

ALIENOCENE – DIS-JUNCTION

TOWARDS AN
INSURGENT ZOMBIE
COLLECTIVE



FLORIAN CORD

We perceive it all around us: The present is monstrous. Indeed, “monstrosity has transcended its status as a metaphor and has [...] become a necessary condition of our existence in the twenty-first century”.¹ In particular, it is the zombie that is today a veritable everyman (sic) monster. No wonder we encounter it everywhere now, there’s been a ‘renaissance’ of zombie cinema, and a boom in zombie scholarship. In fact, our entire culture is obsessed with it. This is because the zombie is us. Paraphrasing Donna Haraway, I want to suggest that by the early twenty-first century, our time, a mythic time, we are all living dead (or infected living); not the word but *power made flesh*. The zombie is our ontology, it gives us our politics. Like the cyborg, it is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality.² ‘Thinking zombie’ thus constitutes a “valuable springboar[d] into consideration of human ontology”.³ What makes the zombie so pertinent is that it is essentially a grave where binary oppositions are buried. The entire tradition of ‘Western’ metaphysics down into the hole. All the old dialectics of life and death, mind and body, subject and object, self and other laid to rest. Not ‘either/or’, but also not quite ‘both/and’, but rather the fundamentally pessimistic ‘neither/nor’.⁴ Unlike the cyborg, in its now dominant form this version of the posthuman is not ironic or

¹ Levina/Bui 2013: 2.

² See Haraway 2010: 2191.

³ Webb/Byrnand 2017: Pos. 3757.

⁴ Lauro 2017: Pos. 150.

celebratory, but sinister, abject.⁵ It is a *figure of crisis*. Speaking in a Gramscian idiom, today's crisis is certainly 'organic', encompassing all spheres of society, whose parts – economic, political, social, ideological – no longer cohere into a whole – though they have not yet been pushed towards what Althusser called a 'ruptural unity' entailing the corrosion of consent and the disintegration of the molasses of societal consensus. Yet, the present crisis is also more than that: it is literally 'organic', biological and ecological, but also non-organic, planetary, of the Earth. And, paradoxically, not sudden and ruptural, but chronic, permanent. Zombie crisis. In the face of the looming (and already present) catastrophes, we are the walking, living dead. The zombie embodies our post-/ahuman (and posthumanist) temporality – life lived under the sign of death. It is therefore not surprising that there is a general sentiment today of 'living in the end times'.⁶ Bent merely on surviving, on avoiding extinction and total destruction, we "persist in a future without hope, a paradoxical future without a future" – the zombie as "the degree zero of our capacity to imagine the future".⁷ Hence the discourses of the 'cancellation' of the future, the exhaustion of the Utopian impulse, and so forth. "Everyone agrees that things can only get worse."⁸ Fukuyama's 'end of history' rewritten in a dystopian vein, as stasis, paralysis, apocalypse. Nothing but 'capitalist realism'. The temporality of the zombie is that of a never-ending, 'absolute present' without past or future, a perverted Nietzschean 'eternal return', in fact a time-lessness. Entrapped in the hegemonic structuration of the field of the possible, in the 'police' order endlessly and performatively repeating "the truth of the impossibility of the impossible",⁹ we zombies of capital find it "easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism". In the

⁵ Vint 2017.

⁶ Žižek 2011.

⁷ Vint 2017: Pos. 5317; Larsen 2017: Pos. 5213.

⁸ Invisible Committee 2009: 23.

⁹ Rancière 1999: 132. See also Büscher-Ulbrich et al. 2021.

Zombiecene, the stark material effects of this limitation of the political imagination can no longer be ignored – the image finally materializes: the end of the world.

Capitalism continues to evolve through the zombification of all that lives. As more and more beings are forced to occupy liminal positions between life and death, so that the category of ‘life’ itself is now put into question, the zombie form of existence becomes a universal condition. The earth itself is in a state of living death. In this situation, the biopolitical production of what Giorgio Agamben has termed ‘bare life’ escalates. For Agamben, developing Foucault’s account of biopower, what characterizes modern politics is that, “together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction”.¹⁰ The zombie, this figure of undecidability and boundary confusion – neither properly living nor dead, mind nor body, inside nor outside of human community, included nor excluded from the law – is an emblem of this Agambean ‘threshold’, who, similar to Agamben’s *homo sacer*, is stripped of a politically qualified form of life and reduced to her physical existence. Following Agamben, who declared that, as politics becomes increasingly identified with biopolitics, today “*homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen”,¹¹ numerous succeeding scholars have used and modified Agamben’s thought in their analyses of, for instance, neoliberalism and contemporary biocapitalism and biofinancialization. Pointing to the entanglement of the politicization of life with its economization, converging on the goal of managing the processes of circulation, flux, and flow of individuals as well as populations, they have argued that it is particularly the systemic

¹⁰ Agamben 1998: 9.

¹¹ Agamben 1998: 171.

violence written into dominant modes of entrepreneurial subjectivation that reduces the citizens of the affluent ‘Global North’ to a state of naked life, though these are of course not literally divested of rights or given over to death. As, for instance, Byung-Chul Han explains:

The victims of this systemic violence aren’t the excluded *homines sacri* but the achievement-subjects *trapped within* the system, who, as sovereigns and entrepreneurs of themselves, aren’t subjugated to anyone. In a sense, they are free, but simultaneously, they are the *homo sacer of themselves*. Systemic violence [...] turns everyone into *captives*, prisoners of the system that forces them to exploit themselves.

For Han, the life of the *homo sacer* of the achievement society is naked not because it exists outside the legal order, but because “it has been stripped of any transcendence of *value*, reduced to the immanence of the vital functions and performance, which must be maximized with all available means”. Thus subjected to the generalized “demand for performance and optimization” (*Leistungs- und Optimierungsdictat*), Han asserts, “we have all become performance and health zombies” – our “lives are like those of the undead”.¹²

Analyses like these are vital. And yet, the somewhat universalizing rhetorical gestures of thinkers such as Agamben or Han should not make us oblivious to the various striations, differences and inequalities that in fact characterize the capitalist world-system. Yes, “in our age all citizens can be said, *in a specific but extremely real sense*, to appear virtually as *homines sacri*”, and yes, in the *Zombiecene*, “[b]are life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category” but “now dwells in

¹² Han 2018: Pos. 1526, 2234.

the biological body of every living being”.¹³ Nonetheless, it will never do in this context to speak in the same breath of, say, the ‘Western’ entrepreneurial subjects discussed by Han, a person in a persistent comatose state, so-called ‘illegal’ migrants from the ‘Global South’ held in a Northern detention center, a species facing extinction, and non-human animals subjected to the carno-phallogocentric animal-industrial complex. Biopower exists in different shapes or types; its forms are contextual, variable. Different forms of life (and nonlife) are invested by power in each case in specific ways. Consequently, the opposition between *bios* and *zoē* is perhaps better conceived as a *continuum*, with different degrees, or kinds, of ‘bare life’. Thus, not only is, as Agamben himself at one point avers, “the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant, becomes only ‘sacred life’, and can as such be eliminated without punishment” defined differently in different contexts (national/cultural, historical) – capitalist ‘zombie humanism’ also produces “hierarch[ies] of liveliness” and various “balancing acts between bio- and necropolitical regimes”.¹⁴ Instead of a neat and universal shift from the power “to take life or let live” to the one “to make live and to let die”, what we can observe today, taking a perspective that is both non-Eurocentric and non-anthropocentric, is in fact a much more complex, heterogeneous picture, including a range of hybrid combinations and variations. With regards to humans, this includes, for instance, being “made to live and left to die” (vis-à-vis the neoliberal erosion of the welfare state in most ‘Western’ democracies) or the power “to make survive” (rather than to make live or die),¹⁵ as well as the violent entanglements of biopolitics with necro- and thanatopolitics across the ‘Global North’ and ‘South’. Hence, when speaking of the Zombiecene, it should never be forgotten that the maintenance of certain (zombified)

¹³ Agamben 1998: 111 (emphasis added), 140.

