

Zombie rebirth and *The Walking Dead*

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Flattered and excited to be invited to speak here today. Not least because when I heard the conference theme, I instantly thought... ZOMBIE!! In fact Mayra – plenary re Romero film! But as you're probably just starting to become aware at this stage in your academic careers, this is what happens when you start researching something – you see it everywhere...

In this case, though, I don't think I'm inventing connections – zombies really are relevant here. Most obviously of course, they epitomise the idea of rebirth as one of our undead monsters – they rise again after death, and are born into a new existence. But, having got that obvious connection out of the way, the more I thought about zombie texts, the more I felt that the tradition as a whole was – and continues to be – being reborn and redeveloped across different media in a number of ways. Obviously I'm a comics theorist, but I thought that situating some comics case studies – not to mention their adaptations – against this wider backdrop might be of most interest to most people at a conference like this.

So I'm going to use a number of different examples to argue that zombies are being reborn in a number of ways. These include their use in different types of cultural practices and play; their development through various archetypes that have appeared at different times; and finally the generic and stylistic rebirths that occur when they cross into other media and into texts for new audiences.

Since the millennium we have had a renewed interest in zombies. They're no longer the default setting at fancy dress parties, and in stories they are now even getting personalities and identities. We might think this is a new thing – but people have been saying 'that's not a *real* zombie' for years, as the figure constantly changes and develops.

But rather than focus on the differences between each new incarnation, instead I want to show how, although different media have emphasised

different aspects, the same themes underlie all the various zombie archetypes that we have created.

SLIDE: zombie zeitgeist

We are living in a zombie renaissance right now. Since the millennium the zombie has displaced the vampire as the dominant horror culture archetype and become a plural signifier with a wide range of meanings (financial, environmental, personal). Zombies are breaking out of the page and screen and into our politics, news and future via zombie walks, and various UK councils have even released plans to handle zombie invasions.

[Over the last decade many UK local governments have played along with the trend to bring the zombie into 'real' life – in 2011 Bristol City Council released plans for handling a zombie outbreak in response to a freedom of information request (Morris 2011); similar requests were received by other British cities during the same (Gosden 2011) and a lack of preparation by Leicester resulted in a zombie "attack" being organized via Twitter a week later (BBC, 17 June 2011).]

As adaptable as the zombie signifier itself, this "fleshmob" craze has been co-opted into a variety of purposes: whether in celebration (such as Hallowe'en) or as a form of protest (such as the Occupy movement). Like the purpose, though, the metaphor seems mixed; as Occupy Wallstreet participant Thomas Rohner commented: "I like the fact that you can take it two ways" (Potter 2011). Was the implication that the masses were the zombies for allowing the banks to control us in this manner? Or were the bankers the zombies; following directors' orders without question and consuming our resources in the process?

But either way, what better symbol for a global recession than the zombie: hopeless, downtrodden and unaware? Zombie films and literature often contain a healthy suspicion of authority, as governments generally either deny the zombie threat or have their own agenda, often not in the people's interests. The term has infected financial terminology as in these books, and Yari Lanci has even suggested that Danny Boyle's rebooted running zombie relates to a paradigm shift in our own political consciousness whereby speed has become the defining and most valued factor of today's culture. Not only does capitalism demonstrate that "time is money", but new technology requires an ever-

shifting skillset and employees who are not “up to speed” can be replaced.

A 2009 article in *Time* magazine (entitled “Zombies Are the New Vampires”) says “[Zombies] seem to be telling us something about the zeitgeist”, but actually says very little about *what* zombies are telling us about the Zeitgeist. It notes the popularity of zombie films and their use in online identities and offers a range of applicable cultural interpretations. Ecological anxiety? Zombies are Q “biodegradable, locally sourced and sustainable”. Fear of the Other? Zombies are a perfect metaphor for the overseas combat, as Romero initially showed us, and Brooks continued in WWZ. American values? Zombies are Q “plucky and tenacious — you can cut off his limbs and he’ll keep on coming atcha. [...] They’re monsters of the people” (Grossman 2009; Farnell 2011).

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And the people, it seems, would like to be zombies! Zombie walks have been around since the millennium (the earliest recorded example was held at the Gencon Gaming Convention in Milwaukee, WI in August 2000 (Laws 2007)) and have risen in popularity since then.

I conducted a small-scale survey of just under 100 Bristol zombie walk participants back in 2012, which was published in a collection called *Mythologies Today*. I discovered that the drive behind costumes and performance is overwhelmingly competitive and that both tend towards the subversive rather than the sanitized. Costumes are homemade, and based on humour, although homage and shock value were close runners up.

Zombie walks are grassroots-organised and heavily DIY-oriented; paradoxically asserting *individuality* through the expression of *sameness*. The walk and its organisation enact a series of tensions: the individual/hive; the political/recreational; and the technological/homemade. A dual imperative (of individuality versus groupthink) is played out during the walk, confronting participants and audience with a critique of identity: the myth of the self. My zombie is

'not me' (because my personality and memories are all gone), but at the same time remains 'me' (in appearance and body) – or at least what is left of me. The zombie is a symbol of negation: simultaneously there (in body) and not there (in mind). The zombie walk asks how a single person can maintain their unique identity within a community and expresses and enacts our concerns about freedom within a society of political and social limitations.

The zombie walk also inscribes the duality of fear and play so often found in the gothic. Many participants stay 'in character' for the whole walk; most say they attempt this for at least some of the time. Moaning, shuffling and calling for 'braaaaaaaains' are the key elements here. But the zombie walk is also a social activity and so many zombies will drink alcohol, chat and smoke as they lurch along, and the final destination is generally a pub. The pursuit of fun is by far the most common reason given for participation, although community spirit and a love of zombies also feature, and families and children can often be found in the horde.

This is interesting because, moving outside the zombie walk, zombie play more generally is on the rise as the zombie is being reborn for children. Ian Conrich (2011) comments that in the past decade the QUOTE "zombie contagion has broken free of the screen within which it was relatively contained" and lists a vast range of products and merchandise that exploits these images, including sweets, outfits, Lego, garden decor and much more. Parody and play have not been extensively analysed within the Gothic, but critics such as Botting (1996: 168) comment that: Q "The play of fear and laughter has been inscribed in Gothic texts since their inception". Horner and Zlosnik go on to consider ways in which the comic turn is achieved: from the physical grotesque to the use of the uncanny, arguing that through Q "irreverent dialogue with the uncanny and the supernatural, the comic turn in Gothic writing offers a fresh perspective on modernity" (2012: 332), and that it interrogates the production of the modern subject.

