselves by consumer goods, taken away.

The collapse of social structures also renders subjectivity and identity problematic. The zombie challenges and renders irrelevant categories of race, gender, first world and third world, capitalism and socialism and so on. Patterson comments that the “Zombie apocalypse makes everything devoid of meaning” (2008, p. 112). It is only through the subjective technologies, constituted through categories such as age and gender, that the individual comes to recognize herself as an autonomous subject. For Foucault, individual’s do not have an original subjectivity and to this regard, Gomes writes that “Subjects fail to exist when deprived of social processes, mainly those of a discursive nature that produce them as free and autonomous beings” (2010, p. 91). Thus the zombies’ mass existence and devastation of the social order collapses the organizing discourses of society.

For Muntean the survivors of an apocalypse may also be classified as a type of zombie due to the collapse of their social orders and identities. In analysing *On the Beach* (Kramer, 1959) Muntean classifies the nuclear disaster survivors as ‘trauma zombies’ because:

their normal symbolic processes of meaning-making (that is to say, ideology) are so disrupted that they are unable to maintain a coherent identity and thus enter a muted, dazed state of being not unlike that of the traditional zombie. The trauma zombie, as suggested by its appellation, is born of a traumatic incident or injury – typically a confrontation with a massive rupture or collapse of their social order – and becomes, like the zombie itself, both victim and perpetrator of its affliction (2011, p. 82).

Muntean's description of the characters in *On the Beach* also applies to the survivors in *The Walking Dead*. The protagonist Rick displays the characteristics of a trauma zombie immediately in the first episode of season one, where he wakes from a coma in an empty hospital. There is no nurse to assist Rick when he asks for help. The town is empty and the only people around Rick are zombies who cannot be communicated with. The social conventions and structures that Rick knew and was familiar with have disappeared. Rick finds that he is alone and falls to the floor howling. Rick even describes himself as a trauma zombie in season one, episode three, when he tells Lori of his awakening that he felt

disoriented. I guess that comes closest. Disoriented, fear, confusion, all those things, but, disoriented comes closest . . . I felt like I'd been ripped out of my life and put somewhere else. For a while I thought I was trapped in some coma dream, something I might not wake up from ever.

For Muntean the characters in *On the Beach* are post-ideological as "there is no longer an extant system of larger 'real relations' through which they can derive meaning" (p. 85). This is a valid characterisation of the situation in *The Walking Dead*, to the extent that the larger social structures which organise society and identity have largely collapsed and have been lost in the apocalypse. However even though Rick and the other survivors have been thrown from their ideological structures and societal organizations, they are still interpellated as social identities due to their relationship with the group. The group divide chores, prepares meals, play games and have group meetings to make decisions. Further, Rick and Lori continue to wear their wedding rings, holding on to the pre-apocalypse order of marriage.

Muntean argues that in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) the characters construct a “microcosm of the ideologies of their old existence” in an attempt to “stave off the otherwise crushing alterity of their new environment” (p. 89). Arguably, the characters in *The Walking Dead* are doing the same thing. The characters can still maintain the narrative of their identities by referring to the past where their identities originated or were situated. Thus they can navigate life still referring to the old structures at times. New narratives and discourses of understanding the world develop for the survivors as well and the characters are also interpellated and addressed according to new, post-apocalypse narratives. In this way, the survivors are to some extent both post-ideological or post-interpellated beings, as Muntean’s discussion of the trauma zombie seems to suggest, but they are also in the process of trying to create new identities and social categories out of the relation between their past lives and their current circumstances.

However the zombie apocalypse does create a situation in which the rules which society adheres to become extensively disrupted, and consequently can lead to a sense of alienation and disorientation for the survivors. Bourdieu writes that, apropos of the normally glacial and resilient habitus:

In situations of crisis or sudden change, especially those seen at the time of abrupt encounters between civilizations . . . [such as] too rapid movements in social space, agents often have difficulty in holding together the dispositions associated with different states or stages, and some of them, often those who were best adapted to the previous state of the game, have difficulty in adjusting to the new established

order (1997/2000, p. 161).