¹⁴ Agamben 1998: 139; Halberstam 2020: 119, 118.

¹⁵ Nealon 2014: 470; Agamben 1999: 155.

life-worlds are today closely intertwined with and, in fact, dependent upon, the “creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*”.¹⁶ In this context, it is worth remembering the colonial roots of the zombie myth, which was effectively appropriated from Haitian folklore, in which it was tied to the history of slavery. Not neoliberal, but neoimperial zombification: “more life for the few and living death for the many”.¹⁷ This zombification is captured in a striking way by photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee in the picture that won him the second prize of the UNICEF Photo of the Year competition in 2020, depicting two girls forced to work in the Jharia coalfield in India.

The gaze of these subaltern children again reminds us of the crass inadequacy of universalizing discourses, of the necessity of keeping what Elizabeth Povinelli calls “ordinary suffering”¹⁸ and the manifold forms of precarious survival and endurance clearly in sight, and hence of the need to differentiate and contextualize all talk of ‘zombification’. To a certain extent, something similar is achieved by the 2009 science fiction film *District 9*, directed by Neill Blomkamp. Filmed in a dirty, gritty realism and combining a number of genres or styles (mockumentary, horror, satire, splatter film, and more), the film is set in an alternate-history Johannesburg, South Africa, approximately 20 years after a damaged alien spacecraft arrived, which has since remained hovering over the city. The disoriented passengers were brought down to the surface and confined to the eponymous ghetto-like camp of District 9. The aliens, derogatively referred to as ‘prawns’, are subjected to all kinds of discrimination and cruel mistreatment and, as viewers come to find out, even used for gruesome medical experiments. As the film opens, they are about to be forcibly ‘resettled’ by

¹⁶ Mbembe 2003: 40.

¹⁷ Halberstam 2020: 118.

¹⁸ Povinelli 2011: 14.

'Multinational United' (MNU), a large weapons manufacturer hired by the government, to a new area outside the city – effectively, as the protagonist later admits, a “concentration camp”. The film’s plot revolves around the company’s employee charged with the relocation process, who, searching one of the aliens’ shacks, accidentally sprays some alien fuel in his face and consequently slowly begins to transform into one of them. The film charts his gradual metamorphosis and shifting allegiances as he is hunted by the mercenaries of MNU – which wants to “harvest” his body, “billions of dollars worth of biotechnology” – and comes to partner with one of the aliens, whom he eventually helps to escape from the planet. At the end of the film, his transformation is complete. As Stefan Helgesson has pointed out in his contribution to a review roundtable on the film, through its layers of grotesque, absurd humor, *District 9* effectively

counters [...] the apocalyptic mood of much contemporary popular culture in the West. If the taste for apocalypse stems from an experience that western exceptionalism is being threatened (after us, the deluge!), then the contemporary experience in the Global South – of which *District 9* is a symbolic representation – is much more complex. Whole populations in the Global South are in fact “living the apocalypse” (from the perspective of a once-dominant West), but even so, life goes on in a pragmatic, patchwork fashion.

Like Bhattacharjee’s photograph, the film thus challenges non-discriminating and overly generalizing usages of tropes such as the zombie, dystopia, or apocalypse, but at the same time also affirms the pertinence of the zombie figure. While it is not a zombie film in the literal or narrow sense, it can nevertheless be read as speaking to the contemporary problematics of zombification in a powerful way. As Helgesson observes, “[t]he recurrent switches between aerial views of shoddier parts of

Johannesburg (no leafy northern suburbs in sight) and shots of bodies in pain, alien bodies, dead bodies, exploding bodies, body fluids, and meat, produces [sic] an edgy yet consistent rhythm in the film”.¹⁹ The numerous mockumentary-style CCTV recordings included in the film only add to this rhythm, recurrently interpellating the viewer into the ‘gaze of surveillance’ characteristic of the surveillance culture of contemporary capitalism. What all of this alerts us to is, I think, the crucial role the body and processes of life occupy today as privileged sites of political intervention. Through images, representations and discourses, pharmacology and techno-scientific research, surveillance and data-mining, racialization, gendering and ‘speciesization’, as well as through deprivation, incarceration and violence, the biological life of individuals as well as collectives is here shown to be profoundly invested by power. The film is centrally concerned with modern bio- and necropolitics, corporate biocapitalism, shifting definitions of the Agamben ‘threshold’, and with the generalization of the state of exception (the camp as the *nomos* of political space) and the contemporary escalation of the production of bare life.²⁰ That is to say, above all else, this is a film about bio- and necropower, about the spiraling politicization of life and the contemporary processes of zombification.

Yet, beyond biopolitics and bare life, there is more: The Anthropocene is really the Zombicene not only because the dividing line between life and death is becoming ever more blurry, but also because so is another one: Wherever we look today, it is becoming increasingly clear that even the seemingly self-evident distinction between *life and nonlife* itself can no longer be taken for granted. In this

¹⁹ Valdez Moses et al. 2010: 174, 173.

²⁰ Through scenes like the one early on in the film in which the protagonist discovers alien eggs in one of the camp’s shacks and goes on to “abort” them by cutting off the tubes through which they are nourished, *District 9* further points up what Agamben has called the “inner solidarity” (1998: 10) between democracy and liberal humanism on the one hand and fascism on the other.

way, as Povinelli has forcefully argued, we²¹ are now becoming aware of another type of power, one on which biopower has in fact always depended: ‘geontopower’, that is, the governance, not of life and death, but of the difference between life and nonlife. As Povinelli has shown, “Western ontologies are covert biontologies – Western metaphysics as a measure of all forms of existence by the qualities of one form of existence (*bios, zoe*)”.²² Yet, in the era of climate change, humankind as a ‘geological force’, the threat of the extinction of all biological life, etc., this “biontological enclosure of existence” is crumbling.²³ Even as many today continue to invest in the drama and mystery of life and re-constitute the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, both the material world and the (natural) sciences increasingly confront us with the actual entanglement of life and nonlife and thus reveal their separation to be the result of “a power to differentiate and control”, of a “differential distribution of kinds of entanglements”. This hegemonic distribution is now being widely challenged, not least by the ‘dissensus’ not only of nonhuman, but also in/animate (e.g. geological, ecological and meteorological) ‘existents’, which not only claim admittance into the demos, but tend to push for a disruption of its very constitution and hence for “alternative arrangements of existence”.²⁴ The zombies are on the prowl.

The Zombiecene is, of course, also the age of pandemics, chief among them the virus, which has been closely associated with the figure of the zombie at least since Danny Boyle’s influential film *28 Days Later* (2002). In this context, as the

²¹ As is so often the case, this ‘we’ is problematic, signaling here a speaking-position located within the so-called ‘Global North’. For as Povinelli shows, this type of power has long operated quite openly in settler colonial contexts.

²² Povinelli 2016: 5.

²³ The ‘eerie Thanatos’ that Mark Fisher (2016: 82-97) has identified in the realm of cultural production can be understood as another symptom of this erosion of Western biontology.