So today's zombie walk is primarily a humorous activity, and zombie play more generally focuses almost entirely on the destruction of social norms. This is apparent in texts and artifacts that juxtapose the zombie

with childhood for humour. For example, child zombie costumes are widely available online, along with Lego zombie playsets, and spoofs such as the “scratch and sniff” book *Pat the Zombie* (“Judy can feel Daddy’s putrefying face. Now YOU can feel Daddy’s putrefying face” (Ximm and Soofi 2011)).

SLIDE: dialogues

So zombies are adaptable and subversive, but sometimes in contradictory ways. This leads to a danger that the zombies themselves can also be seen as empty metaphors. The variety possible in the presentation of the on-screen zombie might also support this – in cinema, for example, today’s running cannibals are a far cry from the possessed Haitian figure. As Hannah Wolf-Bowen points out in her short story ‘Everything is Better with Zombies’, there are lots of different ways to make a zombie and yeah, it’s confusing. Over the last century a diverse range of archetypes have emerged, and I’d now like to look more closely at these.

But rather than a simple zombie evolution (magic/cannibalism/psychosis/sensitivity) I want to propose that the different archetypes all exist in dialogue with each other and that they articulate the same key themes, grouped around these three areas: social breakdown; identity; and play. This is not to say that the emphasis isn’t different at different points, but I want to go beyond direct cultural readings, and instead try and identify a coherent sense of zombeism that continues to be reborn in each new text.

SLIDE: ZOMBIES ON SCREEN

The zombie cinema tradition is the most well known. A basic timeline (from a Western perspective) would trace the rise of zombie cinema like this. The earliest films, such as *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* emerge in the 1930s and are set in exotic locations such as Haiti, where the zombie legend originates. They contain an exotic other as the main threat (the possessed body of the black man – alive, controlled and thus with a purpose, although not their own). George Romero then develops the figure in the 1960s as an anthropophagic ghoul – i.e. a dead body that rises from the grave and feasts on human

flesh. At the millennium the zombie reverts to a human figure again – but this time not under magical control but instead virally infected, often from a scientific invention gone awry – and psychotic, as in films such as *28 Days Later*, *The Signal* and *Pontypool*). More recently zombies have been parodied, and ultimately even given agency in order to become protagonists and even heroes.

But I nonetheless want to argue these four incarnations all articulate the same key elements: social breakdown; identity; and play.

SLIDE: EARLY CINEMA

Critics to date have generally viewed the rise of different types of zombie in terms of the surrounding culture. For example, Jamie Russell argues that in 1930s America, Q:

‘the zombie and the stock market crash segued neatly together, expressing the powerlessness that so many felt as they suffered under an unstable economy’ (James Russell 2005, p. 23)

This approach demonstrates how the zombie – a dead worker resurrected as a slave for endless toil – was the perfect monster for the age. These possessed zombies show a preoccupation with slavery and a fear of the masses and the Other, whether a literal figure or an alien force – such as the Luddite fear of mass industrialization that lies behind Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). Kyle William Bishop also relates the pre-1950s films that anticipate the Romero zombie to social and political anxieties about communism and mass society (Bishop, 2006).

But this loss of will and individuality is not just political, it can also be read as an identity critique, shown by the dominant aesthetic in all these films, of bowed heads and grasping hands. Faces and fingerprints offer uniqueness and these images foreground this issue and negate identity through repetition.

SLIDE: Zombies and comics

At this time, and along with the other Undead, zombies were also featuring heavily in horror comics. The first zombie story to appear in

comics is claimed as 'King of the Living Dead' in 1947. Again, the plot is driven by fear of the Other en masse: as an undead army is being created underneath the streets of Budapest. In 1948 the soon-to-be-notorious EC Comics published its very first horror story. This was 'Zombie Terror', by then-unknown writer and artist Johnny Craig, which appeared in the superhero comic *Moon Girl*. There's a hefty dose of voodoo in this tale and its zombies are again the Othered bodies of black natives. The layout of the comics page emphasises this: to use Thierry Groensteen's categories for considering panels, the form (shape), area (size) and site (position) of this first panel all emphasise the elongated body of the Slave Other. The perspective also positions us alongside the humans fleeing or shooting at them.

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The same is apparent in "Corpses... Coast to Coast!" (*VOODOO* #14, Anon 1954), whose opening panel stresses the mass existence of the zombie on a factory line. This is an embedded story framed by a narrator who addresses the reader directly as in this first quote, breaking the fourth wall with his gaze, further emphasised by the circular form of this panel. In his dream the country's gravediggers have gone on strike and our narrator and a mysterious colleague decide to collect all the unburied bodies and revive them as zombies. These zombies are mass-produced capitalist workers, and technology is also brought in, as shown by these quotes. The story has political overtones, as there is a nuclear war with Moscow which results in our narrator being promoted to the top position and creating a "Zombiocracy" ("Now we have peace! No more fight! All is big brotherhood of zombies!" (7)).

Linking mass production (technology) to global warfare and political parties makes this zombie narrative socio-political as it comments on the domestic workforce. However, it also brings in themes of identity and play that are often overlooked in zombie texts of this time. The story concludes back in the main diegesis, with our teller informing us in the final panel "none of the people who know me, suspect what I really am... a dreamer, yes...*but also a zombie!*" (7) So here we have a narrating, sentient zombie who anticipates the active agents of millennial zombie texts such as *Warm Bodies* and *iZombie*.

Parody and play can also be seen in the political pastiche of a zombiocracy and that 'big brotherhood of zombies'

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Identity is also interrogated through narrative style and content in "The Brain-Bats of Venus" (*Mister Mystery #7*, Wolverton 1952) which uses second-person narrative throughout ("Your spaceship is out of control over Venus, Rod Crenshaw! [...] You come out of your unconsciousness [...] Then you look down..." (1-2)). Our hero Crenshaw thinks he has escaped the Brain Bats but ultimately the narration concludes Q "Then comes the realization that you, Rod Crenshaw, died in the blast – and that the thoughts now coursing thru your revived brain are those of a Brain-Bat that escaped the blast – to make of *you* – a *zombie!*" (7). The second-person address, which merges the reader's identity with that of the protagonist, as well as the typography (which links the words "you" and "zombie" through emphasis) are accompanied by the final silent panel of Crenshaw with a Brain-Bat astride his head: his eyes are white and unfocused, as befits the zombie, while the Brain-Bat looks directly at us, breaking the fourth wall. Medium and content both align here to problematize the borders of identity.