The characters in *The Walking Dead* have had their identities disrupted and re-evaluated. Pre-apocalypse, Glenn was a pizza delivery boy; post-apocalypse he is a navigator through zombie infested cities and a co-leader to a group of survivors. Some of the characters hold on to the old ways of thinking which are shown to be irrelevant in the zombie world, demonstrating their Bourdieuan difficulty in adjusting to the new state of the game. Rick and Shane continue to wear their police uniforms even though there is no longer any police force. Merle continues to position himself as a 'redneck'. As a part of this orientation he discriminates against Rick for being a cop and T-dog for being black. Rick assures Merle that these categories are now meaningless in season two, episode two: "Look here Merle, things are different now. There are no niggers anymore, no dumb as shit white trash fools either. Only dark meat and white meat. There's us and the dead".

#### Post-Apocalyptical Society

The characters strive to find a place where they can re-establish the familiar social system and situate themselves long-term. In season one their first hope is in the city of Atlanta, which they soon come to be informed has also been overtaken by zombies. The survivors then place their hope in the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), believing that they are coming up with a cure for the zombie virus and that they will protect survivors. When the survivors reach the CDC they are welcomed by its one remaining scientist who informs them that the

CDC has not and cannot come up with a cure, and that there is no place for the survivors to go, so they may as well kill themselves before the zombies get them. This revelation is particularly overwhelming for Andrea who begins vomiting. Andrea laments “Everything’s gone . . . It’s over, there’s nothing left. Don’t you see that?” Dale consoles Andrea “I see a chance to make a new start”. Andrea remains unconvinced “Oh my God Dale, didn’t you see the look on Jenner’s face? Hear what I’m saying! There’s nothing left”. For Andrea and some of the other characters, hope is situated only in redeeming the old social order where social humans can control and manage the world. These characters cannot look outside of the old orders to create a new society for their current circumstances.

This sense of alienation and helplessness is a strong motif in contemporary culture. Peter Paik argues that through things such as widening disparities between the rich and the poor, and climate change and the depletion of resources, we are confronted by the necessity for radical change. For Paik, ‘mass man’ lacks confidence in both society and themselves to make the steps towards change and is therefore entranced by spectacles of societal collapse. Further, he contends that in lacking a spiritual order and with the collapse of capitalism, society must pass through the Hobbesian state of nature (2011, p. 6). Paik asserts that the contemporary moment is distinctive due to the extent that the motif of social collapse has entered popular culture (p. 6). This situation has come to pass in *The Walking Dead*: the post-apocalypse survivors are unable to rescue each other, they are unable to die without becoming zombie and they are unable to build a strong and stable culture. Further the State is not there to rescue the survivors or provide them with aid. This



results in a sense of helplessness and they resort to a state where survivors are under the impression that they must kill, or be killed.

Bishop argues in his analysis of *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) that the survivors are living in an empty society and as they do not need to work or produce anything “they lose those self-fulfilling activities that make them subjective individuals” (2010, p. 35). The survivors in *The Walking Dead* are primarily focused on survival which involves running, hiding from and killing zombies and other survivors, as well as trying to find food and shelter. Like Bishop’s analysis, this leaves very minimal time for the survivors to pursue ‘self-fulfilling’ activities. For David Pagano, zombie cinema acts in contrast to the promises of an apocalypse where a new, peaceful order can be created, and instead demonstrates a disappointment in the apocalypse (2008, p. 84). The apocalypse does not offer the survivors any grand meaning or greater purpose, and it does not offer a new beginning for the survivors who are taken one by one by the zombies. The zombie apocalypse does however offer alternatives to the survivors and the audience in some ways, most particularly in the form of a liberation from the symbolic violence and limitations of a capitalist dominated sociocultural set of rules of being. Featherstone argues that the ‘performing self’ ensures that the individual focuses on her “appearance, display and the management of impressions” (1982, p. 27). The survivor is liberated from these requirements of performance, thrown into a world where escape from the zombies and basic survival become the only requirements. The survivors no longer have the burden of self-image or the burden of comparing themselves to wider norms and requirements of their gender, age, class or so on. Further the survivors are liberated from the on-going consensual slavery of

capitalism. Vinci argues that in capitalism we have become cultural slaves “interpreting fabricated desires as psychological needs” (2011, p. 229). The survivors in *The Walking Dead* are freed from the order of capitalism. How they understand the world, feel and react may still be primarily based on the structures and discourses of their former world, but the disruption has problematized these discourses and values. The ideological context for the survivors in *The Walking Dead* is constituted first and foremost, out of a denaturalising of capitalism.