²⁴ Povinelli 2016: 21, 91, 28.

current Corona pandemic illustrates very well, the workings of both, biopower and geontopower, are fairly out in the open. In particular, the virus effectively perforates the boundaries between nature and culture, life and nonlife, not only with regards to its own existence but also to others. Thus, COVID-19, for instance, has not just laid bare the biopolitical governance which is always at work, though normally in much less obvious ways, but also exposed (human) corporeality as ‘transcorporeality’, that is, as always intermeshed with the more-than-human world. The virus confirms the new materialist argument that the ‘human’ is far from a closed, self-contained and self-sufficient entity and that its borders are actually porous and permeable, as it is caught up in pervasive processes of ‘influx and efflux’ that thwart any attempt to clearly demarcate an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside’. It reveals “the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’”²⁵ and that it only ever exists in and, indeed, as a human-nonhuman ‘assemblage’. The human is relocated on “a continuum that elides conventional dichotomies of life and matter, organic and inorganic, subjective and objective, agency and structure” – yet, whereas for a neo-vitalist thinker like Jane Bennett this continuum is always thought as one of “lively bodies and forces”,²⁶ so that vitality, vibrancy and life come to be the defining features of all existents (to the extent that, developing Deleuze and Guattari, she can even speak of ‘nonorganic life’), I believe that, following Povinelli, we should allow this continuum to include nonlife, thus not “denying the ability of other forms [of existence] (the not-Life not-Nonlife) to undefine, redefine, and define us”.²⁷ Is it a coincidence that the Coronavirus afflicts the respiratory system? After all, like eating and drinking, breathing is one activity that troubles the artificial division between inside and outside, between life and nonlife, effectively breaking the “epidermal

²⁵ Alaimo 2010: 2.

²⁶ Bennett 2020: xi (emphasis added).

²⁷ Povinelli 2016: 55.

enclosures” we have constructed. As Povinelli asks: “Where is the human body if it is viewed from with [sic] the lung?” The lung, Povinelli maintains, is “the most appropriate organ for the Anthropogenic climate change era because it points to the openness of all beings to their surroundings”.²⁸ Like the virus, it compels us to ‘unskin’ entities, to look beyond the imaginary epidermises and borders and become aware of a “radical open field”.²⁹ In the age of the virus, we understand that we are zombie bodies, all of us, infected by the outside from the beginning. What we need is not an object- but a zombie-oriented ontology or ecology – the zombie as “the inhuman reality of the body”.³⁰

But the meaning of the zombie is far from exhausted by these reflections on bio-, necro- and geontopower. In the Zombiecene, zombification extends to virtually all social spheres:

a) *Politics*

Politics, for instance, is today thoroughly zombified, dominated everywhere, as Henry Giroux and others have shown, by zombie politicians and policies, zombie values, zombie culture, zombie ideologies, and zombie violence. This “casino capitalist zombie politics views competition as a form of social combat, celebrates war as an extension of politics, and legitimates a ruthless Social Darwinism in which particular individuals and groups are considered simply redundant, disposable”. As Giroux points out, “the mutually determining forces of economic inequality, corporate power, and a growing punishing corporate state [have] become the defining features of zombie

²⁸ Povinelli 2016: 42, 51.

²⁹ Povinelli et al. 2017: 180.

³⁰ Cohen 2017: Pos. 11314.

politics”.³¹ In the era of Trumpism, this politics has arguably reached a zenith. The countless popular cultural renditions of Trump as a zombie figure hit the mark. As Fintan O’Toole has recently observed in an instructive essay on Trump’s ‘afterlife’, “[l]ife after death is [Trumpism’s] governing trope”. In particular,

it has fully assimilated the outward appearances and forms of the dead Republican Party to a new body, a duplicate that looks the same but has in fact been hollowed out. [...] [W]hat has been excised in this process is the most basic assumption of electoral democracy: that the majority wins and the minority, however, [sic] disappointed, accepts the legitimacy of its victory and its right to govern.

It is in Trump’s transformation of this tactic into a long-term political strategy, a post-democratic structure of permanent minority rule, that the move towards authoritarianism is rooted – the GOP becoming the “RIP party – repressive in perpetuity”. As O’Toole argues, it is this anti-democratic culture established by Trump, his “unabashed demonstration of the relatively unbounded possibilities of an American autocracy”, that now needs to be uprooted – “the long posterity of Donald Trump”. Beyond the resuscitation of the corpse of the former American conservative party, there is another important element of Trumpism that clearly marks it as a brand of zombie politics: “Its core appeal is necromantic. It promised to make a buried world rise again”.³² This, of course, is a key characteristic of the contemporary ‘new right’ in general. Virtually all over the globe, these new zombie politicians are engaged in black magic, summoning ancient specters, attempting to bring back to life the dead (essentialist) referents of nation, *Volk*, race, sex, gender, etc., whose refusal to rest in

³¹ Giroux 2014: 2, 36.

³² O’Toole 2020.

peace is accompanied everywhere by escalating violence. This necromancy goes hand in hand with a shift in the public mindset at large, in which, particularly after the experience of more than 30 years of neoliberalism and its politics of precarity, the future is not associated with improvement and progress anymore but with decline and retrogression, and hence no longer a site of hopes and expectations but fear. The popular mentality performs a U-turn, so that positive affects are now invested elsewhere: in the past. Thus, with utopia buried, the ‘retrotopia’ has emerged: “visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future”. As Zygmunt Bauman remarks, the impact of this shift “is visible and palpably felt at every level of social cohabitation”³³ – wherever we look, the garbled and toothless, rotting, hideous face of the zombie past glares at us. Yet, in the age of global hypercapitalism and biopolitics, the great referents of liberalism (freedom, reason, equality, individualism, etc.) seem equally exhausted, tenuously living on as mere simulacra in political rhetoric and ritual. *What way out of this omnipresence of different kinds of zombie politics?*

b) Economy

Already Marx himself frequently used Gothic imagery in his critique of political economy. In each period, there are different ‘monsters of the market’, ‘embodying the violent contradictions of the system’.³⁴ The central figure of global (neoliberal) capitalism is the zombie. Consider, for instance, its insatiable appetite, its boundless, self-replicating nature, its parasitic and alienating character (esp. in the exploitation and ‘ossification’ of ‘living labor’), the domination of life by ‘dead labor’ as well as the

³³ Bauman 2017: 5, 6f.

³⁴ See McNally 2011; Newitz 2006; Latham 2002.

‘necrocapitalist’ extraction of surplus value from the *actual* death of laboring bodies,³⁵ the obliteration of the distinction between subject and object through the dynamics of the fetishization of the commodity on the one hand and the reification of the worker on the other, the cruelty and lack of empathy in the generalized ‘war of all against all’, the perpetual drive for ever more (‘mindless’) consumption as well as the ‘self-consumption’ of the contemporary aesthetic subject in the experience or attention economy,³⁶ the dialectics of massification and individualization, ongoing cannibalistic as well as zombifying neoimperialism, the colonization of the brain in ‘immaterial labor’, the fabrication and control of the ‘subject’ (*subjectum/subjectus*) through virtually all-powerful material-discursive-media-techno-pharmaco apparatuses or assemblages (we are far removed from ‘freedom’ or ‘free will’ here!), as well as the fact that, from a critical, ecological/archaeological point of view, none of the innumerable products manufactured by the system ever really dies, but decays, rots, and stays as dangerous residue (‘zombie media’³⁷ etc.). At the same time, this system has for some time now been in severe crisis. After 2007-2008, some commentators began to speak of ‘zombie banks’, but really, what we are faced with today is an entire zombie system.³⁸ Moreover, as McKenzie Wark has recently argued, with information now no longer being an emerging but, in fact, the dominant force of production, and with the ‘vectoralist class’, which owns and controls the vectors along which information is gathered and used, having become the new dominant class, it seems that, for all intents and purposes, ‘capital is dead’.³⁹ While it continues to lumber on – after all, every social formation is a hybrid of coexisting and overlapping

³⁵ Tyner 2019.

