

ZOMBIES

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Zombie as metaphor

There is a long tradition in western thinking of regarding figurative language as antithetical to knowledge. New theoretical paradigms emerging in the later decades of the twentieth century went some way to redressing this, but the methodological barbed wire of the social sciences still gets in the way of understanding the centrality of metaphors to social life, despite a large body of anthropological writing on the way lived experience is mediated by metaphor. An antiquated view of metaphor persists often taking the form of criticising arguments that deploy metaphors as resting on 'mere allegory'. But the 'mere allegory' of zombie is hard at work in the social world.

The idea of figurative language as a deviant use of language without cognitive value has its origins in Aristotle's (1996: 34) *Poetics*, where metaphor is defined as 'the application of a noun which properly belongs to something else. The transference being either from genus to species, from species to genus, or from species to species or by analogy.' Conceived as mere literary devices and creative embellishments, the slipperiness of metaphors was seen to get in the way of knowledge. The idea of metaphor as an obfuscating use of language reached a high point with the empiricist philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and their attempts to create an objective language of knowledge unmediated by subjective interference. Locke, as de Man argues, conceived of figurative language as a disruptive power with the potential to subvert the congruency between words and things. Locke attempted to relegate the figure to 'a disruptive scandal, like the appearance of a real woman in a gentleman's club where it would only be tolerated as a picture, preferably naked (like the image of Truth) framed and hung on the wall' (de Man, 1984: 197). He tried to develop a theory of language in which simple ideas and ideas of substance represented real entities in the world but, as de Man argues, rather than mapping the entities of the world in an

identical relationship, Locke's 'simple ideas' are in fact figures, slipping in an endless series of translations.

Since the publication of I.A. Richards's (1936) and Max Black's (1954) seminal works on metaphor many scholars have argued that scientific language, presumed to be language at a literal zenith, is in fact both figurative at the level of the sentence and at the level of narrative employment. Johnson (1981), Binkley (1974), Cohen, (1976) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and that even the most literal expressions rely on conventional metaphors, such as the use of spatial metaphors in everyday language. Perhaps most importantly, Ricoeur (1978) argued that metaphor not only conveys meaning but is also possibly the principle behind meaning. In other words, metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have pointed out, are what we live by.

Scholars are not exempt from this. As metaphor, zombie has colonised the natural, social and human sciences. In entomology, zombies are viruses that invade insects and compel them to act in suicidal ways (Kuchment, 2011). In biology, they are parasites that compel their hosts to behave in ways adventurous to their resident zombies (Rozen, 2011). In astronomy, a star becomes a zombie by appearing to die in a supernova while continuing to live on (Nature, 2012). In neurology, neural networks and pathways cause unconscious and automatic forms of zombie behaviour (Crick and Koch, 2001; Ratliff, 2005). In IT, computers are zombies hijacked by hackers and set loose in the corporate world (Spring, 2005). In economics, zombies proliferate faster than marks in the Weimar Republic (Domn, 2012). There are zombie banks, zombie economic theories and zombie policies (Quiggin, 2011). (Obama's health care reform is 'like a zombie out of *Night of the Living Dead*' (Miller cited in *The Economist*, 2010: para. 7)). In fact, the entire US economy has become a zombie. According to some economists, the US government's economic bailout of private businesses in the

aftermath of the world financial crisis reanimated businesses that should have been allowed to die, creating a zombie economy falsely animated by government largesse and causing havoc in society as real businesses do battle with their zombie competitors.⁵ In this context, zombie carries the association of an unnatural intervention in a natural death. Death has been thwarted leading to a threatening state of disequilibrium as the living battle for survival with the undead. But the US economy is also 'zombie-like' because of its stalled recovery (Censky, 2012). It won't get up and walk – though this is exactly what zombies do. In Japan, however, zombie firms stagger back to life (Fukada and Nakamura, 2011). Democrats are zombies but so too are Republicans (Nature, 2012). In the social sciences, the zombie metaphor catapulted into fame when Ulrich Beck (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) argued that the sociological imagination was haunted by zombie categories, concepts derived from experiences of nineteenth-century modernity that refused to die. But Beck's concept of zombie categories failed to control the metaphor's spread – even amongst social scientists. Daniel Drezner (2011) recast contemporary international relations theory through the lens of the zombie threat. As he explains, zombie apocalyptic scenarios have more in common with threats posed by terrorists, hackers and tsunamis than the state-centric theories of standard international relations. In the health sciences, the construction of people with Alzheimer's disease as zombies has become a serious matter for health workers (Behuniak, 2011), which the *Journal of Clinical Nursing* complicates by publishing a clinical article on how to best provide nursing care in a zombie apocalypse (Stanley, 2012).