Western society is predicated on organization and exchange. Webb and Byrnannd argue “[being human] is about individuals organizing to achieve aims, and thus all our needs and hungers are peculiarly social and cultural, and hence peculiarly mediated” (2008, p. 89). The zombie kills off this social aspect to humanity by being unable to read signs and meanings, by being unable to exchange and by being unable to consciously organize itself. As the zombie cannot understand or participate in the social it is also unable to have an identity. In this way, Boon argues that “in lacking consciousness, the zombie is incapable of examining self. It is emptied of being, a receptacle of nothingness” (2011, p. 54). The zombie does not have a unique human consciousness; as Webb and Byrnannd write “Zombies are clumsy, and insensitive, with words and objects, and do not respond aesthetically or empathically to cultural products” (2008, p. 95). Further the zombie seeks to deprive all individuals around it of their unique selves and to leave “only an abyss of nothingness” (Boon 2011, p. 56).

The zombie's emptiness exposes rules and narratives as socially constructed. Ahmad writes that "[zombies] are carnivals of the *status quo*, raising the radical possibility of an apocalypse that not only exposes but also destroys entrenched systems of power feeding on racism, patriarchy, gross inequality and other institutionalized follies" (2011, p. 132). The zombie falsifies any notions of a natural social order and social being. Webb et al write that "Systems, rules, laws, structures and categories of meaning and perception can only function effectively as habitus if we do not think about the specific sociocultural conditions or contexts of their production and existence" (Webb et al., 2002, p. 39). The zombie problematizes and thus creates awareness of these conditions.

Boluk and Lenz argue that the zombie destroys the conditions for capitalism while at the same time encompassing it through manifesting a constant desire unmotivated by any biological need (2010). Immediately after consuming flesh, the zombie pursues more flesh to consume. The zombie mimics the conditions of capitalism in multiple ways: Ahmad writes that "Like Baudrillard's simulacra, the [zombie] virus is endlessly copying itself" (2011, p. 140). Through continually infecting others who then infect more others, the zombie acts as an on-going cycle of production. Webb and Byrnan also understand capitalism as a "self-replicating endemic virus" (2008, p. 91), and contend that capitalists compel others to also become capitalists. Further, value and cultural capital are learnt and understood through others to a point where they become disconnected from any original. The zombie mimics the continuous line of capitalist production whereby a copy becomes a copy of another copy and so on. Leverette argues that the zombies are a contagion without purpose (2008, p. 186), just as consumer products often serve no physical purpose.

Webb and Byrnannd argue that the zombie also manifests in the dampening of affect (2008).

The zombie is unable to feel and is emotionally absent. In capitalism too, individualism is not about feelings or emotions, it is structured to be about consumer preferences. The zombie mimics the alienated mass who have become encompassed in the consumer spectacle.

There are no unique selves; rather, each person resembles another person and is produced as a 'type' within the consumer market. The zombies are interchangeable, appearing very similar and all holding the same desire. Empathy and respect for life are not compatible or a part of the capitalist system. Environmental concern, animal welfare and human rights are secondary to personal bodily and cultural capital. The zombie mimics capitalist ethics by being intent on feeding and expanding regardless of any human, animal or environmental costs.