³⁶ Larsen 2017.

³⁷ Hertz/Parikka 2011; 2012.

³⁸ Harman 2010. As a matter of fact, insofar as the equilibrium model which is hegemonic within economic theory is really a ‘great delusion’ since destruction and crisis are built into the system, capitalism may be said to be a ‘zombie system’ by nature.

³⁹ Wark 2019.

modes of production – the actual center of power and of the creation of surplus value has shifted elsewhere.

c) Culture

From films to television commercials, from novels and comic books to music and video games, from the visual arts to political caricature, from hand sanitizers to baby onesies, from garden gnomes to energy drinks – in both, so-called ‘high’ as well as ‘popular’ culture, the zombie is everywhere today. This cultural omnipresence is symptomatic and expressive of the fact that zombification has by now become a near-universal condition, not just of humanity but virtually all existents, that we are indeed in the *Zombiecene*. It indexes something like a ‘structure of feeling’, marked by “deep anxiety in contemporary Euro-American culture over things that refuse to die, on the one hand, and things that occupy a realm between life and death, on the other”.⁴⁰ Importantly, this structure of feeling also involves a strong sense of exhaustion, paralysis, inertia, even belatedness. And this, too, can be related to culture, namely to the fact that, beyond its obsession with the zombie, cultural production at present is *itself* thoroughly zombified. As critics such as Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher have pointed out, the general ‘temporal pathology’ of the ‘cancellation of the future’ that characterizes our present moment manifests in 21st-century (popular) culture as ‘retromania’, that is, as the persistence of old forms that keep coming back from the dead.⁴¹ Fisher explains: “While 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude

⁴⁰ Halberstam 2020: 148.

⁴¹ See Berardi 2011; Reynolds 2011; Fisher 2014.

and exhaustion.”⁴² Gone is all sense of radical rupture, innovation and future shock; instead, culture suffers from an “epidemic of nostalgia”, so that “cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity”.⁴³ The avant-garde has turned into an arrière-garde, the exploratory impulse become archaeology. As Fisher, drawing on the work of Fredric Jameson, observes, the ‘nostalgia mode’ that dominates our present has little in common with the psychological or the political forms of nostalgia of earlier cultural moments. Instead of an actual yearning for the past, it is a mere yearning for a *form*, emptied of any coherent sense of historical time. What we have today, then, is the universalization of Jameson’s ‘waning of historicity’: the naturalization and ubiquity of anachronism, the endless late-capitalist recycling of old formulas and techniques, severed from any explicit reference to the past. When the very distinction between past and present is thus broken down, we find ourselves in the age of the zombie.

d) Theory

Similar to culture more generally, theory (including this very essay) is at present under the zombie’s spell. Not only has there been a surge in zombie scholarship – as a trope, the zombie now also creeps into all kinds of texts otherwise not directly concerned with it. But, in a sense, theory *itself* today exists in a zombified state, too. After all, in the past three to four decades, it has been pronounced dead several times. Terry Eagleton, for instance, writing in 2003, declared that “[t]he golden age of cultural theory is long past” and that “we are living now in the aftermath of what one might call high theory”.⁴⁴ However, as John Mowitt has pointed out, “[i]f theory must be

⁴² Fisher 2014: 8.

⁴³ Boym 2001: xiv; Fisher 2014: 9.

⁴⁴ Eagleton 2004: 1, 2.

repeatedly killed anew, it is because it stubbornly survives its death”. Theory, he concludes, “has assumed the restless, even perpetually agitated, status of the living dead”. Yet, for Mowitt, there is a potential here: “Theory is not simply in Limbo, it is Limbo in the sense that it has come to designate the zone of indistinction, the *limbus*, between life and its others. This legacy of theory, precisely to the extent that it haunts its contemporary pedagogy, is one that deserves more of our attention.”⁴⁵ Christian Haines and Sean Grattan agree, arguing that such an approach is a productive one as it

situates theoretical practice in a position where it does not simply mourn the death of ‘Theory’ but rather interrogates the very conditions of theory’s vitality: theory’s encounter with its others, its constantly finding itself between states, is also its ability to reconstitute itself, to work through the problems it poses itself without simply devolving into a neurotic compulsion to repeat.⁴⁶

This, then, is perhaps also the moment of ‘low theory’, a mode of theorizing advanced by critics such as Jack Halberstam or McKenzie Wark which breaks with the zombifying “repetition of received ideas, narrative forms that resolve in predictable ways, a culture of exegesis that reproduces sameness”. Low theory “is always a kind of *détournement* or highjacking [sic] of high theory for other purposes”.⁴⁷ Building on the work of Stuart Hall, Halberstam and Wark develop this model of thinking as one that is, precisely, “interstitial, its labor communicative rather than controlling”, that works at many levels at once, moves across disciplinary boundaries and refuses established hierarchies of knowledge, is flexible and open-ended, and “designed to

⁴⁵ Mowitt 2006: 272.

⁴⁶ Haines/Grattan 2017: 28n2.

⁴⁷ Wark 2019: 12; 2017: 231.

inform political practice rather than formulate abstract thoughts for the sake of some neutral philosophical project”.⁴⁸

Here, then, the zombie is given a new twist – the opening of a space of possibility, the emergence of something new. We will explore this other side of the zombie in a moment.

e) *Academy/Ideology*

Working at a European university in the early 21st century, particularly in the so-called ‘humanities’, it is certainly hard to resist the title of a recent collection of essays: *Zombies in the Academy*. Faced with the brutal neoliberal restructuring of the university, speaking of ‘living death in higher education’ is immediately plausible. This corporate university as a ‘state apparatus’ (i.e. in the structuration and organization rather than the content of knowledge production) as well as the ideological make-up of the common sense at large are today still largely organized around that most zombified of all entities: the *individual subject*. Even though this fabrication of liberal-humanist discourse has for a long time been more or less taken apart by both, evidence in the material world as well as science and theory – with all the other binarisms related to its strict opposition to the ‘object’ equally demolished (inside/outside, private/public, man/woman, human/animal, ...) – it stubbornly clings on, refusing to die. One reason for this, of course, has to do with the dominant forms of neoliberal subjectivation. In other words, even as, at some levels, including those belonging to what was once called the material ‘base’, contemporary capitalism is, in all kinds of ways, itself engaged in the unremitting deconstruction of the unified, sovereign subject, at others, especially the ‘superstructural’ level of the hegemonic

⁴⁸ Wark 2016: 218; Halberstam 2011: 16.

discourses and representations, it continues to keep the corpse alive for the purposes of (self-)control and (-)exploitation. Here, zombie humanism is still the order of the day. This fact has led some critics to recode the zombie: Since it is a “boundary figure”, an “unbecoming”, indeed, an “antisubject”,⁴⁹ could it not also be a *figure of resistance*?

