

Theorizing Zombiism
(University College Dublin, 25-27 July 2019)



Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the zombie is its intriguing blankness, the dead eyes and lifeless visage that appear to signify – simultaneously – both everything and nothing. As Leo Braudy has argued in his recent study of fearful creatures and mythic monsters, the zombie, unlike more articulate horror icons – Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde or Dracula, for instance – has no voice, no mind, no selfhood.¹ The zombie as animate corpse is an identificatory void into which we can pour our own fears and anxieties. The blankness of the zombie is an enticingly empty screen onto which an abundance of diverse meanings can be projected. It is this multivalent potential that has resulted in the zombie emerging, and re-emerging, as an icon of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century horror. Over the course of the past hundred years or so, the fictive zombie has embodied a host of different ideas about race, identity, nationhood, consumerism, and even sexuality. Yet, beyond the imaginative space of film and fiction, the zombie has also infiltrated the realms of biology, the social sciences, and finance. Zombiism has been used to describe everything from the behaviour of parasite-infected

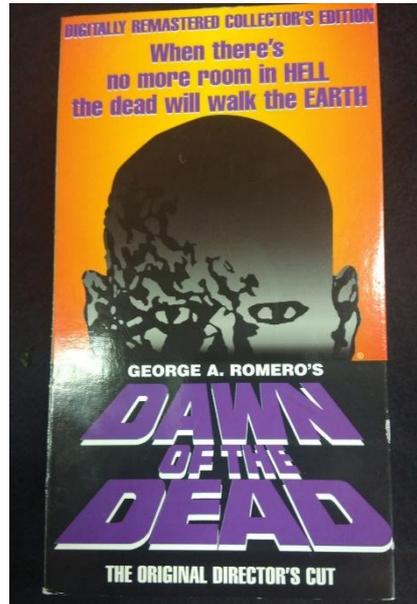
¹ Leo Braudy, *Haunted: On Ghosts, Witches, Vampires, Zombies, and Other Monsters of the Natural and Supernatural Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 105.

animals to insolvent financial institutions that continue to trudge along, artificially re-animated long after their natural death, with the aid of government support.

The linguistic, textual, and conceptual ubiquity of the zombie is an inescapable facet of contemporary culture, and, as such, it now seems like an opportune moment to bring together a diverse group of researchers under the thematic banner of ‘theorising zombiism’. Taking place in University College Dublin, from 25 to 27 July 2019, *Theorizing Zombiism* explored the cultural evolution of the zombie and its meaning across various disciplinary sites. In doing so, the conference engaged with a range of conceptual frameworks for articulating and analysing the multivalence of the zombie, figuring its resonance through theoretical paradigms derived from critical theory, philosophy, African-American studies, gender studies, queer studies, ecocriticism, and linguistics. That so many potential readings can accrue around these decaying, animate cadavers suggests that the zombie is the emblematic figure for our times, an imaginative point of investigation whose excavation uncovers a plethora of meanings and readings. With the inherent multiplicity of the living dead firmly in mind, *Theorizing Zombiism* aimed to explore and expand the potential of Zombie Studies as a field of enquiry. Moreover, this conference served to establish a scholarly community within which the zombie could feature as a serious and fertile subject for future study.

The first day of the conference began enthusiastically with a brief introductory address by conference co-organiser Scott Eric Hamilton, who reminded delegates of the mutability of the zombie and its capacity to infect and transform different disciplinary structures. The inaugural panel began with an exploration of multinational zombiism, with Miranda Corcoran (myself!) discussing Italian director Lucio Fulci’s appropriation of American gothic conventions; Amy Bride analysing the connections between Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* (2003-19) and the 2008 financial crisis; and Konstantinos Kerasovitis framing Greece as a ‘zombie colony’. This traditional panel was followed by a decidedly more unconventional, essentially interactive project led by the group #Zombiesinhe. Conceived as a means to interrogate the growing corporatisation of the modern university (‘Higher Education’), the group asked participants to split into teams and draw their vision of a ‘zombie leader’. Prizes were awarded for the zombie leader who best exemplified the bureaucratic, goal-orientated mindset that plagues the contemporary HE sector. Although humorous, and a lot of fun, this exercise raised important questions as to

how the zombie metaphor might be employed to express the concerns of third-level teachers and researchers.



