THE UNDEAD HORIZON: NAVIGATING THE POLYCRISIS THROUGH SELF-AWARE ZOMBIE NARRATIVES

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THE UNDEAD HORIZON: NAVIGATING THE POLYCRISIS THROUGH SELF-AWARE ZOMBIE NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the emergence of self-aware zombie narratives as they relate to the Polycrisis, its underlying reasons, and possible ways of building sustainable futures, specifically focusing on the films *Warm Bodies (2013)* and *The Girl with All the Gifts (2016).* These self-aware zombie representations challenge the traditional depictions of zombies as mindless creatures, offering a nuanced reflection of humanity's struggles and potential for transformation in the context of the Polycrisis—a confluence of environmental, social, and economic crises exacerbated by Late Capitalism. The study shows that the newly proliferating phenomena of self-aware zombies signify a departure from the conventional portrayals of the walking dead, embodying instead complex themes of care, community, love, and recognition of the other. By analyzing the largely forgotten historical roots of the zombie myth and its journey from Haitian folklore to popular culture, the thesis highlights the genre's capacity to critique Capitalist Realism and envision alternative sustainable futures. Through a detailed examination of narrative arcs, character development, and thematic depth, this research contributes to the field of Zombie Studies, suggesting that these narratives not only confront the destructive impact of Late Capitalism but also offer a vision for a sustainable future.

Keywords: Polycrisis; Zombie; Self-Awareness; Capitalism; Sustainability

ÖZ

Bu tez *Warm Bodies* (2013) ve *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016) filmlerine odaklanarak kendilik bilincine sahip zombi anlatılarının ortaya çıkışını, bu anlatıların çoklu krizle (Polycrisis) olan ilişkisini, bu krizlerin temel nedenlerini ve sürdürülebilir gelecekler inşa etmenin olası yollarını incelemektedir. Kendilik bilincine sahip zombi anlatıları, yürüyen ölülerin geleneksel tasvirlerine meydan okuyarak, insanlığın çoklu kriz bağlamındaki tecrübelerini, mücadelelerini ve dönüşüm potansiyelini tartışır ve geç kapitalizm tarafından şiddetlenen çevresel, toplumsal ve ekonomik krizlerin birleşimini merkeze alır. Bu çalışma, söz konusu filmlerdeki kendilik bilincine sahip zombilerin, alışılmış zombie tasvirlerinden bir kopuşu simgelediğini ve bunun yerine topluluk, sevgi ve ötekinin tanınması gibi karmaşık temaları barındırdığını göstermektedir. Zombi mitinin tarihsel kökenlerini, Haiti folklorundan popüler kültüre kadar olan yolculuğunu analiz ederek, bu türün kapitalist gerçekçiliği eleştirme ve alternatif gelecekler tasavvur etme kapasitesine vurgu yapmaktadır. Anlatı yapıları, karakter gelişimi ve tematik derinliklerin ayrıntılı bir şekilde incelenmesiyle, bu araştırma Zombi Çalışmaları alanına katkı sağlamaktadır ve bu anlatıların yalnızca kapitalizmin yıkıcı güçleriyle yüzleşmekle kalmayıp, sürdürülebilir bir gelecek için bir vizyon sunduğunu öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Polikriz; Zombi; Kendilik Bilinci; Kapitalizm; Sürdürülebilirlik

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

The relentless intensification of multiple crises coupled with a pervasive sense of precarity and uncertainty that is felt in our present era marks a historically unparalleled phenomenon in humanity's collective experience. This relatively new human predicament, largely created by the destructive effects of Late Capitalism, takes its toll on all cultural forms, representations, and ways of relating to human and non-human species as well as the Earth itself. Humanity, at the dawn of the 21st century, is facing multiple wars, refugee crises, climate change, environmental decay, mass extinction, social disintegration, unreliable media propagation, increased inequality, loss of democratic values, and many other problems simultaneously and exponentially. After the collapse of grand narratives, along with other ideas of stability and prosperity that were promised by Modernity, humanity seems to have no alternative or solution to save itself from a slow decay. The famous saying attributed to both Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson brings forth this severe challenge by suggesting that "it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism". The present study takes a new approach to this challenge by analyzing the newly emerging representations and narratives of one of the most pervasive cultural symbols of our times: the zombie. Although the zombie, as a mass media representation has existed since the Halperin brothers' 1932 film *White Zombie*, the myth experienced an outbreak of cultural expansion, invaded all areas of cultural expression, and is recognized by many theoreticians, including Deleuze and Guattari (1978), who went as far as to argue that the only modern myth is the myth of zombies. Transcending far beyond the cliché bogeyman figure of earlier horror movies, zombies now exist in literature, video games, TV series, and virtually all kinds of printed and visual media that are available. Some researchers suggest that this rapid surge in zombie narratives "have allowed us to deal with the profound acceleration in changing symbolic, economic and technical systems" and provided society with a space in which it can "safely represent and address anxieties of its time" (Levina & Bui, 2013, p.1). These profound shifts can be traced through the shocks of the 9/11 attacks,

escalating climate disasters, wildfires, the market crash of 2008, the SARS pandemic, and finally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the co-occurring economic and social crisis. Indeed, these profound shifts had an impact on the proliferation of the zombie apocalypse narratives. The intensification of the age of intersecting crises stirs up the frequency of zombie narratives by touching upon a shared sense of dread, decay, and unsustainability, but this surge and mutation in zombie narratives are not solely related to the apocalyptic settings it offers to address the trauma of cataclysmic events and the threat of a precarious future. Particularly, the emerging narratives of "self-aware zombies"[1] offer valuable insight into how humans' imagination of what it is like to be human has changed in the age of advanced Capitalism. The contemporary ideological setting heavily affects the embodied experience and its relations to the innumerable instantiations of subjectivity. Therefore, another reason for the existence, rapid proliferation, and significance of these narratives is tied to the malleability of the zombie body to convey how humans' imagination of what it is like to be a human (in both corporeal and incorporeal realms) has transformed in contemporary Late Capitalistic societies. This qualitative research will trace the history and the recent transformation of the zombie figure and then focus on two recent "self-aware zombie" representations in the genre, *Warm Bodies* (2013) and *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), to understand them in relation to the shifting attitudes and experiences in contemporary culture and society and to argue for the reflective and revolutionary powers of such representations/narratives to navigate and survive the existential threats posed by the age of multiple crises. The radical shift these representations and narratives bring enables the conceptualization of a sustainable Posthuman figure that exists in a Post-Capitalistic mode of being in the world.

The overarching ethos of Late Capitalism (or Neoliberalism), the age of intensified precarity, the Anthropocene, and sustainable futures are inextricably entangled with one another, creating cause-and-effect relationships on a larger and dialectical scheme of events. The concept of *polycrisis* has gained prominence in both academia and policy-

[1] For the purposes of this study, the terms "self-aware" and "self-reflective" are used interchangeably and point at the zombie's subjective conscious experience and the acute realization of existing as a zombie.

making debates as a way to understand the interconnectedness of these contemporary crises (Jayasuriya, 2023; Henig & Knight, 2023). However, some scholars argue that understanding the interconnectedness of the challenges is not enough on its own, as these cascading crises are best understood as manifestations of a broader crisis of Capitalism (Penner, 2023; Jayasuriya, 2023). Penner further underlines that the root of the crisis is the deformed relationship between industrial humanity and nature, which is driven by specific forms of human activity that prioritize capital above all else (2023). It is also important to note that although the term polycrisis is a recent one, the idea that the Capitalist mode of being is inherently an unsustainable one that repeatedly creates precarity has been argued by many academics after the turn of the 21st century. Scholars such as David Harvey (2010, 2014), Jason W. Moore (2015), Naomi Klein (2014), Mark Fisher (2009), Slavoj Žižek (2011), and Nancy Fraser (2022) share the view that Late Capitalism's drive for profit and resource exploitation makes it a fundamentally flawed and unsustainable system for humanity. Although the ubiquity of the contributing factors and their interconnected manifestations obstruct a clear vision of sustainable alternatives, the present study will argue that the self-reflective zombie apocalypse narratives subvert this difficulty by imagining the alternative Post-Capitalistic mode of being as emerging through something we *can* imagine: the end of the world. By positioning the Posthuman alternative as a paradoxical figure that acknowledges her detriment in a plague-stricken world, the self-reflective zombie narratives endow the undead with the potential for transformative action instead of stagnancy, decay, and doom. These newly emerging zombie representations allow for a better understanding and critique of the embodied personal and social experience, touching upon a variety of issues such as isolation, loneliness, mental illness, limitations of binary thinking, and profit over human and non-human welfare. In doing so, the narrative arc of these paradoxical figures exposes what it is that caused this bleak predicament, what could have been done to prevent it, and what are some possible modes of being that humanity needs to adapt if mass extinction is to be avoided.

Although both *Warm Bodies* and *The Girl with All the Gifts* originated as novels, this thesis focuses on the film adaptations as the primary source material. While the novels

also explore humanity's inability to grasp the interconnected crises and imagine a path forward, the films expand these narratives by providing a tangible, embodied representation of these issues. Unlike the written word, cinema engages viewers through its affective and sensory nature, offering a visceral means of experiencing the path toward a Post-Capitalist future. The embodied nature of cinema allows it to engage with the audience's affective attunement, aligning viewers emotionally with the characters and their dilemmas. An illustrative example of cinema's embodied storytelling is the recurring image of Melanie wearing a muzzle-like mask. This mask, placed on her by humans to prevent her from biting, becomes a powerful symbol of dehumanization and control. As the camera lingers on Melanie's face, her eyes become the focal point, allowing her inner world (awareness, intelligence, and need for acceptance) to shine through the physical restraint of the mask. This embodied portrayal powerfully conveys the tension between fear and trust, dominance and cooperation, which lies at the heart of humanity's relationship with the Other in the age of intersecting crises. Thus, Melanie's dual existence as both a threat and a victim invites viewers to re-evaluate these destructive modes of relating to the other. The affective dimension is also evident in the films' use of the gaze to communicate the characters' inner worlds. In *Warm Bodies*, the close-up shots of R's eyes and his hesitant interactions with Julie transform the Romeroesque zombie figure into a self-reflective being capable of connection and love. Similarly, in *The Girl*, Melanie's gaze becomes a site of tension and transformation, challenging viewers to question the boundaries between human and non-human, predator and protector.

Furthermore, the visual and auditory elements of cinema deepen the narratives' exploration of what humanity perceives as "lost" qualities such as connection, community, and harmony with the human and non-human world. Through their self-aware zombies' journeys, these films reveal the possibility of rediscovering these values. In *Warm Bodies*, the depiction of R's growing capacity for love and his rejection of mindless consumption symbolizes the potential for renewal in a fragmented world. In *The Girl*, Melanie's symbiotic relationship with the fungal pathogen highlights a profound understanding of coexistence with nature, presenting an alternative to the

destructive, exploitative ethos of Late Capitalism. In this sense, the film adaptations serve as "real-life" instantiations of the novels' narratives, translating abstract ideas into concrete visual and affective experiences. The imagery and editing choices in these films not only enhance their storytelling but also add layers of meaning that are uniquely cinematic. For example, the desaturated tones and stark landscapes of *The Girl with All the Gifts* reflect the desolation of a world in crisis, while moments of vibrant color, such as the explosion of fungal spores, symbolize renewal and the emergence of a sustainable future. These cinematic techniques allow the audience to feel the weight of humanity's impasse while simultaneously envisioning pathways beyond it.

On the other hand, cinema holds a unique power in its capacity to reach a broader audience, particularly in our current era. Unlike novels, which demand a level of literacy and time investment that may limit their accessibility, films have the ability to engage diverse audiences across cultural and educational boundaries. In an age where visual media dominates the global exchange of ideas, the cinematic adaptations of *Warm Bodies* and *The Girl* ensure that their critical themes are not confined to academic or literary circles but are accessible to a broader general public. By leveraging the global reach of contemporary film distribution and streaming platforms, these narratives gain cultural significance and resonance on a scale that is difficult for novels to achieve. of *The Girl with All the Gifts* reflect the desolation of a world in crisis, while moments of vibrant color, such as the explosion of fungal spores, symbolize renewal and the emergence of a Posthuman future. These cinematic techniques allow the audience to feel the weight of humanity's impasse while simultaneously envisioning pathways beyond it. In this way, the decision to focus on the film adaptations as primary source material grants this thesis a richer, multidimensional perspective.

The research will adopt a combination of semiotic, narrative, and genre analysis as its method and carry out a qualitative analysis based on the themes, visuals, and dialogues of the films it covers. The project will begin by establishing and justifying the interconnections between the Polycrisis, Late Capitalism, and the zombie as a cultural figure. By grounding the study in the broader socio-economic and cultural landscape, this chapter will provide the theoretical foundation for the thesis. The second chapter

will offer an overview of the history of the zombie myth, tracing its origins, cultural interpretations, and transformations over time. This chapter will analyze how the traditional zombie, typically portrayed as a mindless consumer, has evolved into a more complex, self-aware figure, reflecting significant shifts in narrative and genre conventions. The third chapter will focus on *Warm Bodies* (2013) as a case study to show how the film reimagines the zombie as a symbol of hope and reconciliation, emphasizing themes such as love, community, and sustainability. By examining key scenes and cinematic techniques, the chapter will explore how the film offers a vision of community and love that contrasts with the transactional ethos of Late Capitalism. The last chapter will analyze *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), extending the discussion of self-aware zombies by addressing themes of education, ethics, and coexistence. Special focus will be placed on how the film's visual and narrative elements depict the Anthropocalypse not as the end of the world but as a turning point for harmonious existence. Finally, the conclusion will synthesize the findings from the case studies, connecting them back to the initial theoretical framework. The conclusion will also discuss the implications of these narratives for cultural critique, its future possibilities and potential to inspire pathways toward positive cultural change.

POLYCRISIS, CAPITAL AND IMAGINING AN ALTERNATIVE FUTURE: A HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To argue for the relationship between changing attitudes, conditions, and anxieties of our specific moment in history and the representations of the zombie figure in cultural texts, this chapter will begin by laying out and justifying how these issues are inextricably related and are in a dialectical relationship. To make these interconnections clearer and easier to follow, the below section offers a summarized portrait of the main points of discussion.

1. Humanity is facing an exceptionally tangled web of existential crises that threaten us on personal, societal, and planetary levels. Social, political, environmental, and economic tensions converge to create what is increasingly referred to as "the Polycrisis" or "the Age of Intersecting Crises".

2. The Polycrisis arises primarily as a result of the destructive and unsustainable nature of humanity's current economic structure: Neoliberal (or Late) Capitalism, which is a system that consistently prioritizes profit and accumulation before the well-being of both people and the planet.

3. Despite the intensifying precarity resulting from this structure, humanity seems to be stuck in a mindset of *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher, 2009, p. 1), wherein Capitalism is perceived not as an ideology or economic system subject to change, but rather as a mere reflection of "human nature" or the natural order of existence.

4. Proponents of Capitalist Realism argue that certain qualities, such as constant competition, profit orientation, and hyper-individualism, are fundamental and natural human instincts (Fisher, 2009; Brown, 2015; Bourdieu, 1998). However, this view is now being heavily challenged by the exponentially rising zombie apocalypse narratives in various mediums of human culture, in which the

dehumanizing, contradictory, and unsustainable aspects of Capitalism are laid out, and criticized.