Trombetta reads the Brain Bat in this final panel as symbolising a soldier's helmet and so again relates the comic's content to surrounding cultural fears. But to me the narration of the tale and the use of the medium stresses issues of identity over social ones (as there is no information given on Crenshaw's mission or the politics of either species). And the Brain Bats themselves contain more than a little comedy as they flap, octopus-like, across the large first panel that through its area and site dominates the first page, underneath a title that evokes B-movie horror through its font and wording.

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Zombies in comics prior to the 1954 Comics Code of censorship also frequently appear returning from the grave on a mission of personal revenge and are often sentient and motivated. They are not unthinking or controlled, and although dead and rotting they are not consumed with

hunger for human flesh. Although visually they share many elements with Romero's ghouls this is unsurprising if we consider wartime images as the inspiration for both, and the horror comics as possible influences on Romero. But these comics predate later revaluations of the ghoul as hungry, and as such, they look both forwards and backwards and combine elements from all versions of the figure.

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Critics continue to relate the zombie to the concerns of its era. Boon theorises the arrival of the Romero-zombie as a response to the arrival of the post-nuclear age (2011b, p. 55) and Romero's comments on being inspired by television scenes of the Vietnam war are of course well-known. A critique of humanity and identity famously underlies his movies, such as *NOTL*, which demonstrates society's failure to work together and the collapse of the family unit through the bickering people trapped together in the farmhouse, or *Dawn of the Dead's* consumer shopping mall setting. But even in these classic zombie texts we can see the theme of identity emerging: most obviously in Bud from Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, or the later character of Julie from *Return of the LD3* (1993), who finds that masochism can sate her zombie urges and uses this to prevent herself from hurting people.

SLIDE

Brad O'Brien takes a similar approach to the emergence of Italian zombie cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, claiming that this articulates particular anxieties associated with Italian Catholicism and the fear of social collapse precipitated by terrorism in Italy (2008). This is Fabio Frizzi's theme music for Lucio Fulci's *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (originally named *Zombi 2*, situating itself as a sequel to Romero's original), which combines a John-Carpenter style synth noise with Gregorian chants that carry religious connotations. These films are most famous for their use of extensive blood and gore, including in this instance a horrific eye gouging scene. The film opens with the execution of a hooded zombie, and the Molotov cocktails and hail of bullets in its finale also have political overtones. But again, we could consider that the eye gouging scene is most effective in pulling the reader into the film (since Dr Menard's wife's eye stays open throughout, as do our horrified eyes),

and the dialogue offers comedic interludes (as when our heroes spend ages boarding up entrances only to be told deadpan that it'll never hold). Fulci's zombies move from a trance like shuffle to a sudden pounce, reminiscent of both the Slave Other and the hungry Romerian ghoul. *[This period affected the 1960s to early 1980s with terrorist attacks that ultimately were revealed to be the work of the fascist Government to mobilise the public away from liberal ideas.]*

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Shortly after the millennium, Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) kickstarted the modern zombie era with its running, living people infected with the disease 'rage' and started a trend of infection rather than reanimation that was followed by these later movies. Although European movies such as Lenzi's *Nightmare City* (or *City of the Living Dead*) had already given us the sped-up zombie, Boyle brought the combination to the mainstream. An evolutionary timeline approach would claim here that the zombie has come full circle – like earliest Haitian zombies, living people with no control again. But the prime development here is speed rather than life – as Lanci argues, this is 'zombie 2.0', representing the need for increased productivity and pace that characterizes our modern age. The magical and supernatural elements of the zombie are also sustained by the Rage disease as although it is explained scientifically, it is primarily represented using horror and supernatural codes, for example through the demonic red eyes of its victims.

[Nightmare City's (1980) zombies spew from an aeroplane infected by radiation and can run and jump and much more, and Romero's Night of the Living Dead (1968) also featured running corpses, and another contender would be Tobe Hooper's 1985 movie Lifeforce with its naked flying space vampires – yes, you heard me right.]

It's tempting to read texts like these in terms of their cultural moment. Although a fear of technology is no new thing in gothic literature, it dominates millennial zombie texts. They depict the zombie threat as one of mass *infection* and tie this explicitly to a fear of technology as the virus is transmitted digitally through communication devices in *Cell* and

The Signal. Botting points out that Q “Mimicking, duplicating and threatening to replace human abilities, automata manifest the doubleness that threatens individual uniqueness” and claims technical devices thus disclose a “spectralizing habit” within modernity (86-7). In this light, a suspicion of technology as an infectious, viral force that *could* turn us all into zombies seems an obvious response to today’s world,

However, again I’d like to propose instead that we go beyond making cause-and-effect links with the surrounding culture and instead look for ongoing shared qualities of social breakdown, identity discourse, and parody/play.

SLIDE: *Crossed*

To do this, I’d like to look more closely at the comic book series *Crossed* – which shares many elements with Boyle’s movies. Devised by Garth Ennis, *Crossed* is a ultra-violent horror comic that continues the sadism of zombie 2.0 in a similar manner to cinema. Although presenting its zombeism as an infection or disease, it strongly connotes religious and supernatural fears through the marked faces of the “Crossed”. They are living people who, once infected, act out their most evil, violent and depraved thoughts, and thus spread the plague further through shared bodily fluids. Rape, murder, cannibalism, maiming and all other forms of sadistic butchery and abuse are engaged in for fun, with family and friends turning once infected.

Unlike more traditional zombies, the Crossed are active, manic and psychotic. This is not the burnt-out world of *The Walking Dead*, but a world that is still on fire, with its inhabitants dancing and writhing in the flames. The term ‘crossed’ is significant: whereas zombification is more usually described as a “change” or “turn” (and “turn” in particular implies stasis and inversion), to “cross” instead suggests active movement and transgression of a boundary by moving to its other side.