1996 VHS copy of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) (image courtesy of speaker Harvey O'Brien).

The third panel of the day saw a return to a more traditional format, featuring three speakers whose papers explored some contemporary zombie media. The first speaker, Ailise Bulfin, initiated her discussion of Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) by drawing attention to the semiotic fluidity of the zombie. Bulfin expounded on how this text functions as a critique of the neoliberal economy through its focus on the consumption habits of an over-resourced, over-leisured, educated urban class. At the same time, Bulfin noted that it is possible to uncover a submerged ecological commentary within the novel, as Whitehead engages with the apocalyptic potential of global warming through his characterisation of zombies in decidedly meteorological terms: a drizzle or blizzard, depending on their number. Dara Downey's paper followed with an analysis of zombie television shows *Z-Nation* (2014-18) and *iZombie* (2015-19), which employed René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) in order to disentangle the various complex ways in which these shows collapse – and attempt to reaffirm – the boundary between the sacred and the profane, the pure and the polluted. The panel concluded with Sarah Cleary's eco-critical analysis of *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014), entitled 'Mother Nature Bites Back'. Here, Cleary discussed how the zombie could be viewed as an eco-critical entity, an anthropomorphic representation of nature reclaiming the earth.

The next session was a two-person panel centred around the subject of televisual zombies. Stacey Abbott spoke about the popular series *iZombie*, emphasising how the show was defined by notions of hybridity. As Abbott observed, not only does the series present the zombie as a hybrid figure – both dead and alive, human and non-human – but is, in itself, a hybrid entity, being at an example of both horror and police procedural. Abbott's paper was followed by Lorna Jowett's presentation, 'I Got a New Kill Poncho: *Santa Clarita Diet* and the Pleasures of Zombie Embodiment'. Analysing the Netflix series *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-19), Jowett argued that the depiction of zombiism present within the show is unique in its decision to celebrate the abject rather than representing it as monstrous. The day's discussions concluded with a screening of David Freyne's 2017 film *The Cured*, a recent release, the inclusion of which in the programme highlighted the relevance of zombie fiction as an ever-evolving genre as well as showing, through its Dublin setting, a distinctly Irish interpretation of this genre.

The second day of the conference opened with Rain Chen's analysis of father figures in recent 'blockbuster' zombie films like *I am Legend* (2007) and *World War Z* (2013). In contrast to the earlier films of George A. Romero, in which zombified children serve to queer the American family, Chen argued that post-9/11 zombie texts posit a more heteronormative, even conservative, understanding of the family dynamic. While avoiding the establishment of a binary between these texts, Chen traced some of the ways in which representations of family have evolved over a half century of zombie cinema. This was followed by a fascinatingly original paper by Caroline West on the subject of sexuality, zombies, and pornography. While looking at some of the ways in which the zombie archetype has been adapted for erotic entertainment, West focused primarily on the manner in which discourses about zombies often parallel discourses on pornography. In particular, West noted that both were defined by anxieties about bodily fluids, excess, and contagion. Finally, Deirdre Flynn explored zombiism as a metaphor for Ireland's post-Celtic-Tiger economic crash. Flynn analysed Sarah Davis-Goff's dystopic novel *Last Ones Left Alive* (2019) and traced how the novel's evocation of a post-apocalyptic Ireland chimed with the post-Celtic-Tiger iconography of abandoned houses and ghost estates, ambitious developments left to rot in the wake of economic catastrophe.

The next panel investigated the symbolic and linguistic significance of the zombie. The first paper, a high original analysis by Johnathan Jacob Moore, framed the zombie in terms of Afro-pessimism, and discussed Whitehead's *Zone One* as a representation of social

death. Moore argued that, rather than being merely an incubator of white guilt, the zombie speaks to how the maintenance of so-called ‘civil society’ depends on anti-Black violence. The second speaker, Andrew Ferguson, also engaged with Whitehead’s novel, while simultaneously incorporating texts and iconography as diverse, and seemingly incongruous, as the Mavis Beacon typing programme. This game taught players to disassociate words from meaning in a manner analogous to how the multivalent, meaning-laden zombie can be seen to consume metaphors. For Ferguson, the zombie – and its myriad cultural manifestations – are unique in large part due its refusal to signify. The final paper on this panel took a wholly linguistic approach to the zombie, as Linda Flores Ohlson examined the use of the third-person pronoun in zombie fiction. Flores Ohlson noted how pronominal vacillation when referring to zombies reflects the ambiguous nature of the creature. In many zombie texts, terms such as ‘he’ or ‘she’ are used to describe humans, suggesting closeness and attachment, while the designation ‘it’ is commonly applied to the zombie as a signifier of detachment and dehumanisation. Consequently, this linguistic othering renders the zombie entirely inhuman, a body that can be destroyed without compunction.