“Single vision produces worse illusions than double-vision or many-headed monsters”, Haraway declared. Accordingly, her cyborg was both, a figure of control, but also of the potential for emancipation and new ways of being. In a similar vein, the zombie, too, represents not only “a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality” but also “an imaginative resource” for a novel kind of politics.⁵⁰ Today, as the zombie hordes shamle forwards, what slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? Things fall apart, the center cannot hold? Very well. At last, let the falcon be released. Perhaps, a shape with lion body and the head of a man, a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun – this *humanimal-geo assemblage* – is just what is needed to finally bring twenty centuries of zombifying anthropocentrism to an end. We should not forget that, from the first, the zombie narrative was not just connected to subjection (slavery), but also to revolt (slave rebellions, the Haitian Revolution). Often, therefore, as in Romero’s classic *Living Dead* trilogy, the zombies allure as much as they frighten us, they appall but also seduce; they “exercise too strong a pull, too strange a fascination”, so that “identities and identifications are increasingly dissolved”.⁵¹ As Halberstam points out:

⁴⁹ Lauro/Embry 2008: 90, 94n24, 87.

⁵⁰ Haraway 2010: 2196, 2191.

⁵¹ Shaviro 2017: Pos. 775.

The zombie must not be read as simply the human emptied of will or subjectivity; the zombie is a kind of parahuman force, a collective subject reaching from beyond the grave to exact bloody revenge from regimes of law, order, and truth. The zombie is part of a wild otherworld suppressed by white, rational thought and returning to partial life in order to dispossess humans.⁵²

In short: “Every zombie represents a critique of the human.”⁵³ Time to lay the human to rest. Against zombie humanism, then, a *zombie antihumanism*. The ‘anti-’ also dominates Lauro’s and Embry’s important reading of the zombie: As “anticatharsis” and “antiresolution”, that is, as an “enactment of negative dialectics”, the zombie represents “a paradox that disrupts the entire system” – “a subject that is not a subject”. In this way, the zombie invites us “to throw off the illusory chains of an ‘identity’ based on the division between subject and object”.⁵⁴ In light of the continuing dominance of the ideology of the Subject and the attendant ideologies of race, gender, ability, etc., and of its still central role in the machinery of capital, this is certainly vital – even though I am skeptical about Lauro’s and Embry’s claim that the destruction of the individual will automatically entail the end of capitalism. After all, as I have pointed out, in many regards – though not at the level of the dominant ideologies – contemporary capitalism itself appears quite happy to shatter the illusion of the unified individual and to work with and through the ‘dividual’ instead.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, as Hardt and Negri similarly argue, the “revolutionary process of the abolition of identity” is without doubt a key element in the struggle against capital

⁵² These remarks resonate particularly strongly with Jordan Peele’s stunning 2019 horror film *Us*.

⁵³ Halberstam 2020: 166.

⁵⁴ Lauro/Embry 2008: 93, 91, 94, 107.

⁵⁵ See Deleuze 1992. On the important notion of the ‘dividual’, see esp. Raunig 2016; Ott 2018; Denson 2020: 51-72. Cf. also the contributions of all three scholars to a recent special issue of the journal *Coils of the Serpent* exploring the contemporary relevance of Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, in which he advances this concept (Cord/Schleusener 2020).

and control at large. From down in the abyss, the zombie calls out to us, who are standing on the brink: “Don’t try to save yourself – in fact, your *self* has to be sacrificed!”⁵⁶ ‘Anthropological exodus’. For Lauro and Embry, the zombie is a figure of pure negativity and as such cannot be linked to a “call for positive change, it calls only for the destruction of the reigning model”. The zombie, they argue, alerts us to the fact that “the posthuman is endgame: it is a becoming that is the end of becomings”.⁵⁷ Yet, as their own paradoxical formulation illustrates, there is no end to becoming here. “The zombie”, in Larsen’s words, “pushes a horizon of empty time ahead of it” – there is no reason why we should not attempt to “look over its shoulder” and to think of it not only as a “post-being, a no-longer-human”, but also as a “pre-being, still not somebody”.⁵⁸ To do so means to shift from a zombie *antihumanism* to a zombie *posthumanism*. In my understanding, such an approach includes both, the ‘anti-’ and the ‘de-’ as well as the ‘pre-’ and ‘re-’. That is to say: It takes up the important work of *critique*, yet also embraces a more *affirmative*, constructive position. Thus, as the zombie buries the human, it simultaneously also opens out to something else. An alternative *Zombiecene* is possible.

In other words: If the zombie is ‘a subject that is not a subject’,⁵⁹ then surely we are allowed, even compelled, to ask: *what, then, is it?*, as well as: *what could it become?* After all, even in the case of the zombie, “the decentring of the subject is not the destruction of the subject”.⁶⁰ Rather, it signals a shift from the subject of

⁵⁶ Hardt/Negri 2009: 339.

⁵⁷ Lauro/Embry 2008: 91, 106.

⁵⁸ Larsen 2017: Pos. 5213, 5203.

⁵⁹ Lauro’s and Embry’s phrase is symptomatic of our profoundly ambivalent situation in which we are forced to have recourse to our received linguistic register despite the fact that it (its terms as well as its grammar) is wholly inadequate to what we are trying to theorize. This general problematic is more explicitly taken up in Jane Bennett’s recent book *influx & efflux* (2020). Like Derrida, our only option seems to be to put all these terms ‘under erasure’.

⁶⁰ Hall 1996: 13.

liberal humanism (individual, unitary, sovereign, and opposed to its object-ified others) towards a posthumanist, postanthropocentric, material becoming. “We need a subject position worthy of our times”, Rosi Braidotti declares. This, as she goes on to explain, means emphasizing “the embodied, embedded and transversal selves that we are, bonded by ontological relationality”. In the *Zombiecene*, the subject, following Braidotti, must be reconceived as “a dynamic convergence phenomenon”, “a zoe/geo/techno-mediated being, immanently related to and hence inseparable from the material, terrestrial and planetary locations that we happen to inhabit”. With the old ontological distinctions undone, “[a]t this particular point in our collective history ‘we’ simply do not know what our enfleshed selves can actually do”. Consequently, we are today called upon to experiment with what we are capable of becoming. The zombie – she of all entities! – recoded as a figure of *potentiality*. Thus, practice now moves center stage. As Braidotti observes: “Posthuman subjectivity is a practical project. It is a praxis. What matters is to negotiate collectively about what exactly we are in the process of becoming”.⁶¹ Similarly, Hardt and Negri argue that “what is required is a shift of emphasis from knowing to doing, generating a multiplicity of beings constantly open to alterity that are revealed through the perspective of the body, which is an assemblage of affects or ways of being, which is to say, forms of life”. As Braidotti as well as Hardt and Negri note, such experimental becoming may well be violent, painful, traumatic, monstrous: “Revolution is not for the faint of heart. It is for monsters. You have to lose who you are to discover what you can become.”⁶²

This statement could well serve as a sort of motto for Alex Garland’s fascinating 2018 science fiction horror film *Annihilation*. Based on Jeff VanderMeer’s novel of the same name, it tells the story of a scientific expedition into the ‘Shimmer’, an

⁶¹ Braidotti 2019: 41, 45, 63, 74.

⁶² Hardt/Negri 2009: 124, 339f.

anomalous and quarantined zone that emerged after a meteor landed on the coast of the southern United States and is continually expanding. As the group advances deeper into the area, they encounter all kinds of strange, mutating plants and animals, and eventually come to realize that the Shimmer functions like a prism ‘refracting’ all DNA and thus transforming everything within it. Inspecting their own bodies, they note that this increasingly also applies to themselves. At the end, only Lena, the protagonist of the film, escapes, having unintentionally destroyed the Shimmer, while of the other members of the expedition, two have been killed, the mind of one has been refracted into a mutant, bear-like creature, one has been transformed into vegetative matter, and another disintegrated into a glowing nebulous structure. Yet, as the final shot of the film, in which Lena’s irises weirdly shimmer, makes clear, she too has been changed or is changing.