5. The *undead* serves as the quintessential metaphor for this paradoxical existence and stands out as the most prolific monster of our time. They reveal the unnatural, destructive, and inevitably catastrophic consequences of unchecked Capitalism, encapsulating a “life-in-death” state in which individuals experience alienation, violence, and fear, highlighting a desperate need for sustainable change.

6. The emerging narratives of the "self-aware zombie" provide a direct counter to Capitalist Realism by positioning consciousness and the potential for change at the core of the “life-in-death” experience or the apocalypse. In doing so, these narratives challenge pervasive feelings of impotence, isolation, stagnation, depression, and pessimism while also addressing the intensifying issues of antagonism, apathy, discrimination, and violence through the transformation, agency, and empowerment of zombie representations.

7. These self-aware zombie narratives not only expose the apocalypse—much like earlier *Romeroesque* iterations of zombie films—but also challenge the notions of Capitalist Realism and species extinction as the limit of human imagination. They represent a transformative pathway toward a sustainable Post-Capitalist world by pinpointing the necessary changes to avert extinction through the awareness and redemption of a previously "doomed" cultural myth/figure.

2.1. Capitalism: Natural or Artificial?

Arguing that the Late Capitalist mode of production is the main source of the impasse humanity has reached requires this research to begin by identifying the unsustainable aspects of its fundamental pre-suppositions and how they relate to the unprecedented intersection of crisis-level impediments that pose an existential threat to the continuation of human and non-human life on planet Earth. Capitalism, like all other modes of production, has evolved and adapted to the challenges it faced over the centuries since its inception in the 18th century. Innovative strategies and advanced ways of organizing the economy emerged within this overarching system. Nevertheless, the core goal always remained the same: maximization of profit above all else. The marketization of all aspects of human life, the constant necessity to produce, control, dominate, and aggressive competition (both at a larger scale and on an individual level) are now presented as natural human impulses (Fisher, 2009; Brown, 2015; Bourdieu, 1998). This remolding of what human nature *naturally* is suggests that the core tenets of Capitalism are intrinsic to human ontology, and, therefore, it is the best way for the advancement of civilization and human existence in general.

The unquestioned normalization of Capitalism as a non-ideological and natural phenomenon is at the heart of Capitalist Realism, a concept Mark Fisher coined to describe "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it." (2010, p.2). Theoreticians have been identifying and challenging this sentiment for a considerably long time. Notably, the proponents of the Frankfurt School criticized this understanding of human nature and its "natural" outcomes. Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer, the major figures of the Frankfurt School, rejected the innate urge of human beings towards domination and control and pointed out that we can never be sure how much of these are the results of biology or social conditioning. They also wrote extensively on the culture industry, stressing how culture itself replicates the hierarchical domination that is embedded within the current ideology. Mark Fisher's work was influenced by the writings of the Frankfurt School, and he took some of their

most important observations and applied them to our contemporary Neoliberal setting. Ultimately, their theories seem to suggest that succumbing to passive nihilism, Capitalist Realism, or any other manner of hopeless being runs the risk of resulting in extinction.

In today's world, Capitalism as a way of experiencing, structuring and managing one's life is almost inescapable. Whether in the remote parts of Asia or in the larger cities of the Western world, its power in terms of shaping human and non-human experience is unavoidable. The inescapability of the Capitalist model forces people to function in a system in which all aspects of life have a transactional value. According to this value system, the transactional monetary value is to be maximized, and the processes of value production are to be made as efficient as possible. This core ethos of Capitalism creates a particular mode of being as a collective and as a singular human subject to perpetuate the current system. However, it is becoming more and more clear each year that this way of being in the world cannot be continued indefinitely without causing extinction-level threats, as the limited resources of the Earth cannot stand constant exploitation for the demands of continually increasing profit and efficiency. However, the subjectivities (that is, an individual's unique mental experience) shaped to perpetuate the status quo can easily become blind towards its very real and approaching consequences. As Kovel states in his book *The Enemy of Nature*, Capitalism adheres to two fundamental constants: "Capital must expand without end in order to exist"and "capital tends to degrade the conditions of its own production" (2002, p.38). The need for constant expansion combined with the rapid degradation of the means of production can only result in destruction and a point of rapture in which the system runs out of the resources to exploit. This can only mean mass destruction and extinction-level precarity for humans and non-humans alike. This is why the complex nature of the crossroads humanity is now standing at has become a subject of controversy among theoreticians who now identify this situation as a crisis of Capitalism (Harvey, 2010).

Although the need for urgent and radical systematic change is being voiced by many theoreticians, their approaches to how this change may come about vary significantly. Stuart L. Hart, one of the leading authorities in the development of sustainable business

strategies, points to this crossroads but remains rather optimistic that a turn for sustainable development is possible within the global market economy. Hart's version of *radical* change aims at "creating a new, more inclusive brand of Capitalism, one that incorporates previously excluded voices, concerns, and interests, the corporate sector could become the catalyst for a truly sustainable form of global development – and prosper in the process." (2007, p.xl). While there might be certain benefits that can arise from executing this path of an inclusive brand of Capitalism, the fundamental aim of Hart's project is to ensure *not* the well-being of life but the continuation of the system itself. As he states,

> Failure to address the challenges we face – from global-scale environmental change, to mass poverty, to international terrorism – could produce catastrophe on an even grander scale than that experienced in the first half of the twentieth century: Constructively engaging these challenges thus holds the key to ensuring that capitalism continues to thrive in the coming century – to everyone's benefit. (2007, p.xxxix)

Although I agree that in the face of such global precarity and lack of alternative concrete planning, all ideas of reformation or gradual development within the current system must be taken seriously, Hart's manner of describing the challenge delivers a fundamentally contradictory logic by which he suggests solving the problems Capitalism created by capitalizing on the problems themselves for the sake of *not* solving those problems but making sure Capitalism continues to thrive. Thus, the idea that the global market economy is ultimately "good for all" still remains intact. However, it must always be questioned whether the "everyone" Capitalist vision is referring to is truly everyone or Western, mostly male, property owners who benefit from the continuation of the status quo. Hart's pragmatic approach particularly highlights people's heightened awareness of climate change, environmental destruction, and income inequality. This heightened sensibility creates more and more people who are inclined to consume "environment and society-conscious" goods even if it means paying an additional percentage. However, people who most direly suffer the consequences of the Capitalist structure (the majority of the Global South and the developing world, for example) cannot prioritize humanely produced goods as their exploitation itself is the engine of Capitalism. If the conditions and the main logic of

production are to be altered as a result of these drastic changes, that is, if the exploitation of the working class and the environment is to be abolished, then we can no longer talk about a continuation of Capitalism since that new structure would prioritize people and the planet over profit and continuation of status quo. Therefore, Hart's vision seems to be little more than a guidebook for multinational companies to capitalize on the latest sensitivities and fears of Western people. In his 2012 documentary film, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology,* Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek identifies and comments on this new trend of market strategy by stating,

> …when you enter a Starbucks store, it's usually always displayed in some posters there their message, which is, "Yes, our cappuccino is more expensive than others, but" -- And then comes the story. "We give one percent of all our income to some Guatemala children to keep them healthy, for the water supply for some Sahara farmers, or to save the forests, to enable organic growing coffee,"…So the idea was you had to do something to counteract your pure destructive consumerism…What Starbucks enables you is to be a consumerist and be a consumerist without any bad conscience, because the price for the countermeasure, for fighting consumerism, is already included into the price of a commodity. Like, you pay a little bit more, and you are not just a consumerist, but you do also your duty towards environment, the poor starving people in Africa and so on and so on. It's, I think, the ultimate form of consumerism. (Žižek, 2012)

Zizek's criticism is an invitation to question the existence of an underlying, rather vague, invisibly manipulative and self-contradictory force behind what can be called the ideology of "Humane Capitalism" that famously promotes practices of fair "Fair Trade" among others. This is exactly parallel to the aforementioned contradictory logic of sustainable Capitalism in which even "the end of the world itself" can be a product to generate profit. To give an example from contemporary culture, the critically acclaimed TV series Fallout (2024) imagines a post-apocalyptic nuclear wasteland that was created on purpose by the shelter-selling Capitalists. In order to ensure that their post-apocalypse survival vaults were being sold, they initiated the nuclear war, which was justified by their "fiduciary responsibility" to their shareholders. This underlying responsibility (the underlying mantra of capitalism) of maximizing profit over the well-being of the people and the planet is the core reason why the Capitalist mode of

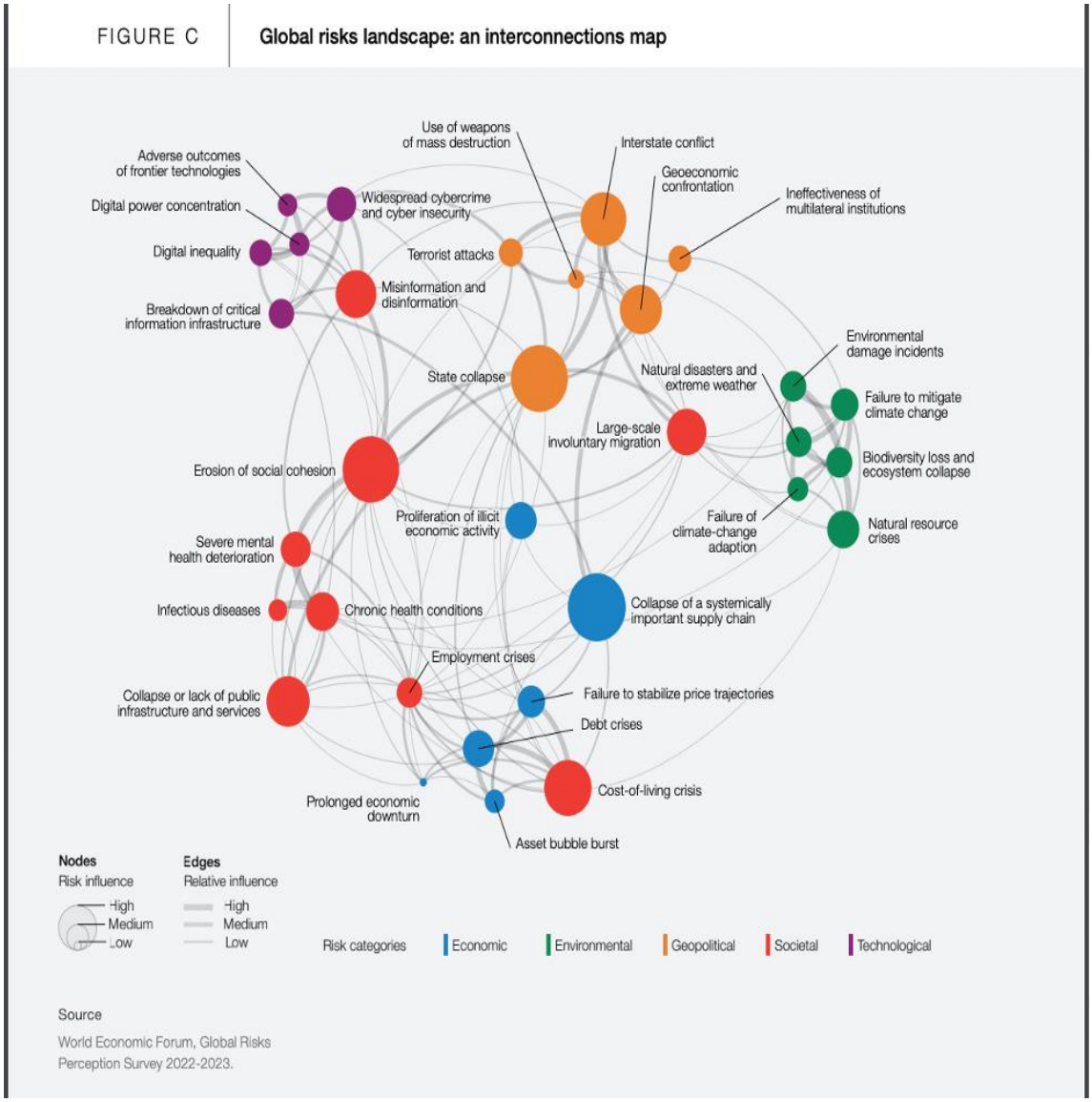
production inevitably creates and intensifies crises and, therefore, is not compatible with sustainable living. Now that the fundamental link between Capitalist core tenets and perpetual precarity is established, this study will turn to understanding the historical and theoretical discussions around the rise of Capitalism and the crisis in Capitalism.

2.2. From the "End of History" to Survival Mode

One can start by identifying how philosophers thought about the evolution of ideology, especially after the end of the Cold War, to understand the historical and theoretical relation between the Capitalist mode of production and the age of crises. In his 1989 article titled "The End of History?", American political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously suggested that "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such … That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." (p.4). According to his theory, the end of the Cold War marked the historical beginning of *post-ideology*, a world in which the ultimate form of governance (Western liberal democracy) is, if not completely adopted, at least acknowledged in terms of superiority by every single human society. This perspective was severely challenged in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks as it became clear that global ideological consensus was not completely reached. The terrorist attacks, among other events, revealed the complex unpredictability of history and the continuation of major conflict and destruction, as well as shaking the belief that unbridled Capitalism is natural and for the benefit of all. The aftermath of a post-ideological world celebrated by Fukuyama shows how a certain way of thinking and producing, understood as the natural and best way, can be dangerous and contribute to more conflict. Today, Neoliberal politics are ingrained in every aspect of human life, and as they continue to grow and spread, so does the precarity of life and a sense of impending doom. Studies suggest that even before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, three to five million Americans were preparing for an apocalyptic event, and research shows this number has only risen due to the

pandemic (Smith et al., 2021). Scientists strongly argue that the point of ecological no return is not very far if the level of CO2 emissions is not limited (Aengenheyster et al. 2018). Even without the impending environmental disaster, the current age of multiple crises, most notably the political instabilities and the regional conflicts pose enough threats to trigger a "mass survival mode". The reality of today's world emanates this sense of doom approaching and precarity increasing. However, humankind seems unable to offer an alternative to Late Capitalism, assuming the reality we have is "common sense" or "how things naturally are," succumbing to the sentiment Fisher described as Capitalist Realism. The "2023 Global Risk Report" published by The World Economic Forum states that "…present and future risks can also interact with each other to form a "polycrisis" – a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part." (p.57). As seen through this quote, the existence of the Polycrisis is now acknowledged by global institutions, and the emergence and the consequences of the interlinked crises are researched in a scientific manner. The report also offers a detailed chart to demonstrate the interconnectedness of these risks (see Figure 1.1.).

Figure 2.1. Global Risks Landscape: An Interconnections Map



(Source: *"Global Risks Landscape: An Interconnections Map," by World Economic Forum, 2023, in Global Risks Report 2023 (p. 10).*)

The interconnections map offers a meticulous eagle's eye view into a very complex set of entangled crises and exposes how the economic landscape is inevitably connected to other risk categories such as societal, environmental, geopolitical, and technological. The largest risk nodes displayed on the map are "Collapse of a systemically important supply chain," "Erosion of Social Cohesion," and "State Collapse.". Moreover, the map

goes far beyond demonstrating the severity of the risk nodes and the connections between them and provides insight into the relative influence of the edges that connect the nodes. An analysis of the relative influence of the edges shows that economy-related blue nodes are more frequently connected by "high influence" edges, both among each other and among other categories. Economic nodes directly and highly influence "geoeconomic confrontation" and "cost-of-living" crisis, which is ranked as the most severe short-term list in the report (p.6). Although the cost-of-living crisis is categorized as a societal risk in this report, it is, by definition, inseparable from the economic realm.