One of the many zombie Lego figurines given out to delegates.

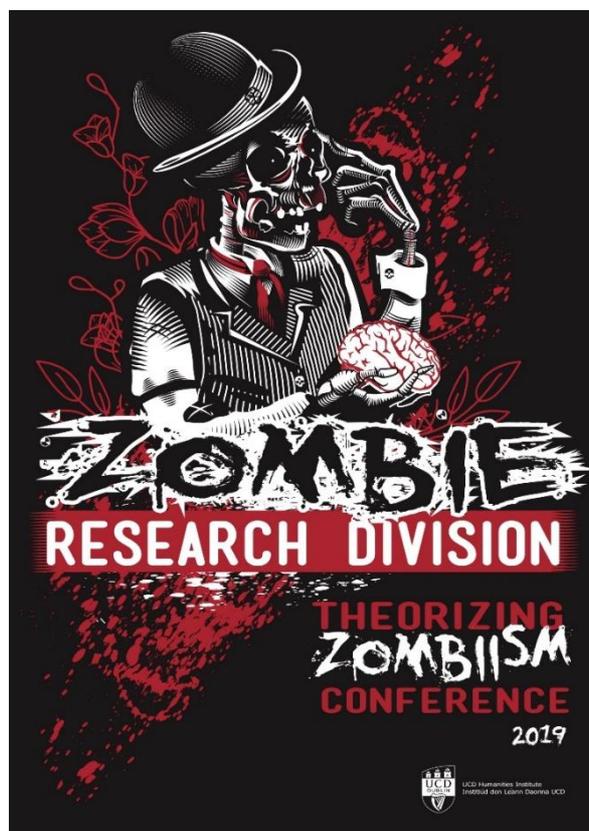
Panel Seven constructed the zombie as a multimedia or transmedial phenomenon whose form is scattered across a host of expressive media, from film and television to video games and music. The first speaker, Conor Jackson, explored the popular video-game series *Dead Rising*

(2006-17), looking specifically at how the game's corpulent zombies and conspicuous fast-food advertisements satirise topics such as consumption, over-consumption, and obesity in contemporary America. In addition to framing obese and overweight bodies problematically as grotesque spectacles, the game – Jackson contended – also presents us with the prospect of a food apocalypse as a means of satirising the postmillennial ubiquity of fast food. In particular, the game posits a zombie outbreak which is the result of experimental livestock-breeding techniques undertaken with the aim of increasing supply to the fast-food industry. The second paper, by Alexander Carpenter, centred around music, politics, and ideology in Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005). Carpenter's talk analysed the role of music in suggesting the possibility of a growing class consciousness in the wake of a zombie apocalypse. However, rather than stimulating a revolutionary ideology amongst the remaining humans, Carpenter argues that, by unpacking the film's musical cues, we uncover the germ of a class consciousness taking root within the decidedly working-class zombie Big Daddy. In the final paper of this panel, Jamie A. Thomas discussed the politics of representation in *Resident Evil* (1996-2020) and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). Comparing the use of Swahili in the music of *Get Out* – where it is used to reflect the struggles of the African diaspora – with the often-inaccurate use of African dialects in *Resident Evil 5* (2009), Thomas highlights how the latter appropriated African languages to create a sense of geographically ambiguous, exoticised Otherness.

The eighth panel featured Scott Eric Hamilton's excellent analysis of Mike Carey's *The Boy on the Bridge* (2017), which explored how the narrative of survival in zombie texts serves as a fictive mode of self-de-extinction, an imaginative apology for humanity's destruction of the planet. Hamilton's paper was followed by Catherine Pugh's discussion of zombies and combat. Pugh utilised Adam Lowenstein's conception of the allegorical moment to explore how zombie texts often allow history and horror to collide in their portrayal of the military. The last paper on this panel was Poppy Wilde's immensely engaging discussion of zombies, deviants, and the right to non-human life. Wilde discussed the possibility that neoliberalism has entered a zombie phase, trudging along as it continues to decompose. The day ended with a social event at a local pub, which featured a ukulele band playing zombie-themed covers of popular songs.