The Shimmer is a ‘hyperobject’ (in fact, some commentators have chosen to read it as a figuration of climate change): it is ‘beyond’ the human and our categories of knowledge, it possesses agency, it brings about ‘the end of the world’, that is, of the ‘Great Divide’ between nature and culture, where ‘world’, ‘environment’ or ‘nature’ function as a clearly separated background for the human drama in the foreground, it puts an end to anthropocentrism and correlationism, flattens ontology, and catches humans in the ‘mesh’ of things.⁶³ If, for Deleuze, film is philosophy, then *Annihilation* is a form of ‘ecological thought’.⁶⁴ This, surely, is ‘Anthropocenema’,⁶⁵ or rather: *Zombiecenema*. Whereas *District 9* presents the zombie as a figure of biopolitical control, Garland’s film invokes it as a figure of violent transformation, of potential and newness, of a monstrous, posthuman becoming.

⁶³ See Latour 1993; Morton 2013.

⁶⁴ See Morton 2010.

⁶⁵ Kara 2016; Neilson n.d.

There is a strong sense of the uncanny to the film. In an article entitled “Generation Anthropocene”, writer Robert Macfarlane referred to the philosopher Glenn Albrecht’s concept of ‘solastalgia’ as part of an “emerging lexis” for the Anthropocene. A term coined to describe a “distinctive kind of homesickness”, “the unhappiness of people whose landscapes [are] being transformed about them by forces beyond their control”, solastalgia “speaks of a modern uncanny, in which a familiar place is rendered unrecognisable by climate change or corporate action: the home become suddenly unhomely around its inhabitants”.⁶⁶ To a certain extent, the film’s landscapes and beings, remade as they are by the Shimmer, may be said to evoke a similar uncanny – “the strange *within* the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange”.⁶⁷ In fact, already early on in the film, as we observe Lena in her house, and her husband, who had left as part of an earlier expedition into the Shimmer one year before and never come back, suddenly returns home, unable to remember or explain what has happened (in a dialogue that is itself deeply uncanny), already then, the ‘homely’ (familiar and familial) appears to the audience as thoroughly alien. This may leave viewers digging for the buried processes of repression that, in the Freudian model, lie at the root of the uncanny. Perhaps, they might even make a find; after all, there is quite a lot here that may provoke a psychoanalytically inspired reading: the emphasis on trauma, the repetitions and doublings (esp. the doubling of the house and Lena’s *doppelgänger* at the end), the suggestion of unacknowledged or unconscious drives and desires, the theme of (heterosexual) sexuality and betrayal, the suggestion of the entanglement of affection and aggression (or Eros and Thanatos), and so on. Yet, I believe that attempts to resolve the events of the Shimmer psychoanalytically should be resisted. In fact, as I see it, psychology is not only not a

⁶⁶ Macfarlane 2016.

⁶⁷ Fisher 2016: 10.

primary concern of the film – certainly, the characters are not the ‘rounded’ figures of conventional realism, expressive of the ideology of bourgeois individualism – more importantly, as the story progresses, it even stops being an adequate model for thinking about human subjectivity altogether. There is no neat resolution, no deep and hidden truth, in the sense of a psychological interiority, here. Because of this, a psychoanalytical, ‘paranoid reading’⁶⁸ inevitably falters. In its place, *Annihilation* requires, indeed, invites, alternative protocols of reading – ones that do not resolve its provocations by looking inside the characters for some ultimate key, but rather attend to the ways in which these provocations problematize the very distinction between an inside and an outside.

Thus, instead of the uncanny, the film is more productively thought about in terms of what Fisher has called the weird and the eerie, aesthetic modes that are driven by “a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience”, and that “allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside”. While, according to Fisher, the weird always involves a sense of *wrongness*, of something that does not belong, with the outside making an irruption into the familiar, and hence leads us to question our received frameworks and conceptions of the world, the eerie is constituted by *failures of absence or presence* – a presence where there should be nothing, an absence where there should be something – and thus is intimately tied up with the problem of agency and the forces governing our lives and world, evoking, for instance, the question of the agency of capital or of the nonhuman. It is obvious that, even more than the uncanny, the weird and the eerie are the domains of the zombie. Importantly, Fisher points out that both are by no means exclusively distressing or even terrifying. Instead, they provoke fascination, a *jouissance*-like mixture of pleasure and pain. After all, “there is

⁶⁸ Sedgwick 2003: 123-51.

an enjoyment” in being in the presence of the new, “in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded” and in “escap[ing] from the confines of what is ordinarily taken for reality”. In all of this, the weird and the eerie, rather than the uncanny, prove to be the defining modes of Garland’s film, allowing us to engage with its enigmas and provocations in much more productive and, I would claim, appropriate ways. Approaching the text in this light permits us, for instance, to understand its concern with trauma not so much in terms of repression and repetition compulsion, but of a kind of “transcendental shock”, of “ruptures in the very fabric of experience itself”, opening the subject up more strongly and explicitly to the outside.⁶⁹ Similarly, the already mentioned shots of Lena’s house early on in the film assume new meaning. As Andrew Hageman astutely observes:

The shots are tightly framed and from perspectives that are in threshold spaces inside the house such as corridors and openings between two distinct rooms. As a result, *Annihilation* conjures the feeling of home in a thoroughly eerie way. It does not, however, do this conventionally. Rather than emphasizing spookiness contained within the house as seen from outside (as in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* [1960]) or the interior as a bulwark against spookiness without the house (as in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]), this montage establishes the house/home as *in itself* permeable and permeated. Put another way, the architectural artifact typically associated with dividing inside from outside, private from public, and so on, is implied to be much more porous than all that. And by leaving this focalising agency unidentified, the film enables readers to fill in the blanks of what crosses thresholds and coexists with human beings, from microbes and viruses to ghosts and water vapor.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Fisher 2016: 8, 10, 13, 22.

⁷⁰ Crosby et al. 2019: 259.

To use Roger Luckhurst’s words, here, as elsewhere, the “interpretive machinery of the uncanny”, which “inherently domesticates”, breaks down. If anything, we are confronted with China Miéville’s ‘abcanny’, which moves Freud’s notion “from simple inversion to odd mutation” and aims “to en-Weird ontology itself”. Such weirding of ontology is *Annihilation*’s main concern. In true (new) ‘weird’ fashion, the film is dedicated to ‘veering’, to perversity and transgression, “a fiction of strange zones and borderscapes, its monsters boundary-crawlers that slime all over generic quarantines, making borders less lines of separation than promiscuous contact zones”. As Luckhurst notes, it is only fitting that weird film and fiction should have become a privileged area of the speculative theoretical and philosophical endeavors associated with the nonhuman turn (resulting, e.g., in Graham Harman’s ‘weird realism’) – it appears to be “a form peculiarly suited to addressing the hybrid world of the Anthropocene”.⁷¹

As we have observed, from the beginning, with the first shots of the home, *Annihilation* undoes stable notions of inside and outside. The heterotopic zone of the Shimmer is itself emblematic of this: an extraterritoriality that is also an intraterritoriality, offering a vision “of alternate orders that are neither quite utopian nor dystopian but instead suggest a weirded interstitial alterity”.⁷² Throughout, but of course above all through the manifold mutations occurring within the Shimmer, the film, as Hageman puts it, “invites spectators to re-envision the home, whether house, ecosystem, or planet, as an intersection of insides and outsides that flow and mix”.⁷³ In fact, the Shimmer can be read as a spatial figuration of the Zombiecene itself: here, the received ontological boundaries between life and death, human and nonhuman, subject and object, organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, are cancelled out.