Each zombie loses itself to the amorphous other and consequently loses a sense of personal identity. In this way the zombie acts as metaphor for integrated society and sense of alienated lost self. Boluk and Lenz assert that the model of contagion for the zombies is that of a social model of interpenetration and connectivity (2010, p. 135). The zombie mimics the way in which individuals have become integrated into a larger system through things such as consumerism and the internet. Rogers refers to Elaine Graham who argues that technological changes such as genetic modification, cloning, microchips and artificial implants, as well as virtual spaces and identities, are producing a "widespread anxiety about the diminishment of uniqueness in the face of new technologies" (2008, p. 119). There is a fear of a lack of autonomy in this respect in regards to new technologies. For Dendle the zombie evokes fears of effaced consciousness and consequently alienation (2007, pp. 47-

48). The fear of not being in control of one's own actions and desires is encompassed in the zombie who appears to be without will.

Baudrillard argues that capitalism and consumer culture controls, simulates, and replaces a person's identity and creates copies without originals (1970/1998). The signs of the real substitute the real. In consumer culture there is no longer any separation between the 'real' and the 'created' as everything only exists within the symbolic order (Baudrillard, 1970/1998). There is no longer any original identity because identity is fully constituted through sociocultural discourses. Through the mass media, directly or indirectly, one learns how to look, feel and behave. The zombie functions as an analogy for or a metaphor with regard to losing one's self in consumer society.

Muntean discusses how a sense of detachment from the larger world is common of the human experience in the twentieth century. He quotes Erich Fromm who argues that:

In the nineteenth century the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century the problem is that man is dead. In the nineteenth century inhumanity meant cruelty; in the twentieth century it means schizoid self-alienation. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men become robots. True enough, robots do not rebel. But given man's nature, robots cannot live and remain sane, they become 'Golems', they will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand any longer the boredom of meaningless

life (as cited in Muntean, 2011, p. 86).

Leverette suggests that the modern zombie is “the post-Fordist somnambulist walking through *Fight Club*, the unsettled housewives of *Thelma and Louise*, the faux savior who can’t tell if he’s dreaming or not in *The Matrix* movies, and, perhaps most disturbing, the child psychiatrist so dis-tuned from the information economy that he doesn’t even know he’s dead in *The Sixth Sense*” (2008, p. 200). The figure of the zombie thus works to both encompass the integrated, capitalist constructed self as well as problematize the meaning structures behind contemporary capitalism.

## Conclusion

The zombie narrative threatens the stability of identity by demonstrating its instability. The zombie shows that it is the sociocultural which makes a subject human, and the sociocultural is always subject to change, as are identities. There is no essential 'I'. As Neurologist Richard Cytowic put it: "The 'I' is a superficial self-awareness constructed by our unfathomable part" (1993, p. 171). As there is no 'I', only created consciousness of an 'I', the survivors are actually not different from zombies in any essential way. The zombie is simply unaware of this constructed 'I'. Muntean argues that "what makes us human is not anything inherent to the individual human itself, but rather is only accrued in the nexus of social relations through which we maintain ourselves and our systems of production (both material and conceptual)" (2011, p. 96).

It can be argued that the figure of the zombie is a symptom of contemporary fears and anxieties regarding capitalist integration and consumer-oriented identities. Furthermore the capitalist ideologies appear to produce a subsequent lack of transcendence or meaning. The emotionless nature of this set of ideologies makes scenarios such as zombie apocalypses refreshing as it enables a sense of raw emotion to be injected back into life. The breakdown of consumerism and capitalism in the zombie apocalypse problematizes identity however it also enables identities to be negotiated without the context of consumerism. These aspects reveal that the zombie apocalypse may indeed be a positive place after all.

## Conclusion

## Introduction

The zombie is an extremely productive site for examining how the dominant discourses of death and the human in the contemporary West are changing and how they have become problematized. Changes in the way that the self and subjectivity are understood in dominant discourse have largely affected and disrupted the way that death, dehumanization and sociocultural identity are understood. This thesis has drawn from Foucault by focusing on the problematizing of particular discourses. Foucault writes:

I would like to distinguish between the 'history of ideas' and the 'history of thought'. Most of the time a historian of ideas tries to determine when a specific concept appears, and this moment is often identified by the appearance of a new word. But what I am attempting to do as an historian is something different. I am trying to analyse the way institutions, practices, habits, and behaviour become a problem for people who behave in specific sorts of ways, who have certain types of habits, who engage in certain kinds of practices, and who put to work specific kinds of institutions . . . The history of thought is the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and 'silent' . . . becomes a problem . . . and induces a crisis . . . The history of thought . . . is the history of the way people begin to take care of something, of the way they become anxious about this or



that – for example, about madness, about crime, about sex, about themselves, or about truth (2001, p. 74).