Overall, the report provides evidence of the overwhelming influence of the economic structure on the Polycrisis. In addition to the World Economic Forum, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) acknowledges that the world is experiencing "multiple crises that reinforce each other"[2]. While the UNDP admits that most of these crises are not new, it also states that the interconnected severity of the problems reached a point in which researchers observed a decline in the Human Development Index (HDI) for the first time in modern history. The first goal UNDP set to overcome this decline is "no poverty," once again a goal centered on the economy, implying that further change is impossible if the economic roots of the problems are not addressed. Historian Mack Penner highlights this root of the problem and how easily it can be overlooked or misunderstood by arguing that,

> the cascading character of the present crisis is a function of a shared ultimate cause. What we have been experiencing is best understood as a crisis of capitalism, the result of industrial humanity's deformed relationship with the natural world. This is more specific than an obvious contending description that would render the present crisis in anthropogenic terms as a result of human activity. Instead, the present crisis is the product of specific forms of human activity and particular elements of humanity, namely, capital. This being the case, we might speak instead of a broad, structural crisis that is, in turn, experienced as a crisis cascade. (2023, p.152)

As a historian, Penner is exploring the ways in which contemporary historians can write a history of our times, and his argument that it is not "human activity" but "specific

[2] https://www.undp.org/policy-centre/governance/events/how-can-we-emerge-stronger-todays-multiple-crises

forms of human activity" is central to his vision of contemporary historiography. According to Penner, it is not possible to understand the polycrisis without understanding the mechanism and history of Capitalism. He acknowledges that "conceptualizing the polycrisis in the neat and tidy box of capitalism might seem too simplistic" but argues against this sentiment by saying that "doing so is necessary for assessing and analyzing how contemporary crises interact." (2023, p.162). This brings us to the question of comprehensive assessment and clear analysis, which seems to be highly deficient and difficult. One philosophical explanation and conceptualization of this hardship is found in Timothy Morton's writings.

According to Morton, the singular events contributing to the multiple entangled crises are too big and gradual for the individual human eye to witness; they are *hyperobjects* (2013). Morton defines this concept as objects that are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (2013, p.1). Their sheer omnipresence and entanglement make it challenging for humans to have a deeper understanding and knowledge of their surroundings as a network of interconnected schemas interacting in a dialectical manner. Now, more than a decade after the publication of Morton's book *Hyperobjects* (2013), it has become crucial to develop such a broader understanding of the world as more and more humans have started to add the words "immediate" and "crisis" to the concept of the Anthropocene to express the current progression of catastrophic events more directly. As groundbreaking primatologist and environmental advocate Jane Goodall states,

> We are going through dark times…The gap between the haves and have-nots is widening and fomenting anger and unrest. Democracy is under attack in many countries. On top of all that, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused so much suffering and death, loss of jobs, and economic chaos around the world. And the climate crisis, temporarily pushed into the background, is an even greater threat to our future—indeed, to all life on Earth as we know it. (2021, p.7)

What has changed and become more apparent in the last decade is that we see and feel the disastrous effects of our mode of existence on Earth. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed our system's inability to meet the crucial needs of people despite the availability of the means of production, as even the developed world failed to provide

masks and adequate health support for its populations. Climate change is already causing extreme flooding, droughts, and fires unlike any before. The crises of regional conflicts, climate, democracy, health, housing, community, and more are entangled with one another to create a giant maze in which life on Earth seems to be stuck. In her critically acclaimed book *The Sixth Extinction*, Elizabeth Colbert invites humanity to realize that we truly are living in an extraordinary moment in time (2014). How we understand the world, our own selves, and our attitudes will determine the future of not just Homo Sapiens but many other species that it exploits. As Goodall further underlines, "without hope, all is lost. It is a crucial survival trait that has sustained our species from the time of our Stone Age ancestors." (2021, p.11).

Now that the more concrete, historical, and theoretical side of how the Capitalist mode of production and the age of intensifying crises are connected is put forward, this research will continue by tracing the origins of the zombie myth, its later status as a cultural icon in cinema and the recent transformation towards the "self-aware" representations with the significantly altered narrative and genre conventions in order to understand why and how this transformation happened and what it can offer us to navigate and survive the age of intersecting crises.

THE ZOMBIE MYTH: ORIGINS, INTERPRETATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

The significance of the zombie as a cultural phenomenon can be understood through two decades of academic research. The burgeoning field of "Zombie Studies" has emerged as an interdisciplinary area within the Humanities, examining the zombie from various perspectives, including its forgotten Haitian roots and the evolution of the zombie figure throughout history. This interdisciplinary field investigates not only the reasons behind the zombie's prevalence in contemporary culture but also the intricate historical lineage that has shaped its various representations. In her introduction to *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (2017), Lauro posits that our society's renewed fascination with zombies can be traced to multiple sources. On one hand, the zombie serves a clear symbolic function as a paradoxical entity, reflecting humanity's struggle to reconcile Humanism with Capitalism. This source of zombie fascination was first put forward by Lauro and Embry in their 2008 article "Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism". Nearly a decade later, Lauro identified another and, I would argue, a more compelling reason for the proliferation of zombies: their total refusal to be confined to a singular interpretation. She highlights this idea by underlining zombie's "refusal to be just one thing…because it operates not on the model of the either/or (and neither appropriately both/and) but on something closer to the fundamentally pessimistic neither/nor…it might be made to signify anything." (2017, p. ix). This argument that the zombie is an empty signifier that can represent different dilemmas, anxieties, and traumas over history becomes more compelling if one investigates its largely forgotten Haitian roots.

The Zombie's origins are remarkably different than the other monster figures we are used to seeing in modern cultural representations. Elizabeth McAlister, an expert in Afro-Caribbean religion, explains the origins of the zombie by emphasizing the decisive divide between the European origins of other monsters such as vampires, werewolves, and witches as opposed to the Afro-Haitian religious one of the zombies (2012). The

unusual and traumatic history, fluidity, transformations, variations, appropriations, and inherent contradictions of the malleable zombie figure separate it sharply from other popular monsters that we are used to seeing on the silver screen, such as vampires, robots, or werewolves. While the other popular monsters originate from Western, mostly European culture, the zombie is a direct result of a native culture subjected to the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and generational trauma. This difference, in terms of the point of origin and the subsequent appropriation, immediately gives the zombie a reactionary, rebellious, revolutionary, anti or dualistic quality. Although the West African religious roots laid the ground for the development of this modern myth, it was under the crushing conditions of colonial slavery that the zombie was born. In its original Haitian conception, a zombie refers to a dead individual whose body was re-animated by a Voodoo master to do his bidding *ad infinitum*. In this sense, turning into a zombie meant eternal labor. The returned body, unlike the slave, did not have the option to kill herself to escape from the horrors of slavery. Lauro offers a detailed history of the Afro-Haitian origins of the zombie myth and how it evolved throughout the 20th century. She explains,

> The zombie's lineage can be traced to African soul capture myths that were carried to the New World aboard slave ships bound for the colonial Caribbean. The zombie as we know it today comes from the Haitian *zombi,* a product of sorcery in which a witch doctor enslaves a victim whom he has raised from the dead to do his bidding or work for him for free…In its earliest iteration, the *zombi* was read as symbolic of the Caribbean country's past as a plantation economy built on slave labor: drained of its own resources and existing only for the benefit of others. (2017, p. ix-x)

Various beliefs associated with the African Voodoo religion, such as soul capture, thus gained a new and traumatic context during and after the transatlantic slave trade. In this original Haitian version, the *zombi* is not feared but is rather a "poor thing," a creature to be pitied for its eternal toil. Nevertheless, the possibility of becoming a zombie or witnessing a loved one turning into one was always feared. In relation to slavery, it is also relevant to remember that Haiti is the only European colony that successfully carried out a slave rebellion and declared independence. In fact, Haiti is the only nation in recorded human history to have emerged as a result of a slave revolt. The Haitian

Revolution took place between 1791 and 1803 under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, who was a former slave. Although he was eventually captured and killed by the French colonialists, his impact on Haitian independence endured through Napoleon's invasion, and Haiti remained independent from Western colonial forces until the neocolonial US occupation in 1915. Lauro notes that "the zombie was first brought to Hollywood's attention as a direct result of the neocolonial Occupation of Haiti (1915–34), whereafter the figure was reshaped and rebranded with the mark of a new society's concerns." (2017, p.x). To that effect, the zombie myth is a myth of "double appropriation" in the sense that it was initially a myth of colonialism and slavery (appropriation of African labor), and later, it was appropriated by American cinema through which it entered our popular culture and gained market recognition as a bogeyman monster figure (Lauro, 2017). This second appropriation marks the beginning of the first historical period of zombies in Western cinematic imagination.

The overall history and the mutations of the zombie monster in Western imagination can be understood in three distinct historical periods: the racialized, colonial zombies in print and cinema from the 1930s to 1940s, the consumerist flesh-eating zombies of George R. Romero from 1968 to 2000s, and finally, the self-aware zombies from 2010s to present time. Although the zombie representations in these three periods change and evolve, the fundamental theme of oppression and exploitation remains ever-present. As Dendle (2007) notes, "Ghosts and revenants are known world-wide, but few are as consistently associated with economy and labour as the shambling corpse of Haitian vodun, brought back from the dead to toil in the fields and factories by miserly land-owners or by spiteful *houngan* or *bokor* priests." (p.46). The labor relations, exploitative nature of market relations, and its effects on the exploited have always been, and continue to be, at the core of the undead figure. In the first period of cinema from the 1930s to 1940s, *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) are the most significant and popularized productions. *White Zombie* tells the story of a Haitian factory owner who sinisterly raises the dead from their graves to enslave them in his sugar cane factory. Dendle (2007) notes how the zombie master is represented as "a god-like master of life and death who views all human relations, at the fundamental

level, as transactions to be conducted in an economy of power relations." (p.47). *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) similarly represents the zombie dynamic as one of control, exploitation, and subservience, but this time, it is coupled with a strong sense of colonial racism. To highlight the colonial racism these movies carry, McAllister notes that,

> …these Caribbean zombie representations might be described as a profound example of what Toni Morrison calls "American Africanism," that is, "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. As a trope, little restraint has been attached to its uses." The films invariably cast black sorcerers (or quack sorcerers) plotting for conquest of and control over white women, and blackness is unmistakably linked with primitive menace, superstition, and the diabolical. (2017, p.66)

The film poster used to advertise the movie *I Walked with a Zombie* attests to McAllister's argument, exposing how exactly the black body is presented as the sinister figure attempting to control and zombify the helpless white woman: a giant sinister-looking male body carrying the unconscious white woman. The vilification of blackness is coupled with criticism of (or anxiety over the loss of) colonial power since the movie, as McNally explains, "depicts the decline of colonial capitalism in the form of a dysfunctional white family, descended from slave owners, as it sinks slowly into decay and self-destruction on a small Caribbean Island. Deploying a problematically gendered trope, a white woman comes to stand in for a dying colonialism." (2011, p.261). Throughout the 1950s, the zombie genre has somehow fallen from favor. Within the background of changing power relations, the threat of nuclear war, and consumer Capitalism, a new kind of zombie was born, and this time, it was far from something to be pitied rather than feared.

The beginning of the second period is marked by a sudden shift from the previous colonial or industrial settings to everyday American towns and cities. The zombie representation associated with this period, as initiated by George Romero's now cult-status 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, did away with the voodoo sorcerer aspects of the zombie myth and created a different kind of zombie monster who dwells in

everyday settings and, innovatively, craves live flesh, kills humans by eating them alive. The first *Dead* movie was soon followed by *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), comprising "The Dead Trilogy". Instead of the supernatural forces of the voodoo sorcerer, these monsters are created by scientifically explicable causes such as radiation or viruses. Reflective of the anxieties of their times, these movies focus on the excess of Capitalist consumerism via zombie gore to comment on the unthinking consumerism rampant in Western society and its possibly destabilizing consequences. Therefore, the Romero zombie, since its inception, is inextricably tied to a criticism of Capitalism, the exploitative power relations it creates, and its debilitating effects on society and the individual. McAlister states that in these movies,

> Zombies are autonomous, but incapable of autonomy. They are a representation of a stripped-down form of "raw life," if you will, animating a body, plus an animalistic drive to consume human flesh. They are not commodified, but they consume; they are hyperconsuming. The most horrifying and excessive aspect of film zombies is their violent cannibal drive, as they lumber and lunge toward the living protagonists and take enormous, gory bites out of their necks, arms, and torsos. What is more, the American zombie is almost always a sign and a symptom of an apocalyptic undoing of the social order. (2012, p. 473-474)

These "zombies are generic; they are nothing except not alive" (McAlister, 2012, p. 474). They are not associated with any sort of awareness or self-reflective capability. They represent the masses, workers, and consumers who are pushed towards a life of going through the same motions every day. The Romeroesque zombie continues to exist today. *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022) franchise can be given as the most prominent and popular example of this type of zombie monster. The Romeroesque zombie created and defined a genre of its own with many genre conventions as well as a narrative arc that remains more or less the same until the transformation towards self-aware zombie representations. To understand the conventions of this genre and its usual narrative arc, the study will now discuss three major cinematic examples to argue that the Romeroesque zombie is represented strictly as a doomed antagonistic monster, and the main narrative arc follows the human protagonists and their fight to re-establish the status quo by getting rid of the zombies either by killing them or finding a cure for the zombie infection, instead of aiming for a reformed social order. The study will then

argue that this narrative arc and representation is no longer the dominant representation as the attitudes on human survival and the future of humanity itself are being more and more questioned. We see that over time, the genre itself adopts a more radical and urgent tone that deals with ethical concerns rather than weighing heavily on the previous "exorcism" or the "cathartic" feeling it provided.

Dawn of the Dead (1978) set many of the genre conventions and narrative tropes that are still being used in today's zombie media. The Dawn serves as a direct sequel to the first movie of the trilogy, Night of the Living Dead, and begins in a world that is already overrun by hordes of living dead and a society at the brink of total collapse. The movie follows Fran (a TV producer) and Stephen (a helicopter pilot) as they band together and decide to escape the deadly chaos of the city. As their journey progresses, they are joined by two SWAT soldiers and manage to seek refuge in an abandoned shopping mall. After securing their shelter as best as they can, the group enjoys the temporary comfort it offers by engaging in endless consumerism. However, as the world outside continues to fall apart, the group is haunted by eventual collapse. Soon enough, a motorcycle gang invades the shopping mall to loot the consumer goods and attract a horde of undead with them. The shelter is overrun and destroyed. Fran and Peter barely manage to get on a helicopter and escape the living dead. It could be argued that the movie ends in a somber tone as Fran and Peter's future is uncertain and very precarious. However, I would argue that the fact that they were able to get on the helicopter together points to the possibility of survival as well as the eventual reestablishment of the status quo. The movie suggests that, now that Fran and Peter are free from the grip of their endless material desires (symbolized by the shopping mall), they can exist in a re-humanized way, as opposed to the anti-humanized zombies who are forever incapable of overriding their meaningless and destructive material pursuit.