⁷¹ Luckhurst 2017: 1052, 1055, 1056.

⁷² Luckhurst 2017: 1057.

⁷³ Crosby et al. 2019: 260.

This applies equally to the body of ‘individual’ organisms. What we can glimpse in the Shimmer’s monstrous shapes is a view of the body akin to the one proposed by (feminist) new materialism mentioned earlier, which conceives it as ontologically unstable, impure, porous, leaky, and permeable. In this way, the film reveals “the fraught and fragile nature of individuation”⁷⁴ and instead emphasizes transcorporeality, interdependence, symbiogenesis, becoming-with, and the ontological entanglement of all existents.⁷⁵ One memorable, disturbing scene has the members of Lena’s group watch a found recording of an earlier expedition, in which one man cuts open the abdomen of another to reveal within, in the place of internal organs, the constant squirming and wriggling of eel- or worm-like organisms. Working through the figure of the tentacle – which has been recognized as a signature of weird fiction and cinema and promoted as an image both for understanding and thinking in the Anthropocene – this Cronenbergesque scene of body horror presents the zombie body as a ‘body without organs’, “not a dead body but a living body all the more alive and teeming [because] it has blown apart the organism and its organization”.⁷⁶ There is no *inside* here – no stable, ordered, and sealed-off corporeal or mental interiority. No closed borders. Instead, the monstrous enmeshing and continuous becoming of all kinds of forces, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, socio-cultural and natural, etc.

⁷⁴ Bennett 2020: xvii.

⁷⁵ Roger Caillois’ surrealist-speculative reflections on mimicry, homomorphy, and phagocytosis, recently discussed by Bennett (2020: 74-78), which assume a continuity between human, animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds and postulate a universal drive towards ‘becoming unbounded’ inherent to all organisms, could be productively read as an intertext of Garland’s film.

⁷⁶ Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 30.

Monstrous? Yes, but, as we have argued, only from the point of view of the old, liberal-humanist subject.⁷⁷ Once this defensive perspective, which was always, in the Lacanian sense, ‘imaginary’, is abandoned, the meaning of the changes occurring within the Shimmer shifts from signaling a horrifying destruction of the self to marking a moment of transformation and metamorphosis. As Hardt and Negri observe: “The anthropological exodus is important primarily because here is where the positive, constructive face of the mutation begins to appear: an ontological mutation in action”. “This creative evolution”, they continue, “does not merely occupy any existing place, but rather invents a new place; it is a desire that creates a new body; a metamorphosis that breaks all the naturalistic homologues of modernity.”⁷⁸ The film itself strongly suggests such a reading: For not only does the Shimmer contain as many wonders as horrors – as Lena remarks towards the end, some things were “nightmarish”, others “beautiful” – after having left the area, she – and the viewer with her – also increasingly comes to understand the mutations in just such terms. This becomes particularly clear in the scenes showing how Lena is interviewed after her return. Here, the contrast that is set up between herself and the man questioning her is striking: Whereas the latter, effectively representing anthropocentric, liberal-humanist ideology and the scientific-military complex it underpins, inquires about the nature of her double (“Can you describe its form?”, “Was it carbon based?”, “What did it want?”) and insists that “it came here for a reason”, “it attacked you”, “it was destroying everything”, Lena replies: “I don’t think it wanted anything. [...] It wasn’t destroying. It was changing everything. It was making something new.” This, in fact, is what *annihilation* comes to mean: not (only/primarily)

⁷⁷ Of course, the category of the ‘monstrous’ has long been investigated and deconstructed in all kinds of fields, including psychoanalysis, gender and queer studies, postcolonial and critical race studies, disability studies, posthumanism, and, of course, teratology.

⁷⁸ Hardt/Negri 2001: 215f.

destruction, but – as in particle physics, where it denotes “the process that occurs when a subatomic particle collides with its respective antiparticle to produce other particles” (Wikipedia) – (also) creation. Creative destruction – destructive creation. *Making something new*⁷⁹ – such are the ‘promises of monsters’.⁸⁰

In this way, Garland’s film encourages audiences to imagine an alternative (to the) Zombiecene, something more akin to Haraway’s vision of the Chthulucene. Specifically, through its insistent focus on bodies and their shifting ontologies, *Annihilation* invites a posthuman materialist approach which can perhaps be characterized as ‘vital(ist)’ insofar as the Shimmer appears as an endlessly productive, transversal and rhizomatic force interconnecting and entangling all matter – *vibrant matter* indeed.⁸¹ Hence also the frequent references to cancer, viruses, etc., and the subtle recurrence of the figure eight or symbol of the ouroboros in the weirdly proliferating tattoo – as Lena says: “continuous mutation”. The film suggests an ontology centered on zoe, on becoming, networks, and assemblages, but also, moving beyond biontology, on geos, nonlife, and unbecoming, thus provoking awareness of Povinelli’s “radical open field”. It is a ‘nomadic’ film, to the extent that ‘nomadic thought’, as it is developed in Braidotti’s work, “rests on estrangement as a method to free subject formation from the normative vision of the self”.⁸² It calls upon us to “become more ontologically inventive and sensible”, to cultivate new forms of kinship, assemblages, and alliances – “disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling” – and provokes disidentification, the deterritorialization and nomadization of the

⁷⁹ One is tempted to cite Salman Rushdie’s famous words on “the absolutism of the Pure” and hybridity and impurity as “how newness enters the world” (1992: 394) here and give them a posthumanist twist. In general, I believe that the potential and limits of a postcolonial posthumanism and/or a posthumanist postcolonialism still deserve more attention.

⁸⁰ Haraway 1992.

⁸¹ See Bennett 2010.

⁸² Braidotti 2009: 527.

human – “cultivate your inner housefly or cockroach, instead of your inner child”.⁸³ For this purpose, the film mainly uses and reworks the aesthetic mode of the *grotesque* – a mode that has a long tradition which typically involves the juxtaposition of ‘usually’ incompatible elements (e.g. human and animal, the ludicrous and the disgusting and terrifying) and the violation of the ‘laws of nature’, thus opening up new spaces of possibilities which force us to question established conceptions of the normal and the human. In particular, the grotesque is deeply materialist, built around what Mikhail Bakhtin famously called the ‘material bodily principle’. Grotesque bodies are non-normative, transgressive, even excessive: ugly, deformed, monstrous, disproportionate, filthy, revolting, incomplete. Unlike the “bourgeois conception of the completed atomized being” enshrined in the now dominant, ‘classical’ image of the body which presents it as “entirely finished, completed, strictly limited”, the grotesque image “ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body” and instead shows an “unfinished and open body [...] not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries” but “blended with the world, with animals, with objects” – “a body in the act of becoming”.⁸⁴ What, I think, emerges in *Annihilation* and other recent works of art and fiction, most explicitly in those associated with body horror, is a distinctly *posthuman grotesque* which, to develop Peter Stallybrass’ and Allon White’s important rereading of Bakhtin, can be understood as involving or pointing to what we might call an ‘ontological’ or ‘onto-political unconscious’ revolving around ontological hybridity as well as the complex interplay of disgust and desire.⁸⁵ Yet, if the posthuman grotesque as it appears in the film inevitably includes a deconstruction

⁸³ Haraway 2016: 98; 2010: 2193; Shaviro 1995: 53.

