

REVIEW

The Ethical Zombie: A Review of *The Walking Med: Zombies and The Medical Image*

The Walking Med: Zombies and The Medical Image. Edited by Lorenzo Servitje and Sherryl Vint, Foreword by Steven C. Schlozman. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016, 264 pages, 55 b&w illustrations, ISBN: 978-0271077123

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This review offers insight into the collection *The Walking Med: Zombies and The Medical Image* edited by Lorenzo Servitje and Sherryl Vint (Penn State Press, 2016) by putting it into the context of George A Romero's recent death (16 July 2017), and the lasting legacy his work has had on the social and political efficiency of the zombie. In particular this review will trace a shift to a more medicalised version of the zombie in contemporary film, television, and especially in comics, which in turn raises numerous questions regarding the neoliberalisation of healthcare, the limitations of so-called 'lifesaving' treatments, the status of the ill, disabled, and elderly, and the pressures of working within a medical environment, showing how the zombie is used a metaphoric tool to educate, undermine assumptions, and pose ethical questions.

Keywords: ethics; Graphic Medicine; film; science; zombies

The recent death of George A Romero (4 February 1940 – 16 July 2017), cult director of the *Living Dead* trilogy (1968, 1978, 1985), has brought back into the spotlight the sharp social commentary that underlies the figure of the zombie, as well as highlighting the enormous influence his work has had on contemporary representations of the zombie across all mediums such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), *World War Z*, and of course the hugely popular *Walking Dead* TV series based on the Robert Kirkman and Charlie Adlard comic series of the same name (2010-present). Romero's lasting legacy will be the way in which his films have been interpreted as

subtly addressing a wide range of social issues in 1960s America including racism, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, patriarchal society, and mass consumerism, which still resonates with the political and social landscape today.

Notable was Romero's casting of African-American Duan Jones (2 February 1937 – 22 July 1988) as the heroic lead in his first film *Night of The Living Dead* in 1968. Although Romero himself claimed that this was not a conscious decision on his part, and that Jones had simply given the best audition, Jones understood the racial implications of his role, discussing the films themes with Romero during the shooting and even suggesting the films ending, in which his character is killed by a group of white zombie hunters that closely resemble a lynch mob. The racial implications of such a scene are such that director Jordan Peele recently acknowledged the huge influence *NOTD* had on his racially charged breakout directorial debut *Get Out* (2017).

Whilst this racialised history is acknowledged in the introduction to Lorenzo Servitje and Sherryl Vint's *The Walking Med* (2016; **Figure 1**), particularly with the

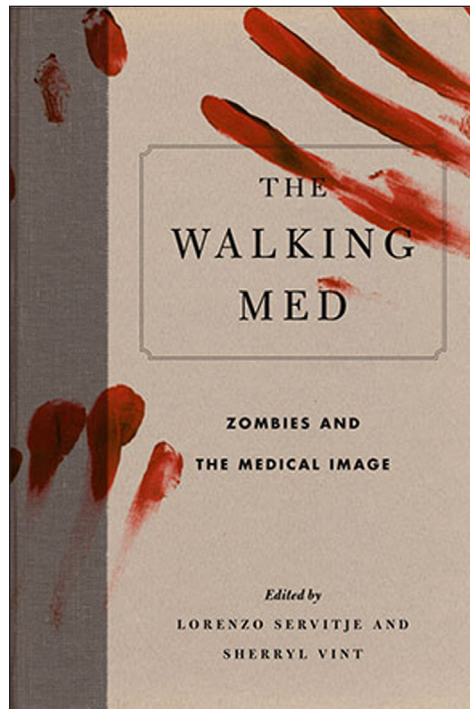


Figure 1: Book Cover of *The Walking Med. Zombies and the Medical Image*. Edited by Lorenzo Servitje and Sherryl Vint, Penn State University Press, 2016. © The Pennsylvania University Press.

zombie's roots in Haitian voodoo culture and the Haitian slave uprising of 1804, the focus of this edited collection of essays from Penn State Press, published as part of their Graphic Medicine collection, is twofold. Firstly it traces the shift in the causes of zombification from the supernatural to the biological realm of viral infection and human scientific interference, and secondly posits the zombie as a stand in for the figure of the ill, disabled, or aging patient under the shadow of neoliberalism. This focus seems especially pertinent given the recent attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act in America (Flynn 2017), the underfunding and privatization by stealth of the National Health Service in the UK (Davis, Lister and Wrigley 2015, El-Gingihy 2015, Tallis 2013), as well as the recent crisis in social care. Such a perspective is useful for cutting through any initial skepticism that might paint such a link as tenuous and trivial at best, grounding the zombie in a lived reality.