In examining *The Walking Dead*, this thesis has examined the induction of a crisis in the familiar discourses of death and the human. This thesis has demonstrated how the figure of the zombie problematizes these discourses by challenging and disrupting a number of assumptions and categorizations that work to sustain them. Further, it has explored how the zombie apocalypse disrupts the normative, consumerist and materialist influenced notions of identity and subjectivity, which in turn disrupts the discourses of dehumanization and death. The conclusion will review the main work that *The Walking Dead* does in both exemplifying the problematized status of these discourses, and in problematizing these discourses. The conclusion will close with a discussion of the potential implications of these changes.

### Problematizing Death

Contemporary discourses on the body have largely problematized the discourse of death. The introduction of biopolitics resulted in the practice of defining individuals largely by their relation to bodily norms (Foucault, 1976/2008), and contemporary capitalist discourse normalises the notion of the body as the site of the self and demands it to be produced and shaped through consumer products (Baudrillard, 1970/1998). Further, materialist discourse has asserted that the self only exists in its physical and commodity forms, devaluing the idea that there may be a soul or spirit that may continue after death (Hallam et al., 1999). In

asserting that the self can be largely defined by the body, these discourses present the body as of extreme importance and necessary to the self. Consequently these discourses have arguably made it imperative for Western individuals to have a constant awareness of their bodies and to ensure that their bodies remain physically youthful, attractive and healthy. Part of the horror of the zombie appears to be its position as antithetical to the desire for the youthful, attractive and death-escaping body. In embodying physical corruption and uncleanness, the zombie plays on the anxiety to keep the body healthy and youthful. As the body has acquired such a high status and has become largely seen as the site of the self, the implications of death, in discourse, have changed. In eradicating the body, death now is also understood to eradicate the self.

### The Loss of Subjectivity

Within consumer capitalism an individual's body is largely the site of subjectivity and identity. It is the loss of subjectivity and identity which primarily appears to constitute the horror of death, rather than the loss of the body in itself. This is demonstrated by the zombie who eradicates its victim's social identity, yet leaves the body in working order: there is no remaining part of a recognizable subject left in the zombie. This is explained in the first season of *The Walking Dead* by Doctor Jenner of the CDC and is demonstrated again in season three when Milton experiments on a zombie. Milton attempts to train a dying man's mind and to trigger the man's mind once he has turned into a zombie. Milton is unsuccessful and Andrea tells him "There is no conscious mind, Milton. When they turn, they become monsters. That's all. Whoever they once were is gone" (season three, episode

seven). The loss of subjectivity appears to be one of the primary reasons as to why the survivors do not want to become zombies.

Without their identities, the survivors do not appear to want to live in the world. Lori expresses to Hershel that “If we’re walkers, you don’t hesitate and you don’t try to save us okay” (season three, episode one). Within contemporary medicalized discourses on death, the survivors face the same fate in both death and zombification – annihilation of their status as subjects. For all of the survivors, however, death is more desired than zombification. In zombification the individual’s body usually declines rapidly; it decays, wrinkles, leaks and oozes. This decline of the body happens publicly rather than being hidden like that of the buried corpse, potentially explaining why the survivors may prefer death over zombification. The desire for death over zombification may also lie in the fear that as a zombie, the individual poses a threat to his or her family as well as his or her reputation and beliefs. The preference may also lie in an on-going hope that death may not entail the complete annihilation of the self.