28 Days Later (2002) added to the genre what can be called the rage zombie. The rage zombies mindlessly crave human flesh, just like the previous Romero zombies. However, there is a certain violence and hostility to their being. Unlike the usual Romero zombies, they can run, chase, and show expressions that are indicative of anger and hostility. Released only a year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the movie follows the

survival journey of Jim, Selena, Frank, and Hanna after the “rage” infected lab monkeys are set free by a group of animal rights activists. These lab monkeys, being ruthlessly experimented on by scientists, are being fed hostile and violent media coverage, and it is suggested that the rage virus is somehow created by this exposure to violent media. The rage-infected zombies of the movie problematize how unbridled and unregulated profit-based private enterprises that put capital over life can create chaotic forms of individualistic and competitive behavior. The non-infected survivors come to realize the importance of community and cooperation as it becomes clear that neither survival nor the contentment of a life well lived is possible without those. After many battles fought and shelters overrun, the movie ends in a moment of hope and a covert promise that the status quo will be re-established. The survivors are saved by a jet that is seen flying in the sky victoriously. The zombie plague, therefore, is used almost like an “exorcism” to do away with the “bad parts” of humanity that developed over time, and the killing of the zombie acts as a cathartic experience that enables the restoration of anthropocentric civilization.

Train to Busan, a 2016 South Korean zombie apocalypse movie directed by Yeong Sang-ho, largely takes place inside a train that travels from Seoul to Busan as the zombie virus rampages among its passengers. Once again, a group of human survivors fight both zombies and other humans as they search for safety. The supposedly safe shelters get ripped apart and destroyed. The movie also deals with issues of class, inequality, and human greed as they are embedded in a “profit-over-people” culture. The enemies of the survivor group are both the uninfected humans and the undead. The film’s social critique becomes particularly striking when examining how characters' actions—such as the selfish decisions of a wealthy businessman—reflect a culture of extreme individualism that thrives under Late Capitalism. His disregard for others’ lives to secure his own safety not only exacerbates the survivors’ peril but also mirrors the exploitative ethos that defines modern systems of power and resource distribution. The lack of cooperation, compassion, and community, as well as the resulting disasters, again act as an exorcism, as “the bad” die and “the pure” survive in the end. Through this lens, the film critiques the transactional nature of relationships shaped by hyper-

competitive environments, contrasting it with the emotional sacrifices made by characters who prioritize collective survival over individual gain. The high-speed train, symbolizing the glory of human civilization, eventually reaches Busan, and the movie ends with hope for restoration and re-establishment of the status quo. However, the journey aboard the train transcends mere physical traversal; it functions as a microcosm of societal struggles, exposing the fragility of ethical boundaries when survival is at stake. Characters like the father, Seok-woo, undergo significant transformation, shifting from an emotionally detached workaholic to a selfless protector of his daughter, which symbolizes a broader rejection of self-serving behaviors for the sake of communal welfare. This duality enriches the narrative, ensuring that even in the face of chaos, the possibility of hope and redemption remains.

As demonstrated through some of the most prominent examples above, the Romero zombie genre more or less adheres to the five-point narrative arc below:

1. Humanity lives by the Capitalistic ethos of "profit over people and nature," and, as a result of this greedy existence, the status quo gets violently disrupted, and the hostile hordes of the undead ravage humanity.
2. A band of survivors seek safety and reach a shelter that seems to provide prolonged safety.
3. The safe shelter gets overrun and torn apart as a result of both greedy, antagonistic humans and the hordes of undead.
4. At least one member of the survivor band dies or sacrifices herself, and the remaining human survivors keep fighting the enemies, searching for salvation.
5. The survivors eventually reach a safe place (human town, ship, plane, etc.) or situation (a vaccine, for example), which promises restoration and return to before-pandemic times. The zombies die out or get wiped out by the victorious humans.

What this research shows is that this narrative arc no longer holds and/or resonates with the contemporary human predicament and attitudes as well as it used to. As a result, the

narrative arc and the possibilities of the zombie figure are changing significantly. As death itself becomes embedded and seemingly inescapable in our current Late Capitalistic predicament, it seems that the only way to create a sustainable future is to embrace the life-in-death situation rather than pretending it does not exist or it will take place in the distant future.

The "end of the world" can have several different names, including doomsday, the apocalypse, or Armageddon, but the common denominator was always the cultural belief that the end of the world is *not now* but at some time in the future. The "Doomsday Clock," first appeared in the 1947 edition of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and has kept ticking towards midnight since the Cold War, never reaching that dreaded destination despite the multiplication of the crises civilization is facing. But what if the doomsday had already arrived? Or, what if assuming humanity is already *past midnight* is the only way to prevent the impending doom? This is what Slavoj Žižek's recent book *Too Late to Awaken: What Lies Ahead When There is No Future?* (2023) argues by saying,

> The apostle Paul characterized his own time in a way that seems to fit our present moment perfectly: 'Make no mistake about the age we live in; already it is high time for us to awake out of our sleep'(Romans 13:11). However, recent historical experience rather seems to demonstrate the opposite: there is no right moment to awaken…We solace ourselves with the thought that there is still time to act, and then, all of a sudden, we realize that there isn't … what if, in our historical moment, it's rather too late to awaken? We hear all the time that it's five minutes (or one minute, or even ten seconds) to noon, to global doomsday, so now is our last chance to avert disaster. But what if the only way to prevent a catastrophe is to assume that it has already happened – that we're already five minutes past zero hour? So what lies ahead when there is no future? (p.7-8)

According to Zizek, humanity could only imagine a sustainable and hopeful future if it assumed that the apocalypse had already occurred. His line of thinking suggests that humanity must begin to re-imagine its past to have a future. To put it another way, the past is open to retroactive reinterpretation, while the future is closed. This does not mean that we cannot change the future; it simply means that, in order to do so, we should first -- not merely "understand" but also *change* our past and reinterpret it in such a way that it opens up toward a different future. How we interpret the past

becomes crucial for creating a sustainable future, and it can only be accomplished if humanity accepts that the apocalypse has already taken place and we are now living past the later days. This is exactly what the self-aware Zombie narratives accomplish, they create a different future by going *through* the apocalypse and reflecting on the life-in-death predicament rather than deeming it completely abject and to be killed. In doing so, humanity can look back to the past and theorize what *could have* been done and understand the present in a more comprehensive manner so that the cataclysmic event would not occur. If the answers we give to this question can be implemented in real life, only then can a doomsday be averted.

3.1. Self-Aware Zombies: The Monster We Need?

Nina Auerbach once wrote that every generation creates and embraces the monsters it needs and that these monsters are reflective of what our times have become, along with its concerns and anxieties (1995). Our monsters mutate and evolve; they are the foes that humans mean to banish, but in one way or another, they creep back to their creators in the most uncannily way and once again show us what we do not want to face. Today's monsters, too, are changing as the immediacy of the intersecting crises becomes more evident, rendering precarity and impending doom present in the material world. If every generation does create, deserve, embrace, and need its own monsters, the newly emerging self-aware undead figure must be scrutinized. The embodied experience delivered through the sentient zombie most strikingly shows how the commodity fetishism created as a result of Capitalism is no longer limited to the commodification and fetishization of the non-human. The human body itself transforms and becomes a site of an alien commodity that experiences intensifying crisis and decay, reflecting the outer conditions of the Polycrisis on the embodied level. Andreescu, underlining the disconnect between the individual and her body, explores the current shift in human embodiment experience by stating,

> …the human body or organ as a commodity masquerades as a living, independent object and elides the actual humans and relations out of which they emerge. Just as we are made to see only the movement of commodities,

> rendering invisible the human labor that produced it, we are not able to see the individual from which the human organ was extracted (Garden and Murphree, 2007, p. 218). Through commodification and hence commodity fetishism, what was intimately linked to one's being – one's own body or organ in our case– no longer belongs to the individual, and instead confronts him/her as an alien, hostile and independent entity. (2016, p.147)

The self-reflective zombie figure lends itself as the quintessential metaphor to describe what Andreescu ascertains to be the current state of human experience: a commodified body that is only masquerading as an independent object and, as a result of this dehumanizing state of existence, becomes alien to its own embodied manifestation. In the case of the self-aware zombie, the individual is able to become aware of the alienness or the hostility of the body and confront it, problematizing a wide range of social and ethical deadlocks. This potential for a confrontation with the commodified and dehumanized self is the core of the self-aware zombie, who, to put it in again Nina Auerbach's terms, is the monster this generation chose to embrace and proliferate. The genealogy of the self-aware zombie is a subject of debate as some critics argue that the zombie character "Bub" in Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) is aware of his condition. However, since Bub only momentarily shows signs of emotion and primitive problem-solving skills in a manner similar to the rage zombies of *28 Days Later* (2002), he would not qualify for what this research identifies to be a self-reflective or self-aware zombie representation. Similarly, Dan O'Bannon's *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985) features zombies that can speak. Nevertheless, O'Bannon's zombies cannot engage in critical discourse with their own existence and can only be considered precursors to the self-reflective zombie. The same argument can be made for the zombie called "Big Daddy" in Romero's fourth zombie movie *Land of the Dead* (2005). This brings us to Andrew Currie's 2006 movie *Fido*. *Fido* is the first movie that features a kind of zombie representation that is in line with the "self-reflective" zombie. The main character, Fido, is a "domesticated" zombie who, upon domestication, becomes the unpaid servant of a suburban American family. Fido is controlled by a collar called "Zomcon," a device that suppresses his flesh-eating urges and makes him an obedient servant. As Fido spends more time with Timmy, the family's young boy, he shows signs of empathy and personality. The movie effectively transforms the doomed, bogeyman

zombie representation towards the zombie being a symbol of love and change. The transformation of Fido suggests the power of compassion over domination as a tool for positive change. In this respect, *Fido* is the first self-aware zombie movie. However, due to its relatively narrow focus on family life and the criticism of rigid social roles, this research focuses on the two following movies that expand the new figure so that would reach its full transformative potential. Isaac Marion's 2010 novel *Warm Bodies* is a zombie romance with a storyline loosely based on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The narrative innovation was continued in M.R. Carey's 2014 novel *The Girl with All the Gifts*. Both novels were adapted to film under the same names in years 2013 and 2016, respectively. This new zombie of *Warm Bodies* marks a sharp break from its traditional ancestors in terms of its ontological and epistemological significance as it is told from the perspective of R, a young zombie who is aware of his zombie state. The concept of awareness, which was always deemed contradictory to the concept of zombie, is thus being incorporated within. This new type of zombie can engage in activities other than mindlessly going after, attacking, killing, and eating humans. These narratives challenge and update zombiedom as a static, single-faceted figure and give them thoughts, identity, subjectivity, and potential for change.

The rapid proliferation of self-aware zombie figures is seen across many other mediums, such as TV and literature. Television series featuring self-reflective zombies, such as *In the Flesh* (2013-2014), *iZombie* (2015-2019), and *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-2019), are prominent examples. These TV series feature a self-aware zombie as its main protagonist and follow her as she deals with the ethical and existential consequences of being a brain eater and even experiencing an existential crisis.

In contemporary literature, there has been a notable emergence of critically acclaimed novels that effectively utilize zombie narrative tropes, even when the term 'zombie' is not explicitly used. Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One* adopts the main genre characteristics of a Romero zombie apocalypse but adds to the genre a new kind of zombie that is called "stragglers", catatonic zombies who seem to be stuck in a moment in an undecipherable but ominous location and position. The novel follows the stream of consciousness of Mark Spitz as he joins a military survivor group, attempting to

rebuild the status quo starting from the tip of Manhattan Island, which is now called "Zone One." As the novel progresses, the narrative turns into a philosophical self-investigation of who and what Mark Spitz really is, and he eventually comes to the conclusion that he himself is a straggler zombie, further reflecting on what this means on an individual, societal, economic and ethical level. Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) follows the pre and post-apocalyptic life of a New Yorker "millennial drone" Candace Chan, as she gradually realizes that where she stands when it comes to the zombie/human distinction is very vague to the point that the distinction is impossible. Finally, Argentinian novelist Agustina Bazterrica's critically acclaimed novel *Tender is the Flesh* (originally published as *Cadáver Exquisito*) (2020) presents a distinctive post-apocalyptic landscape in which the cannibalization of humans is socially acceptable. It can be argued that *Tender is the Flesh* is an extreme version of a self-aware zombie narrative in which the word "zombie" becomes unnecessary, as cannibalism has become the prevailing norm of being in the world. The novel follows the stream of consciousness of Marcos, a man who works for a major human meat (called "special meat" throughout the novel) slaughterhouse as he questions his and society's way of living, its unsustainability, and immorality. However, this period of self-reflection does not last for a long time, as at the end of the novel, Marcos succumbs to a flesh-consuming culture that is doomed to eventual decay and extinction.

Overall, the self-aware zombie self reflects and engages in a philosophical dialogue with herself. She becomes the main character, has an inner dialogue about the state of affairs, and hopes to gain a better understanding of the world, especially in social and ethical terms. This transformation marks a sharp break from the previous conceptualization of the zombie. As McIntosh noted, "Because zombies evolved in the popular cultural imagination the way they did, they symbolize a monster that can be killed guilt free." (2008, p.13). The self-aware zombie, however, acts as an antidote to "guilt-free killing" by questioning the act of guilt-free killing itself both from the zombie' and the non-infected humans' perspectives and using the metaphor as a way of dealing with humanity's "profit over people" way of living which also enables and justifies the death or injury of living beings and continues in a guilt-free fashion. In

virtue of this innovative critical capacity, as the next two chapters will argue, the self-aware zombie proves to be the ultimate metaphor for the possibility of hope and survival in the age of intersecting crises.

FROM MONSTER TO LOVER: THE JOURNEY TOWARDS HARMONY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN WARM BODIES

Warm Bodies, originally a novel by Isaac Marion and later adapted into cinema in 2013, profoundly transformed the ontology and representation of zombies in cinema by challenging the established genre convention that categorized the zombie as a doomed, abject creature. As Barbara Creed noted, the zombie as an abject representation, "threatens life and therefore must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject" (1986, p. 46). While *Fido* hinted at a similar innovative narrative trajectory, *Warm Bodies* is particularly significant and distinctive in that it unfolds within a traditional zombie apocalypse setting, progressively subverting this notion of abjectified radical exclusion to forge a new paradigm—a sustainable Posthuman existence based on cooperation and compassion that transcends the confines of both the zombie and the human.

The zombie genre in cinema, ever since the first Hollywood films of the 1930s to the 2000s, captured the zombie state as an irreversible and abject one in which the regenerative capabilities of the zombie were eliminated. *Warm Bodies*, however, begins with the inner dialogue of a wandering zombie, R, who retains his awareness, albeit turning into a zombie. Although he remembers nothing about his former life and can only remember the first letter of his name, he is conscious of his zombified state and knows that he was once a human. As a result of this narrative shift, *Warm Bodies* offers a unique narrative perspective: the stream of consciousness of the undead himself as he grapples with his contradictory and precarious existence and its ethical consequences on a societal level. R's self-reflecting narration, particularly during the first half of the movie, enables an insightful exploration of the embodied and social experience of a young person who cannot imagine a life outside slow decay. The inability to imagine a Post-Capitalistic future, coupled with the intensifying Polycrisis, is explored within the "abject other" itself rather than remaining an exclusively anthropocentric category. During the second half of the movie, as R and Julie's love relationship develops, both

characters start to evolve and transform into a Posthuman state of sustainable and ethical beings through the impact of human connection, love, community, and solidarity. R's transformation causes a ripple effect on the entire population. Following his lead, both humans and zombies *remember* and regain what was lost and form a new cooperating whole rather than perpetuating the constant state of conflict and ever-worsening destruction. The state of desolation, scarcity, and war in which the film begins slowly shifts toward communal welfare, acceptance, and sustainable peace. By close reading the imagery and the dialogue of the film, this chapter will demonstrate how *Warm Bodies* captures and comments on the embodied existence of the individual in the age of a polycrisis created by a "profit over all else" mentality through the employment of a self-aware zombie narrative as well as discussing what it offers as a potential solution to understand and resist the existential threats humanity is facing today.