In the opening essay "Don't Point That Gun At My Mum: Geriatric Zombies," Gerry Canavan considers the zombie as a stand in for an aging population that has resulted from medical advancements but has led to a rise in illnesses such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, the symptoms of which- slow-moving bodies, forgetfulness, violent outbursts, and changes in personality-closely resemble the effects of zombification. Canavan suggests that the frequent trope in zombie texts of having to kill a loved one in order to save them from the horrors of infection, echoes witnessing the gradual erosion of a family members sense of self due to dementia, brings to light ethical debates concerning assisted suicide for those with severe disabilities or terminal conditions. As Canavan himself suggests, the zombie, on a deeper level, is 'actually about reproducing and/or critically reexamining cultural narratives about who in real-world society is "killable" and who is not' (Canavan 2016: 17).

In Tully Barnett and Ben Kooyman's essay "The Cure Has Killed US All: Dramatizing Medical Ethics through Zombie and Period Fiction Tropes in *The New Deadwardians*" this question is figured along class lines. In this series the upper classes develop a "cure" for The Restless Curse which inadvertently transforms them into The Young, passionless immortal vampires, who still are in control of their cognitive faculties. Those who are neither Young nor Restless –the lower middle and working classes, are known as the Bright, and are regulated to a special segregated zone where they

run the risk of becoming zombies themselves. Barnett and Kooyman note that this segregation harks back to the view of the East End of London and its working class inhabitants as being diseased (Barnett and Kooyman 2016: 57). Access to the cure is restricted to the upper classes, and although the comic is set during an alternative Edwardian timeline, it echoes the current healthcare debate in America, something that is picked up again in Kari Nixon's contribution to the collection "Viral Virulence, Postmodern Zombies, and the American Healthcare Enterprise in the Antibiotic Age". As well as the inequality of access to healthcare, Nixon's essay deals with the moral fallout of the zombie narrative, and the questionable decisions that must be made in the name of survival. In the comic series *Crossed* (2008–2010) a group of adults kill the children they are with in order to quicker escape the articulate, intelligent, and sexually depraved zombies that threaten them. This can be seen as a multifaceted metaphor that can be directed at the American healthcare system, the general callousness of politics, the potential abuses of medical science, and the increasing erasure of human decency.

This last point reflects a growing trend in zombie texts, first introduced by Romero, and resurfacing again in the slow shuffling zombies of *The Walking Dead*, in which the humans actually pose the biggest threat to themselves. This turns the dehumanisation of the zombie on its head by suggesting that the more the humans have to do in order to survive, the less human they become. The kind of apocalyptic scenarios that occur in the zombie genre, according to Nixon, encourages 'the viral spread of our own vicious impulses and has duly rendered *us* the unthinking, shambling zombies incapable of feeling affect' (Nixon 2016: 48).

These essays, and indeed this collection as a whole, mark a sympathetic turn to the zombie that is reflected in contemporary film and TV which are told from the point of view of the zombie such as *Warm Bodies* (2013), *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017), and *iZombie* (2015-present). Whilst interactive zombie experiences, theme park rides, computer games and merchandise can be seen on one hand as ironic given the shopping mall setting of Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), the zombie as commercial entity reveals something deeper. Stanford literary scholar Angela Videgar's work tracing our obsession with zombies to the nuclear onslaught of Hiroshima, the very

real fear of human extinction, and a “what if” brand of survivalism (Geiser 2013), falls short of explaining the popularity of zombie walks and the fact that we often identify much more readily with the zombies themselves rather than the survivors. As Rick Grimes famously states, “We are the walking dead!” (Kirkman, Moore and Adlard 2006: 22; see also Sommers 2016). Canavan sees this statement as being more literally about the inevitability of decline and death, but it also points to the zombie as being a means through which an empathetic identification with Otherness can be achieved. The repetitive use of visual mirroring between Rick and the zombies in *The Walking Dead*, reflected upon by Nixon, is a perfect example of this at work.

Michael Green, Daniel George, and Darryl Wilkinson’s essay “The Walking Med: Zombies, Comics, and Medical Education” considers another form of zombification, the extreme pressures of life as a medical student. Green, whose course teaching his students to create comics based on their experiences forms the basis for this essay, admits to being skeptical of the theme of this collection at first, stating that he is neither a fan of the zombie nor sees any link to medicine. It soon becomes apparent, however, that this is not the case. Without prompting them, the zombie becomes a regular feature, whether explicitly or not, of his student’s comics, being used to express themes such as isolation, the erasure of empathy, the loss of human connection, and fear of becoming a fatigued member of the bureaucratic herd.