Christian discourses on death are still active in *The Walking Dead*. Some characters continue to believe that there is a soul and that it continues in heaven, such as Carol and Jacqui. The Christian discourse on the self and death may indeed have a more dominant standing in the post-apocalyptic world. In post-apocalyptic society, the sociocultural structures of consumerism have been disrupted and consequently the discourse that the body is largely the site of the self is problematized. The breakdown of capitalism enables identity to be negotiated without the context of consumerism. This leaves open a place for

the returned prominence of the discourse that the individual has a soul and that the soul is the source of the self. Further, the high immanence and frequency of death in the zombie world may entail individuals favouring this discourse as it enables hope.

## Dehumanization

Whether the individual believes that their existence continues in death or not, social identity and subjectivity remain extremely important in life. Only 'normal' subjects qualify as people. Those who do not appear to be 'normal subjects' are often victims of violence. In understanding a group of people or a person as not having a subjectivity, indeed as Agamben's 'zoe' (2005), they are often not identified or sympathized with and so it becomes easier to commit violence on them.

It is through the zombie's difference to the survivors as well as the zombie's similarity to all other zombies which makes it easier to dehumanize them. In not following the prescribed norms of being human, the zombies are easily marked as others. The survivors in *The Walking Dead* walk 'properly', and they speak and they think through what they are doing. The zombies are deformed, they walk in a contorted fashion, and they grunt and groan instead of speaking and showing emotion. As zombies are so different to the survivors in the way that they act, it is easy to differentiate them and more difficult to relate to them. It becomes easy to assert that they are different from oneself and one's friends and family, and thus also makes it easier to be violent toward them. This practice in *The Walking Dead* mimics the way that Western cultures easily differentiate and dehumanize non-Western

cultures. The people who are different are understood as less relatable and often as a consequence, as 'not men'. T-dog exemplifies this in his comment on the zombies in season three, episode two, when he declares "They ain't men. They're something else".

Understanding others as 'not men' may enable a clear conscious when committing violence toward them.

"Something else" is not an empathy-producing title; it hides an individual or a group's precariousness. This is exemplified best in the way that the survivors respond to the death of others. In season three, episode one, immediately after a large number of zombies are killed by the group at the prison, Carol expresses joy, exclaiming "Fantastic! Oh we haven't had this much space since we left the farm!" The other survivors cheer, affirming that in killing the zombies inhabiting the prison, they have achieved success and found a new home. The survivors do not express any thought or concern for the many zombies that they have just killed because they are not understood to be legitimate humans.

Where violence is inflicted upon those who are considered 'legitimate subjects', in order to take possession of their resources, *The Walking Dead* demonstrates that different narratives are used. The governor uses extreme violence in the name of acquiring resources, as a way to bond the community of Woodbury together. The governor has created his own military to 'protect' the community. In season three, episode three, the governor and his military find a group of American military with tanks, trucks, food and weaponry, and open fire on them, murdering all of them. Once they are all dead the governor exclaims "Let's see what Uncle Sam brought us shall we?" On arrival back to Woodbury, the governor explains to the

community members that they came across these resources and it appeared that a group of zombies got to the American military before they could. The governor uses this occasion to generate pride and thankfulness among the community members. The governor tells the group that these people did not have walls or fences like they do. He announces, “We didn’t know them, but we’ll honour their sacrifice by not taking what we have here for granted. It won’t be long before dark so go on home, be thankful for what you have. Watch out for each other”. This narrative used in *The Walking Dead* has the ability to generate awareness of the way that narratives are utilised to generate particular responses.

#### Disrupting Normative Discourses

The zombie in *The Walking Dead* acts to disrupt normative discourses and narratives by problematizing the systems of categorization which hold certain discourses together. The contrast of the zombies’ violence in order to survive, and the living survivors’ violence in order to acquire more than what they need, reveals that the survivors can be just as ‘monstrous’ and at times even more ‘monstrous’, than the zombies. Where discourses of dehumanization cannot be used to justify violence, the governor keeps the violence hidden and uses the death of these ‘legitimate’ people to unify and strengthen the community that he is in charge of. It is the use and manipulation of discourses which enables the sustainability and justification of violence.