Embodied points of view are used throughout the comic and its paratextual material, particularly the covers. These point of view shots are rarely assigned to the Crossed themselves but more often the victim,

problematizing narrative identity by evoking the question “what are you going to do to me?”

The reader becomes further involved as many of the splash pages of carnage come with no narrative or dialogic explanation, requiring us to piece together the events (and consequences) of particular scenes. Dr Murray has described scenes such as these as “Where’s Wally” style pages of depravity and violence, as here where we have a *mise en scène* of tiny figures fighting, killing, raping and burning each other around a freeway pileup. Our protagonist Stan’s narration falters into ellipsis here as he says: “By then we’d seen some things that... Well, we’d seen some things”).

Like much of Garth Ennis’s other work and other zombie texts, *Crossed* reflects on human identity and offers social commentary, for example in Stan’s closing narration, which says, Q:

There was no great secret to the Crossed.
I’d never seen one do anything a human being couldn’t think
of doing.
Hadn’t thought of doing.
Hadn’t done.
They were all the awful aspects of humanity magnified a
hundred-thousandfold, but they were nothing more.
Where did they come from?
Us.
(#10)

In this way *Crossed* is one of the most extreme examples of problematized identity that the zombie conveys as, like the zombie walk, it explores our contradictions. The Crossed are diverse, distinct, and individualized – *Crossed* is so horrifying precisely because it inverts rather than removes identity. The Crossed are not moaning automatons or soulless slaves or mindless consumers; they are active agents.

Crossed gives us complete social breakdown and comments on its cause by reinterpreting consumption as gratification and thus articulating

human sadism. It reconfigures the zombie as sadist not victim and thus interrogates identity. It suggests that losing one's soul or identity through zombification and automatically attacking your loved ones is no longer the ultimate horror. Becoming an inversion of yourself motivated by hate and sexual sadism and thus *deliberately* torturing and abusing those you love seems infinitely worse. Humanity's addiction to depravity is explored here and although there is very little humour to be found in this comic, a sense of play still informs this. It's *recreational zombeism* and these Infected are its active agents.

SLIDE

To lighten the mood, and existing alongside the extreme horror offered by these various examples of 'Zombie 2.0' is a strand of zombie comedy. Again, this comments on today's society and a number of scholars find an affinity between the zombification of the slacker and the contemporary experiences of work and leisure within capitalism, as explored in films like these.

[Lynn Pifer (2011) and Peter Dendle (2011) both theorise the rise of the 'slacker zomedy' in these broad terms.]

Shaun of the Dead (2004) and *Zombieland* operate both as parodies and revaluations of what has gone before. In both films the central characters' understanding of and responses to their plight are structured by cultural knowledge taken from these sources and so the movies become a summary of the tendencies and divergences within the zombie tradition.

But again, rather than reading them culturally, as postmodern artefacts or critiques of capitalist society, we could argue that these zombie texts emphasise parody and play while still interrogating identity politics and social breakdown, via Shaun and Ed's interactions and the limited impact that zombeism has on their world

[Zombieland uses its medium, such as the addition of television tickertape, to interpellate a knowing audience, for example by putting words on screen. It constructs this knowing audience and addresses

us directly – we know how to outwit a zombie attack, we have seen enough of them!

Fido – zombies incorporated into society thanks to the zomcor collar. Hierarchy, class-based. Even name (of dog) represents this. Keeping up with the Joneses – Stepford suburbia!]*

SLIDE

The next new zombie to be born I've named the reluctant revenant. It's found in texts such as *Warm Bodies*, which rewrites the zombie into a romantic protagonist – much like Anne Rice's vampire literature which redefined the figure. Whereas Carol Senf notes that Dracula is an excluded antagonist, who is never allowed to speak for himself, Rice's vampires are sympathetic, narrating protagonists.

Isaac Marion's novel and its movie adaptation emphasise this point through its casting, genre, mise en scene (as here where R walks moodily through the rain), and frequent use of voiceover. These all align sympathies firmly with R, and Nicolas Hoult (who was fresh from teen series *Skins*) is perfectly cast here in the ultimate teenage antihero role - and one of the best looking zombies to appear on screen...

... up until Rose Mclver who plays Liv Moore in The CW's adaptation of *iZombie*. Liv's face is not just intact, it's beautiful, and again her zombie role is characterised by all the tropes of young adult romantic drama. She maintains a semi-normal lifestyle including friends, a job, a family and romance, by eating human brains every so often. Although we're subtly reminded through various means that Liv is not functioning at full living capacity (she eats tons of hot sauce, or dramatically flavoured foods, reminding us that her senses are dying) she's shown here using chopsticks – a far cry from tearing into fresh meat and symbolic of civilisation. Throughout the series she consumes brains in increasingly gourmet ways, whether as meatballs in pasta, or battered and deep fried with sweet chilli sauce. As her boss Ravi says, 'God help me, that smells sensational.'

BBC TV series *In the Flesh* also uses the z as a metaphor to comment on conformity, homophobia and the importance of being true to oneself.

Again, it contains social comment, but the dominant theme is an exploration of sexual identity and a heavy dose of parody, as its 'rotters' are relabelled as PDS sufferers (Partially Dead Syndrome). In this world living as a zombie becomes a metaphor for living honestly that takes in gendered and sexual identity.

Finally, *Cargo*, an Australian short film and finalist at Tropfest 2013. [*It's just 8 minutes long and available on Youtube and I highly recommend it to you*]. At first glance it uses many of the established tropes of z movies (apocalyptic landscape, isolated protagonist, attack from family member, danger to family etc) but articulates the question of identity in new way. Although its zombies are without will, via the protagonist it raises question of actions defining a person not the soul.

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This sense of existentialism is something I also find in *The Walking Dead*, which despite occurring in the midst of all this development of agency and reluctance, returns us to the zombie as Roman Ghoul. Kirkman's zombies have no power or ability to choose, they are an existential nightmare and exist either as pets, or just as one more threat of the decaying, postapocalyptic landscape. But here they are defined alongside – and arguably as secondary to – the threats of the natural world (starvation, exposure) and the dominant aspects of this zombie world are stillness and lack, as we can see here. They're reinforced either through repetition, or through wide angled, distant shots of an empty, silent landscape – even making a zombie attack distant and remote in this final birdseye shot from the first television episode.