To ask what a zombie is, then, is to ask what do zombies mean and how do they mean? One answer to this question is that zombie is the word on everybody's lips to express all forms of being, behaving and operating that lack a little *je ne sais quoi*. You no longer need to know anything about zombie films

or computer games to use zombie as a generalised metaphor for everything that is wrong with contemporary life. It is not just humans (singular and en masse) that lack this *je ne sais quoi*, but environments, political structures, social institutions, behaviours and systems. Cropping up everywhere as a noun used to modify other nouns, zombie connotes lack, but the meanings given to this lack are without consistency. As we have seen, even within the one discursive sphere zombie means different things. In architecture, for example, zombie buildings are untenanted office blocks, condominiums and shopping centres that were built before the world financial crisis and are now set to plunge the US financial system into financial chaos (Spolar and Sebert, 2012). Here, zombie implies a potent absence. But zombie buildings are also the products of show-off architects who design glass boxes that do not speak to their environments. Mute and soulless these zombies are not potent but threateningly impotent (D'Alterio, 2012). In both cases, the adjectival noun implies an inner absence with the power to act upon us in negative ways, but the form this action takes is open ended. Zombie is a word with amorphous properties. As an adjectival noun zombie retains the agency of a verb; it both describes and acts. But zombie is also a state of being. Both things and people can look, act, appear, seem, feel or be zombified. In this sense, zombie is both a property that can be possessed and a lack that is at the same time a mode of action. And zombies can be anything! Zombies are voters that lack acuity, institutions that refuse to dissolve and litigants that lack volition. But, to pose another contradiction, these agents of lack also have use-value. Zombie sells. Toyota cashed in on the zombie apocalypse by advertising their Toyota Corolla as an effective shield against zombies (Stanley, 2010). You can play zombie soccer, zombie Lego and farm zombies, or buy everyday objects distorted to meet the zombie menace – from zombie repellent umbrellas to zombie toothpicks. You name it and you'll find its

commoditised zombie form on the web. I scored three out of three with zombie elephants, zombie skydivers and zombie mushrooms.

Zombie is the word on everyone's lips because zombie as *metaphor* condenses elements of the present that we most need, and are least able, to think about. If we approach zombies as mere fictional constructs or understand the zombie metaphor – as mere allegory – then we entirely miss what is going on with zombies today. Metaphors are ways of making meaning and as such they are vehicles for thought. Metaphors travel, carrying meanings from one semantic place to another – boundary riding can't stop the over-leaping logic of a good metaphor. Zombie is a metaphor that enables 'us' – a mass us; an undifferentiated, trans-cultural, global us – to think the impossibility of now. Zombie is not a metaphor contrived for scholars (although clearly scholars are interpellated by it). It is a mass metaphor detonating in the world of popular culture and it is from this vantage point that it travels. Fluid in its capacity to move from realm to realm, at the same time it fixes diverse experiences within its semantic constellation. The hybrids of the semantic world, metaphors loves *mesalliance* – and zombie as metaphor links opposites: death and life; passivity and aggressivity; drive and enslavement; discontinuity and continuity; love and hate; consumption and revulsion; the individual and the mass; self and other; an apocalyptic future and a repressed past. It condenses time making the future now and the past return. Through the figure of zombie all that is past, dead and buried looms up in a future time that is upon us. Zombie is a figure that empties meaning while proliferating it. It critiques, questions, interrogates the way things are while bleakly laying out the impossibility of them being otherwise.

There is no easy answer to the question, what is a zombie. But one way we can understand the mobility of zombies today is as a particular kind of metaphor: a *metatope* – a figure that binds

together other figures in a dense network of meanings. Zombie is a metatropo that has metastasised, invading other metaphors and tropes and binding them together in permeating networks of figures in an ever-expanding semantic take-over. And zombie – as metaphor – is not something you want to be, which brings into question what all those ‘wannabe’ zombies are doing at zombie parades going on all around the world.

END.

~~2~~ THE COLLECTIVE ZOMBIE

~~This brings me back to the parade and to the even more curious question of what happens to ‘zombie as metaphor’ when it takes to the street as a public spectacle. In zombie parades, groups of people who have entered imaginatively into a fictional form, collectively create a social ritual out of its imaginary constituents. This movement from narrative to social enactment, from the imaginary and symbolic world of fiction to the corporeal world of bodies, acts, rituals and performances creates a new kind of collective manifestation. Consecrated by rituals of performance and pantomime the zombie parade is a collective event that transforms a private act of viewing zombie films or playing zombie games into a visible, public and global manifestation of a collective identification.~~

~~From humble beginnings as an event to promote a horror film festival in Sacramento, California, in 2001, zombie parades and festivals are becoming mainstream events attracting thousands of participants in cities across the world. Zombie websites record this escalating tally as if the rise in active zombism~~