4.1. Inside the Zombie's Brain: Infection as Affliction

Warm Bodies proves to be a poignant exploration of what it is like to be a young individual in today's Late Capitalistic era through its innovative and subversive use of the zombie representation and narrative. Loosely based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Warm Bodies* tells the story of a zombie named R who falls in love with a human. The deadly feud between the Montagues and the Capulets is reimagined as the mortal combat between flesh-eating zombies and armed humans during a zombie apocalypse. Like Romeo and Juliet, R and Julie are denied union. However, while Romeo and Juliet perish at the end of Shakespeare's love tragedy, R and Julie survive and manage to end the feud between the two clans through the transformative power of love and acceptance of the other. *Warm Bodies* changed the entire narrative framework of how a zombie apocalypse narrative can develop by breaking the "guilt-free" killing of the "abject zombie" trope, subverting the trope itself to comment on the "guilt-free" destruction of the society and the planet in a profit-for-profit's-sake way of being, facing and giving voice to what was deemed the abject other. Since the film is

ambitious in terms of the range of the issues it problematizes, this analysis will start by clarifying what the zombie is aware of and how it relates to today's individual subjectivities by using Simone Weil's concept of "affliction" as an entry point.

The actual lives of the working class, their daily realities, psychology, the process of exploitation and dehumanization are very rarely experienced by those who theorize about human emancipation, freedom, and revolution. Simone Weil, an unusual philosopher of the 20th century, is among those who believed in personally experiencing the states she philosophized about. After working at a Renault factory for a year, Simone Weil drastically changed her views on what it is like to be a wage laborer in a Capitalist society and developed her concept of "affliction" and the "afflicted state". As it will be argued, the self-aware zombie as an "infected" being is a very apt metaphor to describe this state as it continues living, but in a very altered, diminished, dehumanized, and paradoxical way. Weil describes the state of affliction in her notebooks as follows,

> As I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. Nothing separated me from it for I had really forgotten my past and I looked forward to no future, finding it difficult to imagine the possibility of surviving all the fatigue. What I went through there marked me in so lasting a manner that still today, when any human being, whoever he may be and in whatever circumstances, speaks to me without brutality, I cannot help having the impression that there must be a mistake and that unfortunately the mistake will in all probability disappear. There I received forever the mark of a slave, like the branding of the red-hot iron which the Romans put on the foreheads of their most despised slaves. (2005, p.28-29)

After her year in the factory, Weil began to develop her ideas as to why the proletariat revolution, as Marx foresaw, did not and could not happen in real life. As her description of the afflicted state suggests, the workers' belief of even surviving the fatigue (suggesting an un-dead state) and the brutality of exploitation made it impossible to organize effective political impact. Weil's direct and uncompromising manner of identifying the nonhuman condition under Capitalism is a striking starting point for discussing the self-reflective zombie figure as symbolic of the crisis-age individual of our times. Although the dehumanizing outcomes of wage labor have been

a subject of discussion since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, Weil's understanding is markedly different in the sense that it does not shy away from exploring the *deadliness* embedded within it and the true horrors it brings about. Moreover, her manner of understanding this state is given additional scope as it is connected to her distinctive understanding of humanity, its obligations to one another, and what she called "the needs of its soul". Therefore, her argument of the afflicted, much like the self-reflecting zombie, acknowledges the death-in-life situation that she experienced as a laborer but is not very often discussed. As she explains,

> Affliction is a device for pulverizing the soul; the man who falls into it is like a workman who gets caught up in a machine. He is no longer a man but a torn and bloody rag on the teeth of a cogwheel. The degree and type of suffering which constitutes affliction in the strict sense of the word varies greatly with different people. It depends chiefly upon the amount of vitality they start with and upon their attitude towards suffering. Human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction…To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being. (2005, p.90)

As Weil suggests, once the individual faces his own afflicted state, she experiences what it is like to be a non-being. Tragically, the individual can experience this and become aware of the dehumanized condition, much like a self-aware zombie or a branded slave, as Weil describes her own awareness of affliction. Moreover, the observation that the degree of affliction varies among people resonates with *Warm Bodies'* distinction between regular zombies and "boneys" — those who have lost all hope, lost their ability to self-reflect on their non-being and finally turned into mindless flesh eaters who can never regain their humanity. As Weil continues, "This is why the naked spectacle of affliction makes the soul shudder as the flesh shudders at the proximity of death…It arouses horror. At the stark sight of death, the flesh recoils." (2005, p. 91). Through the narrative structure and the metaphors of cinema, this reality of affliction can be explored without arousing intense horror. Especially via *Warm Bodies's* distinction between the regular zombies and the vicious boneys, the audience is able to identify, mediate upon, and distinguish between what it is like to be aware of one's embodied afflicted state and the possible naked spectacle of its unleashed and terminal forms together with the conditions that created it.

In contemporary Late Capitalism, the daily realities of the "life-in-death" condition are constantly pushed out of sight and kept under control by dominating ideologies and the artificial desires they manufacture. However, an individual's recognition of his impotent position cannot be completely suppressed. Similar to the Lacanian Real(s) suppressed by what Mark Fisher termed Capitalist Realism to hide, "reality" flashes through the cracks for brief moments as the inconsistencies of the so-called "natural" state of reality are sensed. The self-aware zombie, again, by its paradoxical and inconsistent nature, is subversive of what is "natural" and an urgent call for self-reflection and a better, wider, and dialectical grasp of reality. That is, the self-aware zombie is not only identifying the current dehumanizing condition but is also challenging the supposed naturalness of the Capitalist way of existence by way of demonstrating the "unnatural" and destructive outcomes it creates against the wellbeing of all. R's inner dialogue at the beginning of the film contains the pure essence of afflicted embodiment and the overwhelming reflexive impotence it brings upon the subject. However, taken as a whole, the film points at a path to step beyond Capitalist Realism and the reflexive impotence it brings upon people, especially the young population. Before embarking upon a textual analysis of the first scene of the movie in which R's inner dialogue is given, the chosen setting and the embedded imagery must be explicated as these two realms, the inner and the outer, complement and echo each other to solidify the material reality of affliction as represented in a post-apocalyptic zombie narrative.

The movie opens in an unnamed airport, evidently post-apocalyptic but *not* desolate. The representation of the public space does not match the unfunctional realm of the decaying undead as previous zombie narratives such as Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* or AMC's *The Walking Dead* portrayed. Instead, with the security still working, the janitor still sweeping, and the passengers going through the phases of embarkment and waiting for their flights, the airport somehow functions with one caveat: all those within are dead and decaying, and the planes never move. The existence of the laboring zombies, combined with the immediately given knowledge that zombies are capable of thinking, creates an innovatively uncanny realm that mirrors the socially veiled horror of affliction. The chosen setting, the airport, and its uncanny imagery attest to the illusory

nature of the idea of unlimited progress and infinite accumulation associated with free market Capitalism. Even though the flights (the constant progression towards new destinations) no longer take place, the people who once took place in perpetuating the illusion cannot disengage from their afflicted/infected conditioning. The uncanny determination of the zombies to keep performing the former familiar labors highly resembles the time loop zombies of Ling Ma's *Severance*. However, unlike the infected of *Severance*, whose symbolic function was mostly associated with the protagonist's gradual recognition of her own state as a time loop zombie, the protagonist of *Warm Bodies*, R, begins his journey as a self-acknowledged zombie, exploring the ways of escaping the time loop to make a sustainable future possible. The melancholic waiting and laboring inside the flightless airport are symbolic of the vicious cycle in which the problems created by Capitalism are attempted/promised to be solved by Capitalism itself. Yet, the zombie workers' commitment to their posts as they slowly decay into oblivion demonstrates humanity's current inability to imagine an alternative future or a means to escape the perceived impotence. The disguised potency of Capitalism's emblematic public spaces like the airport, the shopping mall, or the highway thus complements the diminished capability of human imagination toward a sustainable future.

4.1.1. Non-Human and the Non-Place

The insidiously potent effects of certain places that proliferated as a result of Global Capitalism were famously studied by anthropologist Marc Augé in his 1992 book *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Augé uses the concept of "supermodernity" as a general term to reflect upon the changing logic of structuring human experience in Late Capitalistic societies. He draws attention to the rapidly increasing time humans now spend in places that lack what he calls *the qualities of placeness*. Places, according to Augé, have at least three common characteristics. They either are (or people desire them to be) "places of identity, of relations and of history." (1992, p.52). In virtue of these characteristics, *places* offer organic community, intra-

personal communication, and creativity, whereas non-places like motorways, shopping malls, and airports lack the possibility of offering these intimate social opportunities that humans both need and crave. The rules of these non-places and the nature of the interactions they permit are pre-determined and uniform. Augé writes that in the non-place, "Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing its motives, its words and images, from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present." (1992, p.84). The limited nature of these spaces eliminates the possibility of the individual to exist inside them in an authentic manner. The individual is sucked into a rootless non-identity as personal history becomes irrelevant. Resonating with this spatiotemporal effect, R is experiencing complete amnesia with regard to his past, family, and community, barely able to hold on to the first letter of his name. Augé further elaborates on the state of existing in these places by likening it to a kind of possession, reminiscent of Weil's concept of affliction, as both imply the enthralling impact of a debilitating outside force. Augé writes, "Subjected to a gentle form of possession, to which he surrenders himself with more or less talent or conviction, he tastes for a while - like anyone who is possessed - the passive joys of identity loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing." [3] (1992, p.103).

Here, the words subjection, conviction, and surrender mirror the airport dwellers' docility in terms of acting (role-playing) as if the airport is still in use. Non-places fester solitude and alienation. Their uniform structure makes them everywhere and anywhere at once as, for instance, one shopping mall in the USA is visually indistinguishable from one in Greece or anywhere else in the age of global Late Capitalism. In this way, the non-human condition is inextricably fused with its non-place surroundings. This coexistence in space and time brings us to a discussion of the sensations and the possible futures of this limbo-like spatiotemporally.

[3] The possessed state of role-playing Augé identifies resonates heavily with Romero's criticism of the consumer society in his second *Dead* film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) in which the survivors mindlessly enjoy the pleasures of the shopping mall during a zombie apocalypse.

According to Mark Fisher, the non-places being unlocatable in space and time contribute to a *flattening* sense of time on a larger scale. Exploring the contemporary byproducts of non-places, Fisher develops his version of *hauntology*, a term originally coined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994). In Fisher's thought, Augé's earlier arguments find presence as puzzle pieces in the larger dialectical framework through which Fisher argues for the "out of joint" nature of Late Capitalism, highlighting its hauntological and eerie presence in terms of embodied psychological experience, place and time (2012).

Fisher suggests that Western society, in general, is haunted by the remnants of its *lost futures* (2012). These futures are the optimistic and imaginative outlooks of modernity society once adopted, and they symbolize the human capacity to imagine alternatives, better prospects, and emancipation for all. In the case of *Warm Bodies*, the haunting of the lost futures and hope for change present themselves as R's self-awareness, which remains as a relic or remnant inside his decaying mind and body. In other words, approached via the lens of Fisher's hauntology, the undead figure himself (which is symbolic of a humanity incapable of imagining a Post-Capitalist future) is haunted by the self-awareness it retains (rather than merely being the "haunting," ghost-like figure as it used to be in most zombie representations). This hauntological remnant is strongly present in the first line of the movie. As he is straggling through the non-place airport, R begins by asking himself, "What am I doing with my life?" immediately questioning the material conditions of his life and his embodied experience within it. His critical inner self directs him to go out more, eat better, and fix his posture as the camera focuses on his tired eyes and purple eye bags. Although he looks extinguished, his visage does not immediately give up his zombification, unlike the gory, rotten stereotypical Romero zombie. This deliberate choice emphasizes R's liminal or contradictory position as a being experiencing life-in-death, haunted by what he lost. Later in his inner monologue, he expresses the loneliness, stagnation, and desperation of his state, saying, "I just want to connect. Why can't I connect with people?". Although his undead state is the obvious reason for his inability to connect, he paradoxically grieves and is haunted by this absence and fails to imagine regaining his ability to connect and avoid slow decay.

More strikingly, R's inner voice constantly diverges from lamentation towards a critical tone through which he blames himself for his inability to increase his current self-capital. His question, "What is wrong with me?" reflects R's perception of his dehumanized cul-de-sac as a failure of his own as opposed to a consequence of a larger structural crisis[4]. Thus, enthralled both from inside and the outside, the hauntological mind space of R mirrors his uncanny spatiotemporally, putting forward his current condition and the only visible future prospect: complete burnout, which is symbolized through one zombie he watches as it loses all hope, completely gives in to the infection and rips off his own skin to turn into a soulless Romero "boney", a dark, all-consuming vortex. This image ends the first scene and gives way to an exploration of R's interactions with the others, commenting on the effects of these issues on a communal scale.

4.2. Rootlessness and the Disintegration of Community

As the previous section argued, the spaces that become more and more synonymous with Late Capitalism are closely related to the loss of personal history, community, and the advancement of time into the future. Using a second concept from Simone Weil's thought, "rootlessness," as an entry point, this section will analyze the self-aware zombie narrative in *Warm Bodies* as a means to identifying and commenting on the major obstacles that prevent change toward an alternative society and a non-destructive future.

Simon Weil argued that material needs are not the only ones required for the survival of humans. She posited several "needs of the soul," which she believed to be as important as material needs. In her book *The Need for Roots* (2003), she identifies and discusses fourteen distinct needs of the soul before starting to discuss the most important one in a separate chapter: the need for roots. In Weil's philosophy, the need for roots does not

[4] This self-accusatory stance reflects the contemporary dominant ideologies of toxic individualism and wellness culture, two aspects theorized by Byung-Chul Han via his concept of a "burnout society." (2015).

suggest harboring rigid sentiments of nationalism or strict devotion customs. She identifies the need for roots primarily as a connection to one's social surroundings, writing,

> To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. (2003, p.40)

In Weil's view, roots imply a past identity and hope for the future, two qualities that are lacking in the self-aware zombie due to its afflicted state. One can conceptualize the need for roots as a tree and its roots. As it is impossible for the tree to continue its life once it is cut from its roots, humans cannot sustain authentic life without a past, present, and future connection to their community. Once it is severed from its roots, the existence of a tree becomes one of commodity existence, exclusively transactional, profit-centered, and non-sustainable. Ultimately, the commodified tree is doomed to lose all chances of survival without the nourishment the roots must provide. Similarly, humans can only continue a life-in-death existence without a solid connection to their community and are doomed for extinction, much like the decaying zombies of *Warm Bodies*. Nevertheless, change towards sustainable life, replenishment, and restoration is possible just as it is possible for a tree to regrow roots under proper care. Thus, avoiding extinction requires a diagnosis of the current state of human roots to prescribe the proper remedy. In humans' case, this diagnostical process requires a close examination of what is severing the societal roots and how.