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What's also interesting to me in *The Walking Dead* is that again the zombie has been made to stand for a different concern of the modern age (i.e. dwindling resources and lack), and is aligned with other natural threats. Books such as Mike Carey's *Girl with all the Gifts* and games such as *The Last Of Us* move in a similar direction and give us zombeism as a fungal infection from the natural world, and the post-apocalyptic world of *The Last of Us* emphasises a return to nature. It is a world where society has already broken down, and this is explored

further through our avatar Joel's occupation as a smuggler, operating outside of whatever law remains. Society's collapse is also emphasised through Ellie's comments on the remnants of the old world that they find, such as abandoned teenage diaries – as she asks, 'is this all they had to worry about??' Familial roles and identities are also explored through the relationship between Joel and Ellie, who becomes our surrogate daughter. The games medium is ideal for presenting the isolation that characterises the zombie genre and exploring issues around agency and identity. The game's prequel 'Left Behind' emphasises these themes even more, as Ellie and her friend Riley try and deal with the zombie outbreak and their response after both are bitten. They explore their identities by trying on joke shop masks and sharing a lesbian kiss, and finally decide (Q) 'Let's just wait it out, y'know, we can be all poetic and just *lose our minds* together.'

SLIDE Dialogues of the Dead

So although the zombie has been reborn in different guises at many moments, this does not always undo what has gone before, and there are a number of competing facets to the contemporary zombie. Based on what I've discussed so far, it seems that zombie texts always contain some sense of social breakdown that, in its strongest form, is apocalyptic. But even stories like *iZombie*, whose protagonists are hiding in everyday sight, emphasise the disconnect they feel from society. In The CW's *iZombie* Liv gives up a promising medical career to work in an autopsy lab so she can feed her need for brains. She calls off her engagement and estranges herself from her family. She's literally forced into the margins of society by her zombie existence.

Venables argues that zombie texts have within them Q a 'hidden wish to see the city fall' (2015: 222) – to escape the confines and pressure of modern life. To no longer be oppressed by capitalism or modern living, and to return to a culture that is physically immediate and based on heroic values (and this is further supported by Dan Hassler-Forest's work on *The Walking Dead* as a contemporary western and his other analyses of zombie capitalism and morality). For Venables social activity such as zombie walks and play represent this desire – to simply *be* the zombie and return to a kind of infancy: to be a creature of instinct

‘without thought, without care, without responsibilities’ (222). I have tried to show how the identity destabilisation is more complicated than this. Rather than simply reacting to or acting out the oppression and restrictions of modern life, I would argue that zombie texts and culture also give us the space to play with the contradictions that exist within contemporary identity discourse, as cultural activities such as zombie walks interrogate what it means to be human and how we might perform that. Finally, parody and play are apparent in a number of different guises, whether through social comment such as the paradoxical notion of a ‘zombiocracy’, or the satirical acknowledgement of an existing tradition.

The zombie evolution, then, might better be understood as a constant rebirth of these three key themes. Superficially each era’s zombie seems quite different, but perhaps the changes are only skin deep. To explore this further, I want to look at some recent adaptations that have taken the zombie in very different directions, in order to consider what happens when zombies shuffle across media and into new genres.

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AMC’s television adaptation of *TWD* broke new ground by moving zombies onto the small screen. It has often been heavily reliant on the visuals from the comic and the discourse surrounding the show, especially in its early days, promotes this. Multiple paratexts (Blu-Ray special features, Comic-Con panels, interviews with cast and crew) – all emphasise the fact that this show will give us the same as the comic.

SLIDE

And on the surface, this is true – we can see a number of replicated visuals here such as Dale’s RV, the prison, and Hershel’s farm.

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On its release, multiple sources framed the new show in all these terms, and drew attention to its similarity to the comic. Jewitt suggests this is an attempt to counter Stam’s ‘elegiac discourse of loss’, where the focus in adaptations is always placed on what has been lost in the process. Fidelity is used to give validity to *The Walking Dead*’s adaptation, and

even as a benchmark of perfection. However this leads to some confused claims about fidelity – here we see creator Robert Kirkman giving his blessing – but also struggling to say something coherent about fidelity...

[PLAY CLIP]

...so it's exactly the same, but also completely different...

SLIDE

Jewitt also draws attention to the number of visuals the show takes from established cinematic sources, in order to ground itself as a recognisable zombie text (as well as these examples, he also mentions *Shaun of the Dead* and *I am Legend*). But the most impactful scenes from AMC's show capture the isolation and distance of the comic...

SLIDE

...for example the images of Atlanta shown here. However, although the imagery is similar, throughout TWD the space of the page or screen is used very differently to create affect, as I want to demonstrate using two examples from the very first episode.

SLIDE

Pascal Lefevre states there are four key issues when adapting comics to film, and I want to use these points to highlight the changes made in the following two examples, before looking closely at the use made of page space by applying other comics theory. The first point here refers to need to add or delete material so I will focus initially on the latter three.

SLIDE

PLAY 18.20-19.00 (50s) and talk over top

First in this scene we can see Lefevre's third category, movement, being exploited. There are a number of different camera angles used which replicate Rick's disorientated senses – we cut from behind to in front, and are also given a listing point of view shot as he staggers. Even within each of these different shots the camera never stops moving.

The framing of the TV screen is used through the doorway, dangling cables and corridor walls, creating a sense of claustrophobia.

From the start there is eerie echoing nondiegetic sound and from behind the shut cafeteria door uncanny noises such as wheezing and laughing, which build to this crescendo of banging.

[PAUSE] This is supported by the other iconic horror movie tropes used, such as deep shadows throughout and these long-nailed hands that reach out for us.

SLIDE – comic page hospital

By contrast, the cafeteria door is opened in the comic – an alteration that enacts Lefevre’s first category. This is the second splash page of the issue, and takes place after a page turn, to increase suspense. Thus it relies upon page layout for impact, and use of visual perspective as noted by Stephen O’Donnell. He points out that the straight lines draw our attention to the vanishing point at the back of the room, and the presence of QUOTE ‘the large zombie on the left [...] outside the focus of the image makes him more terrifying’ and that both point of view and the page turn bring the reader closer to sharing Rick’s experience. (O’Donnell 2015: 49) END QUOTE

SLIDE Thierry Groensteen’s system of comics can help us explain this further. Groensteen takes the panel as the smallest narrative unit on the comics page and focuses on the page layouts and relationships between panels. He argues that comics syntax relies upon three concepts: spatio-topia, arthrology and braiding.