*The Walking Dead* destabilizes and disrupts discourses however, particularly the discourses of dehumanization, by showing that those who participate in the dehumanizing discourse of

others, are themselves the people who are monstrous. By unsympathetically and almost robotically murdering zombies, the survivors in *The Walking Dead* are committing violence toward an entire group of people based on preconceptions of who these people are. In portraying the survivors as more monstrous than the zombies at times, *The Walking Dead* reveals that the 'monsters' are not necessarily the groups who have been labelled as such. Rather, it is the discourse of dehumanization which enables monstrous acts to be performed. This is particularly clear with the introduction of the governor who uses the narrative of the 'terrorist' to encourage the members of Woodbury to cheer and to demand the death of innocent people. This scene is significant as it places a likable character, Darryl, in the position of someone who is dehumanized by others.

*The Walking Dead* also invites the audience to witness the experiences of those who are segregated in society and who are constantly afraid of having violent acts committed on them. The primary group followed in *The Walking Dead* are forced into segregation and hiding to ensure the survival of their subjective identities. The group is frequently attacked and are always under threat by both zombie hordes and other survivors. By focusing on this group, *The Walking Dead* demonstrates the anxious state that the segregated are in, offering a picture of how those who are segregated due to dehumanization may feel. By exploring the situation of those who are segregated as well as by demonstrating dehumanizers to be just as, if not more, monstrous than the dehumanized, *The Walking Dead* destabilizes the discursive structures of dehumanization. In doing this, *The Walking Dead* may indeed aid increased critique and reflection when discourses of dehumanization

are utilised in both *The Walking Dead* and in everyday contexts, for instance where groups may be marked as carriers of disease or as political threats to the community.

By demonstrating that it is only through discourse that an individual is understood as being an abject other, or as evil, *The Walking Dead* also disrupts the notion of inherent 'good' and 'evil'. The notion that someone is 'evil' is often relied on in the discourse of dehumanization. The zombie exhibits however that subjectivity is dependent on processes and discourses of cultural and political legitimation, and is not natural or inherent. The figure of the zombie in *The Walking Dead* reveals that identity *requires* the sociocultural, reinforcing the post-structuralist notion of identity as constructed. Without sign systems and social structures to organise the individual and his or her body, all bodies are the same, they are all vulnerable flesh.

The zombie also problematizes the boundary-based discourse of subjectivity by demonstrating that there is indeed an alternative to *either* male or female, dead or alive, complete or incomplete, human or non-human and us or them. In encompassing a state which transcends these boundaries, the zombie further disrupts the understanding that they are inherent, natural boundaries. This problematization enables a critique of the boundaries and may entail a re-evaluation of them. In this way the zombie reveals the importance of discourse in enabling the individual to perceive his or herself as unified, consistent and whole. However it also reveals the unreliability of discourse to maintain and enable stable and unified subjectivity. The clearly defined boundaries of identity categories require the subject to be impermeable and completely stable and the zombie narrative



reveals that this is not the case. The zombie plays on the fact that individuals are not fully constituted, autonomous beings, and that they are instead often driven by biological desires rather than the idea of 'conscious control'.

A further way that the zombie is disruptive to discursive categories is in its status as both dead and alive. This status disrupts the binary of alive/dead and further points to the contemporary problematized status of this boundary due to the existence of those who appear to encompass both states, such as dementia and coma patients. These patients, as well as the zombie, demonstrate that death can no longer be understood or categorised with as much certainty as it may have in the past.

*The Walking Dead* also poses the question of what constitutes 'being alive'. The idea of whether one is 'alive' or not, and consequently the discourse of 'alive', appears to strongly influence an individual's perspective on death. *The Walking Dead* demonstrates that when an individual's life is not meeting their perspective of what 'alive' or 'truly living' means, then death may not be a negative occurrence. Jacqui argues that the 'sane' option in the post-apocalyptic world is to commit suicide, and commits this act with Doctor Jenner. Further, Lori tells Rick that the post-apocalyptic world is not a world for children as they cannot live a 'real life'.

The majority of the survivors in *The Walking Dead* appear to be convinced that they would be 'living life' and that they would be fulfilled if the pre-apocalypse sociocultural structures

were re-created. These structures provided organization and structure for their lives.