Weil (and other philosophers such as Žižek and Han) identify the domination of capital and its effects on human modus operandi as the fundamental contributor to this sickness that she identified as the "most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed" (2003, p. 56). As she states,

> Money destroys human roots wherever it is able to penetrate, by turning desire for gain into the sole motive. It easily manages to outweigh all other motives, because the effort it demands of the mind is so very much less. Nothing is so clear and so simple as a row of figures. (2003, p.41)

The Need for Roots was first published posthumously in 1949. In the years between, the domination of profit has only intensified in human civilization, exacerbating uprootedness. Once again, Weil's uncompromising characterization of uprootedness as a deadly disease demonstrates her foresight as the problems created by a transactional mindset have now brought humanity to a dangerous impasse of severe social, economic, and ecological crises. Contemporary philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in a very similar fashion to Weil, argues that the loss of binding roots and social traditions that came upon via toxic individualism and the transactional ideology of Neoliberalism is resulting in an unending destructive antagonism. In his book, *The Agony of Eros* (2017), Han suggests that "the relation to the wholly other," how he defines contemporary Eros, is now being lost. In his view, the relation of Eros is being replaced by profit-seeking as the dominant mode of human interaction.

In contemporary popular culture, Eros commonly refers to the Ancient Greek god of love and desire and is visualized through its Roman version, Cupid, a mischievous baby shooting arrows of love. Nonetheless, Eros as a deity had a more foundational significance in Ancient Greece. The earliest text on the Greek cosmogony is Hesiod's *Theogony*, a long poem from c. 7th Century BC. It is considered to be one of the most important resources for understanding the genealogies of Greek Gods and Goddesses. In Theogony, Hesiod describes Eros as one of the animating forces of the universe.

> First there was Chaos, then broad-chested Gaia,
> the steadfast seat of all immortals who live upon the snowy peaks of Olympus,
> then murky Tartarus in the depths of the wide earth, and Eros,
> most beautiful of the immortal gods, who weakens
> the limbs and overwhelms the minds and wise
> counsel in the breasts of all gods and humans. (2021, p.8)

In Hesiod's account, Eros is a fundamental cause of creation and the most beautiful one who brings harmony in the form of "wise counsel in the breasts" to counterbalance the destructive force of Chaos. Similarly, in Plato's Socratic dialogue, *The Symposium,* Phaedrus claims that Eros is the oldest god by referring to the writings of Hesiod, Acusilaus, and Parmenides, implying that his force is the most impactful one

in human life (1951, 178a-178c). Thus, Eros transcends his state as the god of love and desire and proves to be an elemental force for sustaining human existence. This understanding of Eros resonates with Han's argument, in which Eros's agony is tied to the eradication of sustainable life. As he states,

> Capitalism is eliminating otherness wholesale in order to subordinate everything to consumption. Eros, however, represents an *asymmetrical* relationship to the Other. As such, it interrupts the exchange rate. Otherness admits no bookkeeping. It does not appear in the balance of debt and credit. (2017, p.16)

Eros, defined as the relation to the wholly other, is being eradicated as the ethos of Capitalism dictates all relations to be of a transactional kind. Without the interruption of the wholly other, existence dissolves into a homogenous mass that is subordinated by capital. The homogeneity engulfing human relationships is reflected in Warm Bodies through the imagery of the zombie horde, especially in the representation of "boneys". Boneys cannot be distinguished from one another as they literally peel their individuality off their bodies, shedding all markers of otherness, effectively becoming "consumption embodied". Devoid of Eros, the movie openly states that all boneys are doomed to perish no matter how much human flesh they consume since their own bodies are not replenished by raging consumption. According to Han,

> Eros is a relationship to the Other situated beyond achievement, performance, and ability. *Being able not to be able*…represents its negative counterpart. The negativity of otherness—that is, the atopia of the Other, which eludes all ability…A successful relationship with the Other finds expression as a kind of *failure*. (2017, p.11)

Eros, as a relationship that acknowledges the "negativity" of the wholly other, is diametrically opposed to the transactional mindset of a Neoliberal society in which achievement and ability are central. While Han calls for a normalization of this inability and the necessary failure, profit-seeking and projecting modes of interaction respond with immediate destruction when faced with the wholly other. Although R is capable of reflecting upon his zombiehood and what he lost, as shown in the analysis of his inner dialogue, his first interaction with another zombie reflects his vision of the wholly other as food to devour rather than beings to form relations of Eros. After haunting the airport and thinking to himself, R approaches one of the airport bars where he sits with his best

friend (an unnamed zombie) every day. The pastless and rootless zombies grunt at each other for a while instead of having a conversation, completely failing to engage in an intelligible or authentic manner. After uttering glottal sounds at each other, they manage to make out only two words: “hungry” and “city”. The only spoken words uttered by zombies reflect their primary motives as a thirst to consume, a thirst for what Han calls “achievement, performance, and ability”. The possibility of relating to the wholly other is blocked by what R calls “the new thirst,” which is extremely hard to override. On the other side of the medallion, the surviving humans are equally antagonistic and practical towards the zombies. Humans see zombies as abject, bare life, kill them guilt-free on sight, and live inside the city guarded by an enormous wall to ensure the isolation of their polis.

4.2.1. Humans of the Walled City

The psychological and spatiotemporal conditions of the self-aware zombies mirror that of the humans living inside the walled city. That is, while the zombies retain diminished awareness inside the decaying body, humans, too, retain limited awareness and emotional capacity inside the tight perimeters of the city. Instead of the limiting and decaying body of the zombie, humans are bound within the parameters of walls that are prone to breaches and destruction. Inside the walled city, the camera focuses on a group of young humans preparing for a critical supply run outside the walls. After passing various military checkpoints and showing their clearance papers, the group approaches an enormous screen through which the General speaks. The emphasis on constant surveillance that began with the checkpoints is thus cemented with the overseeing Big Brother presence of the General, who prefers to appear through a screen rather than in person to insinuate his virtual omnipresence, reinforcing the feeling of a panoptical prison. General’s modus operandi toward the zombies, or as humans call them, corpses, is to kill them on sight without a moment’s hesitation. Thus, zombies’ thirst for human destruction is repeated by humans with an equal urge for destruction and eradication. When General’s ethereal avatar describes the zombies, saying, “They

are uncaring, unfeeling, incapable of remorse" (Levine, 2013, 00:07:00). Julie, the General's daughter whispers to her boyfriend, "Sound like anyone you know Dad?" (Levine, 2013, 00:07:00). Julie's silent but potent remark is a sign that, like R, she is aware of the dehumanizing conditions of her existence. Her inability to act against her limited existence is symbolized not only through the walls of the city but also by the patriarchal father figure who is constantly surveilling and ordering transactional relations or guilt-free killing. Overall, the scene suggests that the nature of the relationships humans form is not any more intimate or authentic than that of zombies. To convey this lack of authentic connection and intimacy (or, in Han's terms, the lack of a relationship of Eros), the movie employs the act of holding hands as an extended metaphor. The imagery of holding hands (or refusing to do so) is seen in multiple scenes of the movie and ultimately points to the kind of relationship we must form with others (or the mentality we must adopt) and the non-human world if the Polycrisis is to be averted and extinction avoided. In this particular scene, Julie's attempt to hold her boyfriend's hand while listening to the General's speech is returned by a dismissive gesture on her boyfriend's part, evidently denying authentic intimacy as he puts the transactional value of the occasion over authentic connection. After the introduction of this extended metaphor, the film seems to conclude its commentary on the existing state of the world that is causing destruction and possible extinction. The rest of the film, beginning with the moment R and Julie see each other for the first time, explores a possible path toward reversing the impending doom and constructing an alternative, sustainable future for all beings inhabiting the Earth. The solution that Warm Bodies offers by using the self-aware zombie narrative includes a radical transformation of human perspective and way of "being in the world", which will be discussed in relation to Han's understanding of Eros, Weil's concept of attention and Levinas's establishment of ethics as first philosophy.

4.3. Attention, Eros, and the Hand of the Other

The scene in which R sees Julie for the first time marks a sharp break from the previous, instrumentally driven or profit-seeking ways of seeing. Although R and the other zombies attack Julie and her friends to consume them, what happens at the sight of her face is diametrically opposed to what is traditionally associated with a zombie figure and its motives. To convey this change of perception (or attention), the camera instantly shifts to slow motion, and a layer of romantic slow music is added to the otherwise violent scene. The introduction of "rom-com" elements, which are rarely seen in the zombie genre, further highlights the sudden subversive shift. The pupils of R's zombie eyes visibly dilate and focus to suggest a newfound vitality and clear sight. Julie, seen from the fixed eyes of R, fights for her life, shooting other zombies without hesitation. Loyal to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, it is love at first sight. The romantic trance experienced by R is suddenly interrupted when Julie's boyfriend Perry shoots R in the chest, ending the scene with a final gunshot sound. Since zombies can only be killed by headshots, R is unaffected by the bullet and proceeds to attack and eat Perry. As he holds up his arm to bite, R looks at his wrist. The scene stops for a brief moment, and we hear R's inner voice again, saying, "Nice watch" (Levine, 2013, 00:11:57). This peculiar insertion of R's stream of consciousness serves as a further contrast between two very different modes of seeing that are available to humans and how easy it is to switch between them. On the one hand, there is the pragmatic, profit-seeking, competitive, or instrumental mode of seeing that lacks Eros and is associated with the ethos of Late Capitalism, and on the other, there is an "attentive" mode of seeing the other as fully other, without any projections of one's own agenda. The attentive mode puts the acknowledgment of the other and a deeper, broader understanding of the interconnectedness of all things before immediate profit or self-gain. Simone Weil extensively theorized extensively about this former mode of perceiving and experiencing oneself and the world. In her posthumously published writings published in the book titled Waiting for God, she describes the concept of attention as follows,

> Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (2009, p.111-112)

The suspended, detached, and trance-like mode of perception through which R's mind was penetrated at the sight of Julie resonates heavily with the "attention" Weil theorized as a possible way of transforming the human existence and freeing it from the shackles of outside forces that cause affliction in the first place. R lets go of his flesh-eating urges to fully experience the negative and other being of Julie. By being able to put aside the "new hunger", R gains the ability to overcome his afflicted and uprooted state of being in the world. The attentive mode of conscious experience suggests that "attending" neutrally to the other is the only way of understanding her. Attention necessarily involves a heightened sense of lucidity, which, as Weil states, "does away with insatiable desire and vain fears; from this and not from anything else proceed moderation and courage, virtues without which life is nothing but a disgraceful frenzy." (2004, p.82). Similarly, in Warm Bodies, at the aforementioned moment of attentiveness, the chaotic frenzy of the zombie apocalypse slows down, and a rapid, unstoppable transformation begins. Although the attentive mode of seeing is cut short by an act of violence, it seems to leave a mark on R as he breaks the fourth wall while eating Perry's brain, directly speaking to the audience in an apologetic tone, "Now I'm not proud of this. In fact, I'd appreciate it if you might look away for a moment here. I don't like hurting people, but this is the world now. The new hunger is a very powerful thing." (Levine, 2013, 00:12:00). This time, R's inner voice underlines the ethical dimensions of the attentive mode by pointing at the shame that arises from committing an immoral act when he steps out of "attending" to the other. After committing the shame-inducing act, he quickly reverts back to the attentive mode and saves Julie's life instead of eating her as well. R realizes that the only way to save Julie's life is to make the other zombies believe she is one of them. In a very symbolic act, he smears his

blood on her forehead, anointing her as an acknowledged other and also suggesting a kind of holiness to their genuine connection. The metaphor of the anointed face complements that of holding hands, fusing together to make an ontological and ethical commentary, which resonates with philosopher Levinas' argument for ethics as the first philosophy. A discussion of Levinas' thought and how it highlights the powers of the "face" can add to Weil's suggestion of employing the cognitive mode of "attention" as a possible way of transforming human experience towards sustainability and peace.

Levinas, in an interview with Richard Kearney, states that the "approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility", underlining the key role of the face in his ethical philosophy as the material presence that initiates the ethical relationship between the self and the other (2004, p. 75). The immense power of the face of the other seems to arise from its vulnerability. It, according to Levinas, communicates the shared fragility of existence and initiates an inescapable, binding ethical discourse. The face, he asserts, "opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation." (1969, p.201). The acknowledgment of the face of the other automatically creates an unescapable ethical dimension. Levinas further states, "The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill. (1985, p. 86). The face of the human invites the zombie to violence; it establishes the otherness, but at the same time, it is the shared vulnerability that the face exposes that forbids such violence and proves it unethical. The way R "attends" to Julie attests to this shared vulnerability: she is fighting for her life, trying to stay alive, just like the zombies, and if he is not to "anoint" her with his blood (a shared symbol of vulnerability), her death is certain. Julie, exposed and helpless against the zombie horde, is thus saved by R's recognition of shared vulnerability and taken to the airport where the zombies reside. R hides Julie inside the plane, where he dwells. Even though he makes it clear that he is not interested in eating her, Julie still tries to escape twice and only survives thanks to R's best friend's help, who has already begun to develop self-awareness as a result of witnessing this new sort of bond (which can be explained through a relationship of Eros, attentive mode of seeing or acknowledging the ethical connotations of the face of the other). R and Julie take refuge in an abandoned house, and for the first time in his undead life, R

is able to sleep and dream. The capacity to dream is highly symbolic of being able to imagine a future and works against the narrative of reflective impotence and Capitalist Realism that runs deep in Late Capitalistic societies. However, R's optimistic dream is cut short when he wakes up and realizes Julie has abandoned him and returned to the walled city of humans. R, thinking this is the end, begins his journey back to the airport but soon comes across a group of zombies led by his best friend, who reveals that the vicious boneys are hunting for both of them. He says, "It started something. I saw pictures last night. Memories, my mom, summertime, ice-cream, wheat, a girl," describing his retuned ability to dream and accommodate thoughts that are beyond those of transactional nature (Levine, 2013, 01:01:00). The iconic balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet is thus recreated as R risks his own life to warn Julie and secretly enters the walled city. As Juliet was interrupted by her nurse in the original Shakespearean version, the Juliet of Warm Bodies is interrupted by her best friend who, upon discovering R's existence, subverts the original narrative and allows him to come inside and even helps him to look human so that he would not get killed by the humans of the walled city. R's selfless act of warning Julie against the coming boney invasion develops to fruition during the double suicide scene, which is again reimagined to result in not death but continuation and transformation of life. When they are cornered by the flesh-eating boneys on the edge of a tall building, R sacrifices himself to make sure Julie survives the fall. His sacrifice, however, seems only to kill the zombie in him as he wakes up in a pool of water (symbolic of purification and rebirth) with human eyes instead of blank zombie eyes. Shot by the humans of the walled city, R bleeds. At the sight of his face (symbolized by his revitalized eyes) and his blood, humans of the walled city finally recognize the shared vulnerability that creates the moral obligation, relationship of Eros and adopt an attentive mode of being in the world and hold hands. "This is how the world was exhumed" (Levine, 2013, 01:29:00), R says, describing how humans rose from the grave, became un-undead, to create a sustainable mode of being in the world.

The movie concludes with a strong posthumanist, transformative message, as opposed to the classical end of the zombie narrative arc, in which a return to the status quo is

either established or implied. In the last scene, when the peace is finally achieved, R and Julie sit on top of a building overlooking the new world they have created. When R is asked by Julie if he remembers his name or wants to return to his old life, R replies without hesitation by saying, “No. I want this one…Just R.” (Levine, 2013, 01:31:00). Overall, the figure of a self-aware zombie, a being that is already dead, as symbolic and representative of the impasse humanity has now reached, is used to create a road map towards survival and sustainability by exposing the problematic aspects of the embodied and social experience of the individual in Late- Capitalistic era and what exactly must change if humanity is to build a harmonious existence with each other and the other beings of planet Earth.