I mentioned his classification of panel types earlier, where he considers their form, area, and site – all of which affect how each panel relates to other panels.

His concept of arthrology then refers to the relationships between panels and can take two forms: restrained (the sequential relationship between panels) and general (the interrelationships between all panels).

Within a page's general arthrology, Groensteen also distinguishes between gridding (*quadrillage*) and braiding (*tressage*). Gridding is the way a page is broken up spatially, while braiding refers to the supplementary relationships between panels; for example unconnected panels may still be linked through an identical construction (i.e. same *mise en scene*, with differing content), a repetition of a single motif, etc.

SLIDE

We can use Groensteen's terms to identify the ways in which *The Walking Dead* comic creates impact and affect. In general its panels have a standard rectangular form although their area varies, which creates a more jagged rhythm by giving some moments more emphasis. For example, here on the right is the comic's fourth splash page of this issue; which follows the page on the left that showing Rick's entry into Atlanta.

On this left hand page the gridding mirrors Rick's journey into the city in its use of decreasing space. The widest and most empty space is that of the single panel that makes up the top horizontal row (and nearly half of this panel is white space above the city's skyline), which gives way to two panels on that second row that depict the more claustrophobic buildings, and the final row is then made up of three panels, in which we get our first glimpse of the city's zombies.

Braiding is also used within the general arthrology of the page (which links all panels) to emphasise stasis and silence. Rick's solitary speech bubble, positioned in the dead centre of the first panel, finds an echo in the 'Ruh?' of the zombie in panel 4, and the absence of any other devices to indicate sound accentuates the silence.

Rick's absence from the two framing panels in the bottom row also helps redefine the zombies pictured as a framing device (the two in the central panel literally frame his exit from it), and the two surrounding panels of the bottom row frame this central one. The following splash page (which again is placed after a page turn) continues this theme, as our view of Rick is framed by zombie bodies and a grasping silhouetted hand.

So applying Groensteen's theory reveals how the comic's layout reinforces a reading of Kirkman's zombies as just another part of the decaying and revenant landscape. They are an aspect of this still and silent world's dangers, but seldom its central peril. Instead, this page seems to suggest that isolation is the most dominant aspect, and the ultimate danger.

Let's compare this to the TV clip of the same scene...

SLIDE

PLAY CLIP and talk over.

Again, considering LeFevre's categories, I want to draw attention to the use of the screen – which is made up of lots of long shots within which Rick is the only moving figure. In contrast to the hospital scene, the camera barely moves at all – it tracks Rick for one shot we've just seen but overall it is static and each shot lasts a long time – I made a number of cuts here for reasons of time.

In terms of movement, Rick actually seems to be infectious – as here where he passes the still zombies and as the figures coincide they move too. *[pause while Rick speaks – x 2]* And from this point onwards the camera never stays still. *[pause until longshot of zombies in background]* As it moves here the car bonnets in the foreground seem to move and we can see the additional female zombie appear back right.

[pause while crow caws at tank]

Also the use of sound to signify the deserted landscape – horse's hooves, crickets, distant birds, the crows – these noises are all coded signifiers of isolation. *[pause as he goes round corner of tank]* Sound is also used to modify the pace, just like the moving camera – for example this emergent sound of the helicopter [PAUSE] and now his horse speeding up to a gallop...

[as Rick rounds the corner] And suddenly we have lots of sound, quiet and lowkey but also full and eerie. Want to stress that these altered elements (such as the sound effects and movement) are strongly coded cinematic signifiers. The unsteady, moving camera shots and use of slow motion here are disorientating and remind us of the hospital corridor. Being chased by zombies like this is also a cinematic trope, rather than the comic book (which has him suddenly surrounded).

SLIDE

We can also read this page using Charles Hatfield's critical model (2005) which puts forward the idea that comics narratives rely upon four main tensions: between code and code (that is, word and image); single image and image-in-series; narrative sequence and page surface; and reading-as-experience versus text-as-material-object.

Can see the use of tension between the visual and verbal codes to emphasise the isolation on these same pages, where Rick's words 'Here we are...' are juxtaposed against an image of an empty landscape.

The increasing sense of claustrophobia and danger as Rick enters Atlanta can also be analysed in terms of Hatfield's tension between sequence and page surface. While space, silence and emptiness dominate the surface of the page (via the white space of the first panel and the emphasis placed on it by the page layout), claustrophobia and danger are conveyed through the sequence, which shows an increasing number of zombies as we move from panel to panel.

Hatfield's tension between single image and image-in-series is also used here, as the alleyway Rick passes in the third panel is revealed in the fourth to contain a hidden zombie; the fifth image in turn reemphasises this by showing him continuing on his way, unaware.

Hatfield's final tension refers to the role of the reader, who creates the text-as-experience from the pages of the comic; incorporating paratextual knowledge and supplying bridging events between panels, pages, issues and so forth. We can see it in the use of page turns to create suspense and shock value, as I already discussed. In addition, it's interesting to note that collected editions of *TWD* do not include reprinted covers between issues (and the comic in general does not use any narration). These are both unusual absences, and therefore potentially – to the experienced comics reader – add to the uncanny nature of reading the comic.

SLIDE

My own critical approach to comics tries to use gothic literary criticism to develop comics theory. I wanted to try and create a critical approach to comics that considered each text holistically, since the narrative possibilities available are so limitless. So I argue that each comic's use of particular formal narrative strategies can be analysed in line with its events and themes, linking form and content. I group the narrative strategies of comics into three main areas, as here.

Firstly I consider temporality using the metaphor of haunting and the symbol of the crypt. Echoes of past and future are used to emphasize key moments or themes, and the architecture of the page layout uses deviation from a standard grid in pursuit of ornamentation and/or function.

So (at a very basic level) in this reading, I'd argue that the four splash pages we looked at have particular significance as they break the comic's standard page layout. In addition, they all show an isolated and non-standard example of speech (i.e. unformed noises or uncivilised swearing), stressing Rick's isolation and the silent, decaying landscape that has replaced an active functioning society.

I also consider the role of the reader and the transition between panels as an example of Derrida's crypt, *for although the reader creates and realizes the bridging events of the story these will never be viewed: their existence is known, but unseen, locked away in the gap between the explicit elements of the story*. The choice between what events to show – and not show – is therefore significant in constructing the comic. The black borders of *TWD* and the violence that takes place between panels in later issues are key in constructing the understated tone of the series.