This last theme is something that takes on added relevance when placed against the backdrop of the ongoing junior doctor contract dispute and dangerous levels of understaffing in the National Health Service. Therefore this essay becomes a means of articulating the way in which the zombie alerts Green to potential problems and solutions within medical training, commenting that ‘it is nevertheless alarming that these students see medical school as something to be endured rather than an opportunity for growth and development.’ (Green and Wilkinson 2016: 99).

In her essay “Zombie Toxins: Abjection and Cancer’s Chemicals” Juliet McMullin explores the liminal life and death nature of cancer, and the chemotherapy that is used to treat it. Looking at the comics of Carol Tyler, Miriam Engelberg, Marisa Acocello Marchetto, and Brian Fies, McMullin evokes Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject when describing the figures of the corpse and the zombie. She describes these

figures as ones that represent the breaking down of boundaries between life and death, of “death infecting life,” (McMullin 2016: 106) but also, as this collection has made clear, the boundaries between self and other. Abjection and Freud’s concept of the uncanny [1919] draw remarkable parallels to the figure of the zombie. Freud drew inspiration for his idea from horror tropes in literature such as the figure of the double, living dolls, eyeless figures etc. The uncanny for Freud is an eerie sensation of something being familiar and yet strange at the same time and he saw this sensation as a manifestation of repressed desires and fears (Freud 1969: 218–253). The zombie’s mindless violence can therefore be seen as a kind of secret wish fulfillment on our part.

McMullin goes further in this essay by attributing this peculiar life and death, self and other doubling to the realm of the disembodied, firstly to cancer itself, as a foreign force that attacks from within, and then to chemotherapy’s ‘zombie toxins’ (McMullin 2016: 114) which are both treatment and poison at the same time, killing off good cells as well as bad. In looking at Carol Tyler’s three part graphic memoir of uncovering her father’s traumatic war memories, McMullin notes the peculiar personal, as well as collective, history of chemicals that are meant to cure us, from their use as weapons in World War II, to their ready availability to her father in his building work, with the nurse joking that instead of disposing of them, Carol should have just brought them to the hospital for use.

Dan Smith’s essay “The Anorexic as Zombie Witness: Illness and Recovery in Katie Green’s *Lighter Than My Shadow*” also taps into the life and death nature of the zombie whilst filtering it through the lens of warfare. Discussing Katie’s detreating body as being at the threshold of subjectivity, life and death, Smith draws comparisons to the figure of the *Muselmann* the skeletal Holocaust survivor, a dead/not yet dead witness, who destabilises and at the same time foregrounds the very act of witnessing. Smith goes on to suggest that it is the act of creation for Katie, which is visually referred to throughout the comic both literally and metaphorically, which re-inscribes agency to her act of witnessing and allows her to become human again. Whilst this is an astute observation, it fails to take into account the limitations of such a cathartic view of creation.

Finally Sarah Juliet Lauro in her essay “Blurred Lines and Human Objects: The Zombie Art of George Pfau” considers the usefulness of corpses, in particular how their use as anatomical models to further the advancement of medical science. She suggests that the corpse is usually viewed as a broken object, a sign of medicine and indeed our bodies failure, but by applying Heidegger’s Tool Analysis and Brown’s Thing Theory she shows the way in which corpses acquire new functions, and perform a kind of labour, ‘as cautionary tale, as symbol of martyrdom, as relic’ (Lauro 2016: 150) and indeed, as teaching tool. She then draws comparisons between classical examples of medical illustration, in which corpses seem to be peculiarly alive presenting their organs to the enlightened viewer, to George Pfau’s reimagining of this images as zombies, before suggesting that this acts as a pathway into a kind of ‘(n)otology’ (Lauro 2016: 166), an appreciation of and interaction with the nonliving thing in order to better understand life itself.

The zombie in this collection therefore, is transformed from a mindless, passive figure, into an active metaphor and a critical tool with which to explore the limitations of scientific and medical knowledge. In particular the zombie becomes an ethical position with which to address a multitude of political issues within medical science. This collection posits the zombie as a shared metaphor that evolves over time in response to historical and cultural stimuli. As Michael Green states in his chapter, metaphors are “good to think with,” (Green, George and Wilkinson 2016: 99) are good tools for expressing the inexpressible, and therefore zombies are good to think with too.

This collection also demonstrates the zombie as a practical and educational tool, as in Sherryl Vint’s chapter on the Centre for Disease Control’s comic (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention 2015) detailing how to prepare for and survive a zombie apocalypse. This topic turns a seemingly tenuous and trivial subject into one that can not only fit into the broader aims of Graphic Medicine, but can give a fresh perspective on the genre/discipline as a whole, as well as the topics explored within, undermining and critiquing any potential prejudices and assumptions. Beautifully presented, with numerous illustrations and figures, this collection will make the

reader approach the zombie with fresh eyes, applying it to contemporary social and political issues in such a way that would have made Romero proud.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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