Andrea remarks in season three, episode five, “Scavenging, living in a meat locker, that’s not living life”. In Woodbury, the pre-apocalyptic system appears to be largely re-created.

Children are shown playing on the streets, women are wearing sun-dresses, and music is playing. Of Woodbury, the governor comments “It’s about getting back to who we were.

Who we really are. Not just waiting to be saved. People here have homes, medical care. Kids go to school and adults have jobs to do. There’s a sense of purpose. We’re a community” (season three, episode three). The governor informs Andrea “People love it here because it feels like how it was” (season three, episode eight). The pre-apocalyptic order does not always work in post-apocalyptic Woodbury, however.

The collapse of sociocultural structures often reveals them as flawed, and consequently makes it difficult to convincingly re-establish them. In season three, episode two, Lori jokes in response to her distance with her husband Rick “What are we gonna do? Hire lawyers? Get a divorce and split our assets?” The idea of divorce, and even assets, is absurd in post-apocalyptic society. While these systems and structures remain valuable to the post-apocalyptic survivors, they are something that they can never fully re-create as the discourses surrounding them have altered.

## Zombies and Capitalism

Zombies arguably function as a caricature of pre-apocalyptic, consumerist society by mimicking the endless repetition of capitalist production: they consume mindlessly and relentlessly, and their inability to distinguish or negotiate their acts of consumption suggest that desire has become a form of drive. The survivors in *The Walking Dead* on the other hand are not dominated by the imperatives of consumer and commodity culture. They do not have a class or social status or an occupation. The survivors' subjectivities in *The Walking Dead* are largely based around their functions and actions. The brutal environment in which the survivors live produces something more pragmatic, because of the prevalence of death in the post-apocalyptic zombie world. This change also results in different discourses of death.

## Conclusion

In contemporary Western culture, the body has become centralized and only clean, sterile bodies are permitted to be in public and in the public eye. Bodies that are dying or that remind individuals of death or the limitations of the body, such as those that are ugly, old and decaying, are largely segregated from society. As death is no longer so visible, it has come to be viewed as something that is separate from the human. There is a diminished belief in the transcendent soul, and a failure to accept the order of nature and the human dependency on nature and biology (Aries, 1977/1981). This situation has made death a very

problematic subject. It has also appeared to make death significantly more frightening. In contemporary Western media, death is portrayed as terrifying, horrific and unfair. While the grotesque body was once rejoiced as a celebration of the bodily cycle of life and death (Stallybrass & White, 1986), it is now predominantly a frightening symbol of complete mortality, loss of exchange value and loss of self. The zombie reinforces the dominant discourse that death and dying are disgusting and horrifying. A part of their horror is in their reminder that death is non-negotiable and inevitable. The zombie denies the hope of science overcoming death. Ultimately, the zombie reflects a contemporary nihilistic attitude toward death.

*The Walking Dead* however reflects Aries' argument that the primary concern of dying individuals in contemporary society is for their family (1977/1981). The survivors who have families appear to want to live more so than those without families, so that they can live for their families. Further, when they are dying, their focus is on the wellbeing of their families. When Lori is about to die, she says to her son "Carl you take care of your dad and your little brother or sister . . . I love you my sweet, sweet boy, I love you" (season three, episode four). Further, Maggie attempts to support her dad in passing away by telling him "Dad you don't need to fight anymore. If you're worried about me and Beth you don't need to be. We'll take care of each other . . . If it's time to go it's okay. I just want to thank you, for everything. Thank you". This comment is made with the understanding that Hershel is afraid to pass away because he is concerned about his daughters. Here the fear of death lies largely in the fear of hurting one's family members. With the confirmation that one's family will be all right, the individual is able to pass away in peace.

*The Walking Dead* not only offers a reflection of the problematized status of death and the human, but also reveals that new discourses arise and become dominant where problematization has occurred. Whether it is indeed the notion of the family, the returned prominence of belief in the soul, or something else that is arising to attempt to smooth over the problematized status of death and the self, new discourses about death, dying and the human are being circulated in contemporary popular culture.

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