⁸⁴ Bakhtin 1984: 24, 320, 317, 26f, 317.

⁸⁵ See Stallybrass/White 1986.

of the human(ist) subject, the focus here, as we have seen, is also on a reconstruction, on ‘making something new’.⁸⁶

The aesthetics of Garland’s film are, however, not exhausted by body horror and grotesquerie. These are rather combined with multiple other modes and styles, including the visual creation of an overall surreal(ist), hypnotic, dreamlike atmosphere, which is primarily the result of the camerawork, the lighting, and the often stunning shapes. In fact, there is a certain correspondence here between signification or the signified on the one hand and the materiality of the signifier on the other. The film’s sensuous visual style (as well as its extraordinary music, composed by Ben Salisbury and Geoff Barrow) chimes perfectly with its thematic concerns – “corruptions of form” (Lena) everywhere. For instance, the omnipresent rainbow-like light is, of course, a result of ‘refraction’, and contributes to the general impression of a liquid, kaleidoscopic, and vibrant world, a realm in flux, where nothing is definitively fixed or finished and where all things flow into each other. Neither epistemologically – “I don’t know” must be the most often uttered words in the film – nor ontologically is there any certainty here. Like the omnipresent lichens in the *Shimmer*, there is just a ceaseless becoming. In both, form and content, no unity, stability, or completion then – only “echoes” (Lena). In all of this, I believe the film effectively gestures towards something like an emerging *écriture posthumaine*, echoing and ‘refracting’ *écriture féminine*, as it emerges in the work of Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva, and others.⁸⁷ It raises the question: *Comment parler-zombie? Comment parler-posthumain?*

⁸⁶ Arguably, this is in keeping with a more general shift in recent theorizing away from critique (only) towards more affirmative, reconstructive modes of criticism (though of course, *deconstruction* was never *destruction*). Indeed, for Haines and Grattan (2017: 28n1), posthumanism as a whole should be considered part of this shift.

⁸⁷ In this context, it is also noteworthy that the expedition team of which Lena is part is an all-female group.

The postanthropocentric, posthumanist imaginary of the film owes much to Surrealism – but also, or, perhaps better, including, the work of J.G. Ballard (after all, Ballard himself was heavily influenced by Surrealist art). The alligator-filled swamps at the beginning of the expedition, recalling Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, or the wondrous crystallized structures on the beach towards the end, strongly reminiscent of his *The Crystal World*, are two cases in point. Beyond this, almost all the names of the film’s characters are actually derived from Ballard’s writings. This is only appropriate because, like *Annihilation*, this is Zombie-fiction. Writing for the Zombiecene. “Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash. During our friendship he had rehearsed his death in many crashes”.⁸⁸ *Crash*, like Ballard’s other texts from the 1960s and 70s, are ‘thanato-narratives’. His protagonists are the undead, they are us, remade in all kinds of human-nonhuman, organic-inorganic becomings. As ontologies are unsettled and shifting, they, like Lena, like us, are trying to cope, to adapt, to transform, to ‘make something new’.

Yet, while Ballard’s work and Garland’s film are all about the monstrous undoing and transformation of the human(ist) subject, this *making*, that is, the practical and experimental aspect highlighted earlier, is still rather timid in both. Today, the zombie must get more active. It must create a collective. That is to say: We have to move beyond “the happy and hopeless posthumanism that is content with counting and recounting the connections between humans and nonhumans” and instead fashion what Dimitris Papadopoulos calls “insurgent posthumanism”. As Papadopoulos, whose work is crucial in this context, asks: “How can left politics become more posthumanist (again) and how can posthumanism become more left again?”⁸⁹ Certainly, this includes conceiving biopolitics in radical naturecultural ways,

⁸⁸ Ballard 2008: 1.

⁸⁹ Papadopoulos 2010b: 148, 144.

by developing “a perspective on the personal–collective that, without neglecting human individual bodies, doesn’t start from these bodies but from awareness of their more than human interdependency”,⁹⁰ and aiming at ‘alterbiopolitical’ interventions that create new world-making relationalities. *Ontology is political*. It “is not a description of a final state of things, but of processes that includes alternative possibilities of world-making”.⁹¹ Thus, what we need today is an active ‘ontological politics’, a deliberate politicization of *mattering*. While the ‘cosmopolitics’ or ‘assembly politics’ of actor-network theory and others remain important, we must also go beyond these and commit to a *materialist politics* worthy of the name in the *Zombiecene*: a politics “not primarily performed as a politics of institutions but as the fundamental capacity to remake and transform processes of matter and life” – “an activist engagement with matter itself”. Such a ‘politics of matter’, in other words, aims at changing the very materiality of lived spaces and bodies – “material transformation as constituent political organising”.⁹² Experimental practice, the material worlding of existence, is central here: It is through actively remaking our embodied existences, experimenting with bodily practices and material alliances, and through collectively redrawing the immediate conditions of everyday experience that ‘alterontologies’ are created. This fashioning of alternative forms of life, a reordering of the very constitution of being, effectively materializes ordinary relations of justice. This is a material, processual, ‘thick’ justice; the crafting of material worlds allowing formerly ‘invisibilized’ actants to thrive.⁹³ If we are to survive the *Zombiecene*, this will be one critical way: onto-resistance against onto-power; “terraformation from below”;⁹⁴ the collective making of a self-organized common world – the creation, not

⁹⁰ Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 167.

⁹¹ Papadopoulos 2014: 71.

⁹² Papadopoulos 2018: 8; 2014: 75.

⁹³ Papadopoulos 2010a; 2014.

⁹⁴ Papadopoulos 2018: 48.

just of the social commons, but of the *ecological commons*. Yet, whereas Papadopoulos tends to consider the politics of matter an *alternative* to forms of left politics that more overtly target power and the state, following Gramsci and his notion of the ‘integral state’, I believe that the making of the eco-commons actually requires a combined struggle on several fronts, including more direct acts of opposition and resistance. It has often been noted that the zombie frequently appears in the common spaces of the public sphere: in city squares, streets, schools, shopping malls, etc. There is the embodied and everyday making of alternative ontologies here, but also interruption, occupation, a reclaiming and reappropriation of the regimented spatialities and temporalities of the late-capitalist cityscape⁹⁵ – an active struggle against the current s/State (ontological/political ‘state of affairs’).⁹⁶ The zombie today must organize. Take up arms. Form the Undead Liberation Army.

Like earlier monsters, such as the vampire at the end of the 19th century, the 21st-century zombie is a figuration of, not *the* end, but *an* ending. The term *Zombiecene* reminds us that what we are living through is precisely *not* the Anthropocene, but its termination: the end of the obscene scene of *Anthropos*. Yet, this ending is drawn out, reluctant, agonizing. *Anthropos*, this master zombie of our time – *why won’t he die?*

As the zombie itself, we are at present in between, in limbo. The old is dying and the new cannot be born; this is the time in which “a great variety of morbid symptoms” appear – or, in Žižek’s loose translation of Gramsci’s famous words: the

⁹⁵ See Nyong’o 2017; Orpana 2017.

⁹⁶ Badiou 2005.

time of monsters.⁹⁷ All you zombies show your faces. Together, let's make sure this is truly the end of Anthropos. And, finally, the beginning of the *Post-Anthropocene*.

We are on the Road. Things that cannot be put back or made right again. It's high time for something new. Unleash the zombie swarms. Good riddance, Robert Neville. Welcome to the *Zombiecene*.

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⁹⁷ Gramsci 1971: 276; Žižek 2010: 95.

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