Finally, I look at the visual attributes of the comic – its use of multiple points of view, co-existing storylines, alternate realities and overtly stylized art, all of which affect the appearance and content of the page. At numerous points in *TWD* we hold an uncanny viewpoint. Sometimes this is a disembodied and unassigned one, such as the unnatural viewpoint looking down on Rick's hospital bed as he wakes in the issue's first splash page. Sometimes it is the potential viewpoint of a zombie

character – for example this final splash page, where our view could be one of a zombie just rising to its feet, or the above sequence where we share a point of view with the zombie cyclist. The medium thus interrogates the reader's identity by offering them multiple, mobile and frequently conflicting viewpoints throughout the series – a suitable strategy for a zombie text that seeks to explore the predicament of humanity, the real walking dead.

Applying these three different theoretical approaches underlines that, although the two series rely on similar imagery and settings, they are distinct in their use of space. Each medium enhances its affect using its own distinct narrative strategies and signifiers, that rely on exploiting the space of the page versus the screen. So in AMC's *The Walking Dead*, the zombie is stylistically reborn from the Image comic: adding movement in place of the comics' reliance on surface and sequence.

SLIDE

Moving zombies across media into prose fiction has also altered our viewpoint of the archetype. Max Brook's books address the zombie threat in factual and historical terms, using the structures of the handbook or oral history. This formula is found in many classic gothic novels (such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*) that are made up of different character voices, each telling their own piece of the tale. It's also applied by Tony Burgess in *Pontypool Changes Everything* (1995) which weaves together dissociated points of view.

Historical influences are not only apparent in these novels' structure, as interwoven journals and letters are common to the nineteenth century novel, but also in content: *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies* is a mash up of Jane Austen's regency tale and a bloodthirsty zombie invasion. Cinema narratives have also followed this trend, recasting historical figures such as Queen Victoria and Abraham Lincoln as demon and vampire hunters respectively. There seems an attempt here to give the zombie a literary history and a sense of authenticity, even when this is done tongue-in-cheek.

Moving into prose fiction also means that perspective has been altered and the zombies themselves now frequently get to both act and speak. Just as Ann Rice moved the vampire from a silent subject to a narrating figure, now we have novels that are either focalised through a zombie protagonist or even narrated by the zombies in question. *Pontypool Changes Everything* is written in the third-person but drifts between multiple focalisers. Mike Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* is focalized through its child heroine Melanie – who just happens to be a zombie. In Corey Redekop's *Husk*, narrator and hero Sheldon Funk manages to rise to fame as a zombie actor (shades here of Anne Rice's rock star Vampire Lestat) in a book that is tinged with black comedy throughout. Finally, Isaac Marion's *Warm Bodies* (2010) is narrated by R, our anonymous hero, thus giving us access to all the thoughts and feelings that he struggles to verbalise

SLIDE: Warm Bodies

Marion's novel opens with these words from our zombie narrator and hero.

This opening paragraph encapsulates many of the themes that have been discussed so far. Identity is the central subject here, as constructed through memory. Even parody appears in the paradoxical phrasing ('I'm dead... but I've learned to live with it) and the final punch line ('you can't smile because your lips have rotted off'). The language used is revealing, as the similes of car keys and anniversaries situate him firmly in the realm of the human, as does R's apology to us since this is a human social custom. As the book goes on, the zombie society he participates in at many points takes on a grim mockery of human society: R is given a 'wife' and 'children', tries to learn to drive, and so on.

SLIDE

Warm Bodies (2010) and the comic book *iZombie* both share a similar premise that again brings the zombie closer to humanity: that eating brains gives zombies access to their victim's thoughts and memories and is thus a process of (essential) gratification (to hold on to their consciousness and humanity) rather than automatic consumption.

In Roberson and Allred's comic, Gwen Dylan is a revenant gravedigger who must eat a brain a month to retain her mental capacities and memories – a process that also involves her inheriting the victim's thoughts for a while and helping to fulfill their last wishes. Gwen's "ability" also makes her into an amateur detective, but this is not emphasized and the first arc sees her refusing to revenge a murder victim. Her narration does tend towards the film noir at times, as in the extract on the left here (which says Q 'and now I've got his voice in my head, screaming out for justice'), but it's mostly reflective and emotional. The comic also contains elements of zombie parody and a heavy dose of self-awareness: Volume 1 references *Shaun of the Dead* in this opening image on the right, where Gwen and her friends (Ellie the ghost and Scott the were-terrier) wear Halloween costumes that mock their own identities, while Gwen herself appears as Shaun. Identity is a key issue as Gwen's narration complains about Hallowe'en and masks, saying: Q 'There could be anyone hiding behind those things' and Q 'If they think I'm putting on a mask, they're nuts'.

SLIDE

The opening pages of the first issue also stress Gwen's disconnect from society as she and her fellow gravediggers are initially shown in background. They're separated stylistically from the mourners through pixelated art as we zoom in past the crowd on the first page, and then through the space of the double page spread on the second and third pages. The layout of the first panel across pages 2 and 3 leads the eye from the diggers down the sweep of the hill, and the colour contrast and gap between 'them' and 'us' is emphasised. In the bottom tier the words ironically comment on the pictures (Gwen talks about 'losing touch' over a shot of a hand sprinkling some dirt; 'burying the past' over a panel showing the coffin being interred; and 'not looking back' in the final panel where they are marching forward). So Hatfield's tensions and Groensteen's system both inform a reading of the page as being about separation, and its use of televisual tropes (pixels) also feeds into this.

SLIDE: izombie tv

Combining the zombie genre with detective fiction has also been used in other comics such as Tim Seeley and Mike Allred's *Revival*. But it is most apparent in the television series of *iZombie*, which was adapted for The CW channel by the team behind *Veronica Mars*. As a broadcast destination, The CW had a decent pedigree: already broadcasting *Supernatural* and *The Vampire Diaries*, along with comics properties such as *Arrow*, *Flash*, and *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*...

But despite this the series has made significant changes to the comic. Our protagonist is renamed Liv Moore (geddit) rather than Gwen; the primary setting has been changed so the graveyard is now the police morgue, the storytelling rules are bent (braineating leads to straight crime-solving now instead of a mixture of crime solving and last wish fulfillment), and all of the supernatural supporting characters have been replaced with far more normal, *Veronica Mars*-esque humans.