The first panel of Day Three began with Emma Tonkin's highly innovative exploration of the zombie flash-mob phenomenon, and it continued with Peter Wright's discussion of the relationship between zombie narratives and technological development. Wright's insightful

paper was centred around his belief that the visual style of the 1980s Zombie Cycle (films like *Day of the Dead* (dir. by Romero, 1985) and *Return of the Living Dead* (dir. by Don O'Bannon, 1985)) was uniquely suited to the incapacity of VHS and analogue television to reproduce high-resolution images. For Wright, the rotting zombie body aligns both materially and conceptually with the process of VHS-tape degradation. The panel concluded with Lucie Groetzinger's fascinating discussion of eco-zombies in French comics. Groetzinger convincingly demonstrated that French graphic narratives imagined a vegetal post-humanity as a means of commenting upon French politics and environmental policies.



Conference poster art

Karma Waltonen opened Panel Ten with a discussion of *Shaun of the Dead* (dir. by Edgar Wright, 2004) and apocalyptic change. She explored the concept of change on numerous levels and analysed how the film employs a host of repeated characters and phrases, which emerge again and again, associated with different meanings or contexts. The second paper, presented by Conor Heffernan, was a highly original exploration of the relationship between the fitness industry and zombie fiction. Heffernan noted how texts like *Zombieland* (dir. by Ruben Fleischer, 2009) stress the importance of physical fitness as a means of securing

survival during a zombie apocalypse. As such, Heffernan maintained that zombies are often used as a motivating force to promote rigid conceptions of masculinity and femininity. This intersection of zombiism and fitness also extends to the real world, beyond the screen, where zombie apocalypse-themed workouts have become surprisingly popular. The final paper on this panel was presented by Sandra Aline Wagner and explored the recent phenomenon of the zombie mashup novel. Beginning with well-known postmodern zombie novels like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (dir. by Seth Grahame-Smith, 2009), Wagner then moved on to evaluate a distinctly German manifestation of the zombie mashup, a parody of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) that figures Werther as a Romantic, or romantic, zombie.

Panel Eleven featured an innovative paper by Jack Fennell that excavated the zombie presence in Irish weird fiction. In these texts, Fennell claimed, the distinction between corporeal and non-corporeal fails to take place, and the Irish undead are at once spectres and reanimated corpses. The second paper, by Mia Harrison, explored the concept of the chimera zombie. Linking biomedical science and literary criticism, Harrison argued that texts such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (dir. by Jim Sharman, 1975) challenge conventional constructions of birth and gestation, and link to real-world cases of foetal maternal micorchimerism, in which cells are transferred in pregnancy. Harrison claimed that such cases force us to rethink the function of the maternal body and its relationship to the infant it carries. The last paper on this panel was Andrea Adhara Gaytán Cuesta's wonderful discussion of the role of zombies in Mexican culture. From zombie walks to Day-of-the-Dead celebrations and the popular El Santo films (1958-82), Cuesta argued most convincingly that Mexican zombies are allegorical figures embodying the nation's social decomposition. The final panel closed off the conference with Harvey O'Brien's insightful analysis of Sang-ho Yeon's *Trian to Busan* (2016), and Chera Kee's exploration of comics censorship and Marvel's 'not-quite-zombie' Zuvembies. The conference ended with a wonderful discussion by novelists Scott Kenemore – author of *Zombie Ohio* (2011) and *Zombie-in-Chief* (2020) – and Sarah Davis-Goff, whose incredible novel *Last Ones Left Alive* featured heavily in panel discussions of zombies in literature over the course of the three-day conference.

In sum, the zombie is a fundamentally dynamic creature. In ever-shifting guises, it appears in horror, comedy, romance, and even erotica. It is a metaphor for capitalism, neoliberalism, racial inequality, economic disaster, and environmental catastrophe. *Theorizing Zombiism* succeeded as a conference because of the many creative ways its participants drew on the conceptual multivalence of the zombie. The conference created a

space in which the multiplicity of meanings that have attached themselves to the living dead could coalesce, interact, and form new paradigms through which the zombie, as a cultural archetype, could be located. *Theorizing Zombiism* was an extremely productive event, stimulating dialogue and debate, as well as promising new avenues for scholarly enquiry.

Miranda Corcoran