"THE WORLD IS NOT OVER, IT IS JUST NOT YOURS ANYMORE!": ANTHROPOCALYPSE AND THE ZOMBIE POSTHUMAN IN THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS

The Girl with All the Gifts is another self-aware zombie narrative that revolutionized the genre's possibilities. It was first written as a novel by M. R. Carey in 2014, and upon its immediate success, a film version was released in 2016, written by the novel's author himself and directed by Colm McCarthy. Similar to *Warm Bodies*, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (*The Girl* hereafter) takes place in a post-apocalyptic near future, in which a mutated pathogenic fungus named *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis* has infected most humans and turned them into "hungries." The hungries are Romeroesque mindless zombies that constantly seek human flesh. They do not seem to be self-aware as they are completely taken over by the mutated fungus, which is propagating its own species by creating a symbiotic relationship with the undead body. However, there is an exception to this infected undead figure: the pregnant women who were about to give birth when they got infected by *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis* gave birth to a completely different kind of zombie. These new generation of zombies are self-aware beings with advanced cognitive capacity and show a deep, harmonious understanding of nature. They present what can be described as a *synthesis* of human and fungus features that give them a radically different vision regarding their mode of existence on Earth.

Despite being self-aware, new-generation zombies still exhibit an urge to consume flesh when they come too close to uninfected organisms. On this basis, they are treated like subhuman monsters, abject bare life, mere test subjects to experiment on by all human survivors in the military base, except Helen Justineau, who is responsible for their education. The initial setting of *The Girl* is reminiscent of *Warm Bodies*. Once again, humanity has reached a cataclysmic situation in which the remaining population is striving to avoid extinction, living under military rule and fighting against the infected. By imagining a time in which humanity is on the brink of extinction, *The Girl* locates several core reasons that led to the chaotic downfall, which is used as a mirror to reflect

upon the contemporary age of intensifying crises, its reasons, consequences and humanity's inability to imagine a sustainable alternative and to overcome the intersecting crises. The protagonist as a self-reflecting zombie, similar to R in *Warm Bodies*, marks the post-human turning point as it is symbolic of consciousness becoming aware of the failing structure within and without and taking a revolutionary stance against the debilitating consequences of the ideology of Anthropocene. While *Warm Bodies* focused mostly on the transactional side of this ideology, *The Girl* widens the scope of this discussion by engaging with other crucial aspects such as education, ethics of science, protection of nature, and the existential rights of other species.

This chapter will focus on the film version as its main point of reference and offer a detailed analysis of how *The Girl* identifies and comments on the "profit over people" mindset of Neoliberal ethos as the harbinger of the apocalyptic situation and how the self-aware zombie narrative is employed to offer insight as to what it is that must change, and how it can be changed if a mass extinction is to be avoided and a harmonious existence is to be established. The revolutionary optimistic ending of *The Girl* provides this research with an opportunity to discuss the possibility of Post-Capitalistic futures and how they might come to exist in real world.

5.1. The *End* of Education

The Girl begins and ends with two drastically different classroom scenes. While the first scene is one of horror and dominance, the last one is a peaceful and promising one, open to the future and its myriad possibilities. In this sense, one of the biggest issues the movie is commenting on is the detrimental state of the education system and how it is related to destructive and unsustainable modes of human existence in general. While education can and does take place in all stages of human life, for the purposes of this chapter, education is narrowly defined as what children experience on a mass scale at schools during their formative years, which is then constitutive of the future individuals who function on earth as adults. Whether privatized or state-provided, what education is

and how it is inextricably linked to the larger schema of the status-quo-preserving power dynamics has been investigated by many theoreticians. Marxist sociologist Louis Althusser, in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" famously argued for the existence of two different kinds of apparatuses that the ruling class employs in order to preserve the exploitative status quo: repressive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses (2024). While the repressive state apparatuses are relatively easier to detect since they have the authority to use violence and punishment (police, courts, and military can be given as examples), the ideological state apparatuses operate in more subtle and diverse forms of coercion. Family, organized religion, and school systems are among the institutions Althusser identifies as the state apparatuses that function ideologically rather than repressively. As he explains,

> …the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'. All the agents of production, exploitation and repression…must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously'…(2024, p.)

By identifying the repressive nature of the education system by underlining its servitude for the ends of the ruling ideology, Althusser facilitates the discussion of the classroom in relation to the unsustainably exploitative Capitalist mode of existence. Moreover, Althusser thought education had a higher coercive rank with regard to other forms of ideological apparatuses of the Capitalist state by suggesting, "one ideological State apparatus certainly has the dominant role, although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School." (2024, p.156). The silence of the school can be due to its inescapability as it is experienced by all, normalized, and left unchallenged. However, by virtue of its *en mass* mode of operation, it is like a molding machine that shapes and ejects. As a result, "Each mass ejected en route is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfill in class society: the role of the exploited." (2024, p.156). Therefore, the aim of education in the capitalistic mode of production is to produce subjects that are completely ready to be used for the benefit of the ruler class who see them as not ends in themselves but a means to an end. This dehumanizing core of ideologically fueled education is concerned with numbers, facts,

and the accumulation of profit instead of honing critical thinking abilities or pursuit of deeper insight, skills that are crucial for problem-solving and sustainable survival. As to more contemporary discussions of ideological dominance over education, Davies and Bansel investigate the shift that occurred in the realm of education, particularly after the introduction of Neoliberal Capitalism, by stating,

> Public institutions, previously supported as essential to collective well-being, were reconstituted under neo-liberalism as part of the market. 'Within this view there is nothing distinctive or special about education or health; they are services and products like any other, to be traded in the marketplace' (Peters, 1999). Many countries' public sectors were early targets of this ideology in the 1980s and were either privatised or transformed by neo-liberal management technologies. These included increased exposure to competition, increased accountability measures and the implementation of performance goals in the contracts of management. A decade or so later, in the mid- and late 1980s and early 1990s, the same measures were introduced into universities. (2006, p.310)

This reconfiguration of the relationship between people, the government, and the market resulted in a massive indifference towards collective well-being. All aspects of life, including health and education, which are essential to long-term survival, become competitive realms of the market that aim to maximize profit above all else. This particular reconfiguration exposes the long-term self-destruction that is embedded in Neoliberal ideology. Sacrificing the fundamental and limited means of survival for the benefit of the market, the system can only last for a period of time before the accumulated stress results in a cataclysmic state. This state is best exemplified in apocalyptic scenarios in which the extent of destruction is too visible to dismiss. In such states, the need for retrospective understanding and an alternative, sustainable mode of being in the world becomes inescapable.

The Girl begins by depicting a day in Melanie's life as she wakes up and goes to *school*. However, this process is designed to expose the dehumanizing and anti-well-being logic that lies beneath. Melanie, a black girl about 12 years old, wakes up in her prison cell and, as the sirens of the prison ward roar, gets up and methodically straps herself onto a wheelchair. She is one of the second-generation zombie children who are incarcerated in the military base named Hotel Echo. Shortly, two soldiers enter her solitary confinement. They further immobilize her body, especially her head, and take her to the

classroom. The classroom setting is designed to ensure shock on the part of the audience as the abusive and twisted side of the condition is severely highlighted. The complete immobilization of the students serves to convey multiple problematic and self-defeating aspects of education. First, it highlights the inescapable and involuntary nature of going through the education system, as education is compulsory in most parts of the world up to a certain age. Second, it emphasizes the confined and rigid nature of the curriculum, single-mindedly focused on the maximization of material outcomes as the students are not able to shift their eyes from the board even for a second. The manner in which the head is immobilized is particularly reminiscent of the famous "therapy" scene in *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971) in which Alex's head is immobilized. The overt similarity between the two visual imaginings establishes the subtle link between mind control, re-wiring of thought processes, and taking a seat in a classroom where the goal is to produce desired acts of self-exploitation. Lastly, the students being strapped in wheelchairs instead of normal desks is suggestive of both maximized efficiency (as it is the most convenient way the soldiers can bring the students to the classroom) and of the disabling nature of the process through which individual autonomy (symbolized through the ability to walk) is not permitted.

The curriculum is of equal significance as the students are expected to memorize the periodic table to its finest details. As Howell and Baker summarize, the entire scenery is a "nightmarish parody of childhood education where contextless facts are drilled into the incarcerated young." (2022, p.86). Mirroring the accumulation of capital, the aim of education is an accumulation of facts, a zombifying process through which no wisdom can possibly be gained. Furthermore, the commodifying effect is emphasized as one teacher tells Ms.Justineau that she taught "just the numbers, content is not really relevant, is it?" (McCarthy, 2016, 00:04:40). As Hamilton (2021) suggests, the education at Hotel Echo military base "lacks a substantial post-humanistic education and, like the real world, the value of humanities-based inquiry is diminished in preference for scientific data" (p. 286). The post-humanistic education Hamilton is referring to can be juxtaposed and contrasted with the anthropocentric and ultimately detrimental system of education that makes humans "environmentally incompatible and

evolutionarily defunct" (p. 299). The name "Hotel Echo" also demands scrutiny regarding its symbolism. On the one hand, "hotel" points to the temporariness and eventual unsustainability of the military base, foreshadowing its collapse, and on the other hand, the name "echo" resonates with the stillness or repetitiveness of its ideological stance. The criticism of anthropocentric ideology in education is most vividly represented by Ms.Justineau, who sees the students as individuals and reads them myths and stories in secret, although these are not part of Hotel Echo's curriculum. As the next section demonstrates, this introduction of the myth and storytelling to an otherwise oppressive education system proves be crucial in terms of the self-aware zombie story arc and the resulting Posthuman evolution.

5.2. Pandora and the *Gifts*

Pandora's Box, the myth Ms.Justineau chooses to read to the children, can be interpreted as a structural analogy that is then embodied and reenacted by Melanie herself as a self-aware zombie while she is emerging as a Posthuman figure. To start, Pandora, like the second-generation zombie children, is an unjustly vilified figure. Largely understood as the original sinner who unleashed all evil onto earth by opening a sacred box, interpretations of Pandora have been misogynistic and without detail. Jean Cousin the Elder's 16th-century depiction of Pandora named *Eva Prima Pandora* shows her right hand resting on a human skull while her left hand, covered with a serpent, is about to open the sacred jar. After this famous depiction, Pandora was firmly established as the sinner that brought about mankind's ruin throughout the Renaissance period. Nevertheless, the origins of the myth do not necessarily posit Pandora as an evil figure. Jane Harrison was the first researcher to challenge the antagonistic attitude towards Pandora. She stated,

> No myth is more familiar than that of Pandora, none perhaps has been so completely misunderstood. Pandora is the first woman, the beautiful mischief: she opens the forbidden box, out comes every evil that flesh is heir to; hope only remains. The box of Pandora is proverbial, and that is the more remarkable as she never had a box at all. (1900, p.99)

Harrison's research reminds the reader that Pandora was the Goddess of the Earth herself, also known as Gaia. Pandora's cult was "a ghost and ancestor cult" and "her spirit, the ghosts, were the source of all good and all evil" (1900, p.108). Her box, on the other hand, never existed and originally was the earthly grave that contained ghosts and evil forces (1900). Within the broader and more accurate context, the story of Pandora completely turns upside down and becomes a myth of hope rather than doom. Interpreting Harrison's argument, Barnard-Naudé remarkably establishes the link between the setting free of the ghosts and the assertion of hope by stating,

> Harrison's version of the Pandora myth accordingly reveals that a particular sort of encounter with the spectre generates hope. The first clue as regards the specificities of the encounter is that Pandora in human form is charged with tending to a grave, in other words, to the remains/to what remains. Second, Pandora tends to the grave/the remains in such a way that ghosts are liberated. Third, this tending which liberates ghosts, leaves hope behind *in the grave*. In other words, the remains *become* hope…through Pandora's action, the remains are transformed into hope…It is, however, critical to underscore that Pandora *produces/makes hope out of an encounter with ghosts* and that it is a particular encounter, one that liberates the ghosts—the liberation of ghosts and the production of hope are thus, in the Pandora myth, two sides of the same coin. In truth, the liberation of ghosts becomes the condition for hope to be left behind. One could therefore argue that the Pandora myth teaches us how to *negotiate* hope in the encounter with the spectral remains. (2020, p.80)

The process in which the remains are transformed into hope through confrontation resonates heavily with this research's previous argument concerning R and his state of being haunted by what remains (his consciousness). It is only by nourishing and acknowledging this remnant that hope is finally able to flourish. Nevertheless, the analogy functions in a different manner in *The Girl*'s case as the two-sided process that liberates the specter and creates hope mirrors the inevitable extinction of the anthropocentric mode of thinking while what remains, the second-generation zombies, becomes hope. Understanding how Melanie's storyline mirrors that of Pandora as the Earth Goddess begins on the day Hotel Echo falls as those who survive the downfall will be judged on their ability to generate sustainable hope for the future.

5.3. Out of the Echo Chamber

The Girl employs the binary opposition between Ms.Justineau and Dr.Caldwell and how they interact with Melanie on the day of the raid to expose the shortcomings of anthropocentric and dichotomous thinking. Dr.Caldwell is the cold, data-driven scientist who experiments on children, hoping to find a cure. Blinded by ambition, she cold-bloodedly kills children for scientific advancement, whereas Ms.Justineau is moved by the torturous treatment Melanie is put through and even risks her own life to alleviate her conditions. This binary battle between scientific data and critical inquiry reaches a climax when Dr.Caldwell decides to take Melanie's brain out, but Hotel Echo gets overrun by the hungries before she succeeds. The fall of Hotel Echo is an example of how the binary no longer holds; as Derrida (1981) reminds us when we have binaries, "one of the two terms governs the other" (p.41). This governing position of blind science is forcefully deconstructed, and the logic behind is again proved unsustainable. The flesh-eating hungries massacre the inhabitants of Hotel Echo and threaten human hubris. The Romeroesque hungries prove to be very apt figures for exposing the paradoxical nature of Capitalistic gain, as Lauro (2017) states, "zombie narratives and rituals interrogate the boundary between life and death, elucidate the complex relations between freedom and slavery, and highlight the overlap between capitalism and cannibalism" (p.64). After the fall of Hotel Echo, only two soldiers, Ms.Justineau, Dr.Caldwell, and Melanie manage to escape. Dr.Caldwell, forever believing in instrumental reason, never gives up on the possibility of reaching another military base and killing Melanie to create a cure. Dr.Caldwell says, "She belongs to the program, and she is vital. I would suggest you take out the spare wheel and put her in the wheel well" (McCarthy, 2016, 00:34:17). This quote directly reflects how the Capitalist ethos views what it can capitalize on as mere instruments, even though Melanie is clearly and unmistakably a lucid and cognizant individual. Ms.Justineau, outraged by this suggestion, attacks Dr.Caldwell, slapping her forcefully. After this point, the group's survival will heavily depend on Melanie as she is the only one who is in harmony with

nature. What Melanie stands for can be understood as a Posthuman figure who challenges the core beliefs of the previous humans who eventually became defunct.

> The posthuman destabilizes the limits and symbolic borders posed by the notion of the human. Dualisms such as human/animal, human/machine, and, more in general, human/nonhuman are re-investigated through a perception which does not work on oppositional schemata. In the same way, the posthuman deconstructs the clear division between life/death, organic/synthetic, and natural/artificial. (Ferrando, 2021, p.5)

Melanie's animalistic features are accompanied by compassion, love, and harmony with nature. She refuses to be limited to one part of any oppositional schema but since she is a novel figure and she is heavily commodified, she has to prove her worth to gain the respect of most humans. As they try to navigate through the urban setting, filled with hungries, Melanie saves everybody's life by distracting the hungries and clearing the group's path to safety. Since she is a figure beyond the binary distinctions, she is compatible with both humans and the hungries, and the hungries do not try to attack her. Even after saving their lives, people other than Ms.Justineau are still skeptical of Melanie, unsure if she can be trusted or not, reminding her of her exclusion.