Speaking about the show, creators Thomas and Ruggiero gloss over the changes made, but acknowledge that their *iZombie* has more in common with a show like *Buffy* – and is a 'supernatural drama' containing an ironic acknowledgement of what has gone before and playing against the historical tradition (Mian). The majority of zombie references in the show are self-referential. Speaking of her need to eat brains, Liv explains: that if she doesn't, Q: 'I get dumber, meaner. I'm afraid if I let it go long enough I'll go all, y'know, George Romero'. When she loses her temper at the close of the first episode she describes herself as having gone, Q: 'Like 28 days later style with a side of rage bomb.'

However, I'd like to argue that The CW's *iZombie* doesn't just follow in the footsteps of *Buffy* and the zombie tradition, but relies on generic and gendered markers to situate itself as a teen drama. Just as *Veronica Mars* took the (traditionally male) detective formula and rearticulated it in a feminine form (the ongoing and open ended drama serial (Fiske 1989)), so does *iZombie* resituate the zombie figure within a number of established generic forms.

Firstly, there are multiple signifiers of the police procedural. Liv (who explains her zombie skills as psychic powers) is paired with Clive in an example of the 'buddy cop' film, with some standard dialogue, as when Liv exclaims Q 'we need to catch whoever did this and nail his ass to the wall!' This awareness and emphasis on genre comes from both inside and outside the series: Clive jokes the two of them could call themselves 'Cagney & Pasty', and in a panel at Comicon 2015 when discussing Liv's increasing alienation from her family in season 2 creator Rob Thomas joked, Q 'It's going to be a depressing art film next year'.

iZombie also flags its comics roots through a number of visual references, such as the animated credits shown on the left here, which are drawn by *iZombie* creator Mike Allred. There is also a panel-esque framing of certain shots using window frames, or the walls of the kill room in episode 1. But each time the comics pictures dissolve into strongly coded generic sequences taken from cinema and TV, as for example this sequence towards the end of episode 1 where Clive and Liv are trying to rescue two kidnapped Romanian escorts.

[PLAY]

Not only are the music and scenario standard police procedural, but visually we can see the type of gothic distortion identified by Stephen Falmer (e.g. size of his shadow), and the chiaroscuro lighting is pure film noir. There are strong key lights with a limited fill light, which exaggerates the contrast and gives a low key look. Hard lights are used which produce sharp edged shadows, and the angle chosen brings in the window frame which adds further contrast and a gothic silhouette.

SLIDE

Generic indicators are also taken from a number of television genres, for example as in this opening scene from Liv's 'ordinary' life before she became a zombie, which is strongly coded as a hospital drama both overtly and covertly.

[PLAY]

So we have the moving camera tracking the action, the use of tight shots for tension, Liv as the maverick/protégé who ignores instruction with success ('we should wait for Dr Jefferies'), and the use of her voice over, which evokes other dramas such as *Sex and the City* (not to mention *Veronica Mars*) in its cloying, self-obsessed content – as Liv says at one point: "There were parts of me that were dead before I was even a zombie"

SLIDE

Genre is also signalled covertly, for example in the use of shots like this after the credits, which find a parallel in the Seattle skyline that features prominently in every episode ever of shows such as *Grey's Anatomy*.

SLIDE

Finally and most obviously, this sequence from the close of episode 1, which includes not only a postmodern reference to zombie traditions, but also places the emphasis firmly on Liv's love life as she dwells on her relationship with ex-fiancé Major.

[PLAY]

The 'Confident walk into future' is a staple of any chick flick and has appeared numerous times at the close of shows like *Sex and the City*. Here however, it turns into a zombie lurch and Liv's inner monologue emphasises the importance of being true to herself – effectively, learning to 'love her zombie'.

I'd thus like to argue here that *iZombie* is strongly coded using television and cinematic genres, in order to normalise the zombie and make it, finally, one of us. As Liv says in voice over: 'I can choose to be a decent person.' And, later in the same episode: 'Embrace who you are'. Her zombieism is an affliction she has to disguise and manage, but it's no more than that.

SLIDE

In *iZombie*, then, I'd like to suggest that what we are finally seeing is the zombie as zombie. Liv isn't made to stand for any social issue or fear.

Instead her zombieism is something she just has to deal with while she tries to carry on with her life. And she's literally 'everyman' as she takes on the identity of each brain she consumes. Decades after the 1970s and 1980s gave us reluctant, humanised vampires in Anne Rice's novels and the J.M. De Matteis 1980s comic book series *I...Vampire!*, finally the zombie has been given the same treatment. Nina Auerbach explores this vampiric shift in her book *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, and the reluctant zombie revenant has now reached the same point. We could even suggest that Liv's impenetrable alabaster skin has more in common with this type of elegant, marble-featured vampire than the rotting zombie tradition. So in the comic and the CW's series, the zombie is no longer a changeable metaphor or variable signifier, but instead is reborn as a human condition, within a storyworld that nonetheless sustains its key tropes of social breakdown, identity and play.

[I Vampire was reborn as part of New 52 in 2011 - Andrew will have to work with John Constantine and Gotham's Dark Knight, Batman! Writer Joshua Hale Fialkov and artist Andrea Sorrentino mix the world horror with super-heroes]

SLIDE: CONCLUSION

In the first decade of the millennium zombies have seen a massive revival in popularity. Today I've tried to show that this is at least in part due to their symbolic significance (they have always been an adaptable sign) and suitability to whatever current crisis (political, religious, financial) we find ourselves in. But I have also tried to demonstrate the ways in which the zombie archetype has constantly rebirthed itself by drawing on other zombie incarnations – both past and future. I'd rather not view this as a simple evolution or linear timeline, but instead have tried to trace a dialogue between different texts and different media in order to identify an enduring set of criteria. Entertainment media have developed the zombie signifier in multiple and postmodern ways: creating a kind of post-zombieism where themes of social breakdown and apocalypse, identity and selfhood, and parody and awareness dominate. Our most recent zombie incarnations even manage to transcend this and have taken us beyond metaphor to a point where the zombie simply *is* – just one more thing to deal with. Our zombies are continuing to be reborn in every text: not just from the grave, but also across genres and media.