The anxiety towards "that which goes beyond the clear-cut categories" is very much a contemporary issue, especially reflective of our attitudes toward artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is becoming a fluid, porous entity that challenges the binaries of organic/synthetic, natural/artificial, sentient/non-sentient, and even alive/dead. This novel ambivalence is a cause for anxiety, and the results of this technology are still yet to come. While some people think AI will solve all of humanity's problems, others believe it will threaten human existence altogether, making Homo Sapiens a redundant, intellectually stunted species. In this sense, *The Girl* can be taken as a potential thought experiment of how humans would react if AI became sentient and had a more harmonious relationship with the environment, and it does not arrive at a very optimistic outlook for Homo Sapiens. This is why how we develop, utilize, and regulate AI will be the decisive factor when it comes to potential threats. If humanity sees AI as merely another tool of practical reason to accumulate capital, it could increase efficiency but might also accelerate environmental destruction and the depletion of natural resources.

With this idea in mind, *The Girl*'s general message and unconventional ending become more significant as it seems to suggest that nature can only sustain those who can sustain themselves, and humans have failed in doing so.

Despite having a genre-bending protagonist, *The Girl* follows most of the key steps of a post-apocalyptic zombie movie. First, there is the refuge, and then the refuge is overrun by enemies; the next step is miraculous survival, and usually, in the end, there is a sacrifice, a cure is found, and the status quo is re-established. This last step does not occur in the case of *The Girl*. While scouting for food, Melanie comes across a run-down library and is immediately drawn to the books. Inside the library, she comes across a group of second-generation zombie children just like herself. Hidden behind the bookshelves, she inspects the behaviors of the group, paying attention to how they communicate and take care of each other. These children are not educated like Melanie; although they possess the capacity for language, they can only communicate with gestures and coarse sounds since they have no parents or society of adults to teach them how to speak. They also possess advanced survival skills, and they pick up the scent of one of the soldiers from Melanie's group. Realizing her friend will be hunted down, Melanie rushes back to warn the rest of the group. Although Melanie knows the second-generation children are only trying to survive, she still does everything in her power to save her human friend. However, the rest of the group is focused on trying to get in contact with another military base, effectively choosing the possibility of re-establishing the status quo over saving a member of their community. This is an overt critique of Neoliberal ideology that values the continuation of the detrimental system over the well-being of common people, who are deemed as cogs in the machine and thus insignificant. It also reflects the rootlessness and the lack of genuine community belonging. However, just like Hotel Echo, other military bases fell to the overwhelming hordes of hungries, effectively terminating all human settlements. Despite losing her friend, Melanie faces the group of second-generation zombie children and becomes their leader by killing their previous leader. She has compassion, but she is also violent when it comes to protecting her community. Opposites find co-existence in the Post-

Humanness of Melanie. She is a force of both nature and culture, underlining the inextricability of these two.

After realizing killing Melanie is the only way she can possibly find a cure, Dr.Cladwell tries to anesthetize Melanie and cut her brain out. Unbeknownst to her, Melanie can hold her breath much longer than humans and resists the airborne anesthetic thanks to her symbiotic relationship with the fungal infection. The relentlessness of Dr.Cladwell attests to humanity's belief of superiority. She embodies the hierarchical and self-damaging hubris of humans in relation to Capitalist ideology.

> The critique of species supremacy—the violent rule of Anthropos over this planet—opens another line of criticism of the parameters that define the human itself. "Man" is called to task as the representative of a hierarchical and violent species whose greed and rapacity are enhanced by a combination of scientific advances and global economic domination. (Braidotti, 2021, p. XIV)

Dr.Cladwell's incapacity to think of any system outside Capitalism and any being dominating the world other than humans reaches its climax when she tries to convince Melanie to sacrifice herself for science, to give up her Post-Humanity for the sake of humans. Although Melanie is ready to sacrifice herself for Ms.Justineau, she still asks, "What about the children Dr.Cladwell?" (McCarthy, 2016, 01:35:17) to which Dr.Cladwell admits the individuality and self-awareness of Melanie and the other second-generation children, surrendering at the last moment to what she cannot comprehend or dominate fully. This surrender results in Melanie's question, "Why should it be us who die for you?" (McCarthy, 2016, 01:36:01). Melanie overrides the species supremacy of the Anthropos and refuses to sacrifice the harmonious Post-Human species for the hubris of the Anthropos. In a manner much like opening Pandora's box, she releases the airborne fungal pathogens by setting its sealed tree pods on fire, releasing the spirits of the defunct species to protect the hope of sustainability via next-generation zombie children.

As the pathogen is slowly turning him to a hungry, the last standing soldier laments the end of the world, saying it is all over, to which Melanie replies, "The world is not over, it is just not yours anymore!" (01:41:01) correcting his mistaken understanding of the "anthropocalpse" as the end of the world. The movie's last scene mirrors the very first

scene of the classroom, but this time, not only the roles are reversed but the narrative is completely subverted. While Ms.Justineau is locked and restricted cage, the second-generation post-human zombie children are the free thinking, free acting students. Subversively, it is the *human* teacher, Ms.Justineau, who made the ultimate sacrifice by surrendering her freedom for the sake of the "next people," as Melanie calls them. The human making the sacrifice and accepting extinction is a pioneering update to the zombie genre. Ms.Justineau remains in Pandora's box as the symbol of hope while at the same time, it was *her* destructive species that had to be exorcised to create this hope. Thus, the ending represents a complete ideological shift toward a sustainable, non-destructive ideology, albeit free of the Anthropos.

5.4. Redefining Hope and Futurity in the Anthropocalypse

The Girl with All the Gifts updates the zombie genre and uses it as a lens to critique humanity's role in the Anthropocene. Rather than adhering strictly to the genre conventions, it critiques the unsustainable systems and ideologies that prioritize profit and hierarchical power structures at the expense of ecological and societal well-being. At its core, *The Girl* represents a narrative of transformation and adaptation. The second-generation zombies, particularly Melanie, symbolize a Posthuman potential that challenges the dualisms central to anthropocentric thought, such as human versus non-human and life versus death. Melanie's symbiotic relationship with the fungal infection positions her as an emblem of coexistence, demonstrating the need to move beyond rigid, hierarchical thinking that has contributed to ecological destruction. Melanie's ability to exist within and navigate both human and non-human spheres exemplifies the possibility of a more harmonious and sustainable mode of existence. Her progression from being a dehumanized test subject to a leader of a new generation mirrors the potential for humanity to reevaluate its role in the face of existential crises. The rejection of human dominance, epitomized by the declaration, "The world is not over, it is just not yours anymore!" reflects a profound ideological shift. This moment challenges humanity to abandon its self-perception as the singular authority over life on

Earth and to instead recognize itself as part of an interconnected ecological network. The film thus emphasizes humility and respect for other species and ecosystems as essential to avoiding extinction. Education emerges as a central theme, critiquing existing systems while serving as a metaphor for broader societal transformation. The stark contrast between the rigid, incarcerating environment of Hotel Echo's classroom and the hopeful, harmonious environment in the film's conclusion highlights the potential for education to either perpetuate harmful ideologies of destruction or cultivate new ways of harmonious and sustainable thinking. By valuing creativity, empathy, and critical inquiry, exemplified through Ms. Justineau's resistance to the restrictive curriculum, the narrative underscores the importance of reimagining education as a part of reimagining a sustainable future. The incorporation of Pandora's myth further strengthens the film's exploration of hope as something that arises through confronting and transforming past errors. Just as Pandora's actions in the myth released both evils and hope, Melanie's final decision to spread the fungal spores symbolizes the end of humanity's destructive practices while also preserving the potential for an alternative future. By "opening the box," Melanie ensures the survival of her kind and initiates the restoration of ecological balance, illustrating the dual processes of liberation and renewal. *The Girl* refuses to restore anthropocentric normalcy. This perspective invites audiences to reconsider their relationship with other species and the environment, emphasizing interdependence, connectedness, and coexistence. The collapse of human civilization is framed not as a tragedy but as an opportunity for regeneration, symbolizing the potential for a new mode of existence grounded in sustainability. The film compels its audience to confront the consequences of human hubris and in doing so, it underscores the necessity of transformative change, suggesting that the end of one paradigm can serve as the foundation for a more sustainable and inclusive future.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the contemporary transformation of the zombie figure from a mindless monstrosity to a self-reflective figure, illustrating how this cultural shift in representation reflects humanity's struggle with an age of intense precarity and lack of vision for sustainable existence. The main research question this study aimed to answer was how it is that these emerging zombie narratives reflect and respond to the age of intersecting crises, which, in turn, was created largely due to the logic of Late Capitalism. Several other related research questions that stemmed from this main question aimed to understand, in particular, the ways in which the zombie figure changed over the decades, what the interpretations of the figure looked like throughout these periods, what the figure signifies in today's world and how an analysis of self-aware zombies can contribute to a deeper understanding of today's web of crises and the potential pathways for transformation and sustainable living.

In order to answer these questions, the study started with an analysis of the contemporary human condition, now commonly referred to as the Polycrisis or the age of intersecting crises. It argued that the Polycrisis is a web of interrelated struggles on personal, societal and planetary levels and that it arises primarily as a result of the unsustainable "profit over people and planet" logic of Late Capitalism. To illustrate this fundamental relation, the study pointed out the unsustainable ethos of Capitalism as an ideology of constant growth, without regard for limited resources or the exploitation of life on Earth. The study then argued that the intensifying precarity that ensues as a result of our current hyper-individualistic and profit-oriented way of being in the world has long been deemed the "natural" and best way for humans and that this view is now being challenged even by the proponents of Capitalism. However, the lack of concrete vision for a Post-Capitalist society perpetuates what Mark Fisher described as Capitalist Realism, a sentiment that argues there is no sustainable alternative. The study then argued that the undead had been the quintessential metaphor for this paradoxical existence that seems to approach existential-level threats each day. Suggesting that the

undead, as a liminal and impossible entity that embodies the life-in-death state, has been a symbol of the inescapable decay of the Capitalist structure. To elaborate on this argument, Chapter 2 focused on the origins, interpretations, and transformations of the zombie figure. Starting from its largely forgotten Haitian roots, the study traced the myth's history of slavery, trauma, rebellion, and eventual appropriation by Hollywood cinema. The study analyzed the mutation of the zombie monster in Western cinematic imagination in three different periods and suggested that the second period, started by George R. Romero's 1968 movie *Night of the Living Dead*, is now being continued by a third period, that of self-aware zombies. These emerging representations, as the research argued, are reflective of a change in human attitude towards the Polycrisis as more and more people confront the precarious web of crises instead of avoiding or abjectifying them altogether. The self-reflective undead proves to be the monster we currently need, as it has rapidly proliferated since the beginning of the 2000s and has now become a culturally acknowledged figure in literature, TV, and film. The study then offered two self-aware zombie films as its case studies to argue that these narratives offer uniquely valuable insight into exposing the detrimental effects of the logic of Late Capitalism on embodied, social, and planetary levels and also into finding an alternative mode of existence that is focused on community, cooperation, empathy, and sustainability. The first case study on *Warm Bodies* explored what it means for a zombie to be self-reflective in a decaying world, focusing on the embodied experience, surrounding urban landscape, and ways of community building through empathy and love, arguing that this evolution starts with a "recognition" of the other. The second case study on *The Girl with All the Gifts* enabled the research to explore other areas of the Polycrisis, such as environmental degradation, scientific and technological advancement, and education.

Arguing that the self-aware zombie not only reflects what the polycrisis is and how it came to be but also provides pathways toward a sustainable future through themes of redemption, transformation, and mutual recognition.

The study contributes to the existing body of research by approaching the Polycrisis from a new and previously under-explored cultural lens. By exploring the significance of a recently emerging cultural phenomenon, the research expands both the field of

Zombie Studies and Cultural Studies research on a broader level. By bridging various disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, cultural theory, and film studies, the study also encourages interdisciplinary dialogues that can enrich our understanding of how Polycrisis interacts with cultural narratives and representations. As the research results show, there are several key issues humanity must recognize and address in relation to the intensification of the Polycrisis: extreme individualism, lack of community, acknowledgment of the other as an ethical obligation, exploitative attitude towards nature, and a desire for profit over all else. The research results show that developing a deeper understanding of the age of intensifying precarity, its reasons and manifestations is important on an existential level if extinction is to be avoided. In that sense, the continuation of research in this particular field stands as one of the most urgent issues of our times. By carrying the discussion of Polycrisis toward an interdisciplinary framework, the study opens up the possibility for other researchers to understand the Polycrisis from different disciplines, such as mental health, neuroscience, education, climate science, economics, and policy making.

The main limitation of this study is that the number of case studies is limited, and as a result, not all themes that can potentially be explored in the intersection of self-aware zombies and the Polycrisis are covered within the scope of this research. Another limitation is its focus on a Western cultural context, as broader research on worldwide cultural representations could generate more significant results and contribute to the existing research in a more impactful manner. To that effect, further research avenues to expand the current study could focus on exploring different cultural representations from different parts of the world, engage in a comparative study, or expand upon the case studies.

Ultimately, by recognizing the complex layers of the undead figure, its history, transformations, symbolism, and current relevance, this research aimed to demonstrate that even a figure that has been long characterized by its rotting corpse and abject status is subject to cultural change and can transform into a symbol that illuminates the path towards a resilient harmonious future.

The research foresees the transformation and proliferation of the self-aware zombie in the upcoming years. The undead, coming back from death, and haunting are becoming more and more popular themes as global precarity increases[5]. This prediction is supported by the recent revelation of the main villain in Netflix's *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016), which is one of the most notable cultural phenomena of our time. As the fourth season of the series unveiled, the underlying villain, Vecna, had been a self-aware zombie who, in his life-in-death state, retained self-reflection but decided to use his insight for revenge. Like many other figures of the Stranger Things series, Vecna is taken from the Dungeons & Dragons game lore, in which he is referred to as an "undead wizard" or a "lich". Although he is not necessarily a symbol of hope and redemption, self-reflection and a desire to change the world are present in Vecna. Similarly, the critically acclaimed series *Fallout* (Sowards, 2022) features the "ghoul" as one of its protagonists, who became a self-aware undead figure after being exposed to extreme radiation. Fallout's unique zombie, named after Romero's original zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is a psychologically complex character who cannot be categorized as good or evil but ultimately shows signs of redemption and transformation. To that effect, I predict a diversification of self-aware zombie representations and their increasing existence in texts that cannot be classified as traditional or revised zombie apocalypse narratives. These texts can provide a richer analysis of the potential these figures provide as no longer the "monsters" of our time but the "people" of our time. Thus, future researchers may study the zombie not as a marginal figure but as a completely typical representation of the individual in a crisis-stricken world.

[5] The term *brain rot*, chosen as Oxford's Word of the Year for 2024 while this thesis was being written, underscores the timeliness and poignancy of the issues explored through this research. The term's metaphorical connection to zombification and diminished self-awareness reflects broader anxieties about humanity's intellectual stagnation and loss of agency in the context of Late Capitalism's pervasive digital and consumer-driven culture. See Oxford University Press, "Oxford's Word of the Year 2024."

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