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DOING THE ZOMBIE GLITCH; HAPTIC UNDEADLINESS AS A POLITICAL THEORY

Introduction

This paper develops a particular enquiry that I first set out during my practice-based doctoral thesis. Whilst my writing here is a theoretically driven piece of research, it also attempts to formulate a speculative notion of political practice. In particular, it sets out to use zombie aesthetics in order to mobilise a critically engaged and practical response to the homogenising operations of late capitalism. Instead of treating undeadliness as an allegorical articulation of the contemporary condition – a fruitful though well-trodden endeavour – I attempt to use zombie cinema as a methodological blueprint or instruction manual for how we might *do* politics. So I do not try to *read* the image of undeadliness as much as I focus on the formal filmic devices that made George Romero's early zombie films so compelling. I set up the term 'haptic undeadliness' to describe a particular quality in Romero's films whereby a prevailing sense of diegetic integrity and narrative coherence is ruptured by the visceral spectacle – the slimy gore and the unreadable affective weirdness – of the undead corpse. I then go on to understand our own political status quo as a conceit that might be antagonised by a similarly haptic strategy.

Haptic Undeadliness

The allure of George Romero's early zombie films owes a lot to his ability to create for the spectator riotous and frenzied set pieces – gory tableau of artificial excess – that privilege visceral thrill over narrative cohesion. In these moments Romero does not try to evoke a hermetically sealed fictitious conceit in which a drama can unfold; rather he displays the materiality of an explicitly artificial diegesis. I understand materiality here as a term that describes the formal surfaces of the onscreen image, as opposed to the *representational* function of these surfaces within the dominant language of cinema. Steven Shaviro draws attention to this point in his essay *Contagious Allegories*.

Romero turns the constraints of his low budget – crudeness of presentation, minimal acting, and tacky special effects – into a powerful means of expression: he foregrounds and hyperbolizes these aspects of his production in order to depsychologize the drama and emphasise the artificiality and gruesome arbitrariness of spectacle. ... Our anxieties are focused upon events rather than characters, upon the violent fragmentation of cinematic process...

...rather than the supposed integrity of any single protagonist's subjectivity.¹

To explore these ideas in more detail I will analyse some specific scenes from Romero's oeuvre. In one particular feeding frenzy from *Dawn of the Dead*,² we see a close up of some zombies toying with a pile of freshly exposed human innards. However, the zombies do not immediately shovel the flesh into their mouths. They rummage through the fake entrails and prod the miscellaneous viscera. These are only fleeting shots, but Romero is proudly asking us to enjoy the gory set piece as a self-contained phenomenon in its own right. The probing hands that we see cease to be those of a ravenous undead mob; they become instead the hands of Romero's extras who have obviously been asked to show off the ooziess of the props as much as possible. These brief moments become a spectacle of material surfaces that are temporarily divorced from their representational function within the narrative. Romero is not bothered here with maintaining the illusion of a self-contained fictitious world; he wants us to revel in the playful artifice of his invention.

In *Day of the Dead*³ a pack of zombies decapitates a screaming soldier. They carry out this procedure with a serene gracefulness and lightness of touch that is fascinatingly incongruous with the act itself. One particular zombie pulls the severed head away from the body in a very deliberate manner, then slowly backs away as if in awed reverence to the special effects. The other zombies fervently pat and push at the soldier's abdomen without exhibiting any real urge to plunder the newly exposed flesh. They add texture to the visceral scene and frame the gory manoeuvre; they become a stage-managed and static feature rather than a hungry hoard of zombies within a narrative trajectory. Again this is a momentary and highly choreographed set piece that revels in, and invites us to enjoy, its own artifice.

How might we begin to theorise these scenes in which Romero revels in the gory spectacle of the cinematic image at the expense of narrative cohesion? Laura Marks describes haptic looking as an intimate and affective encounter with the materiality of an object. She opposes this mode of looking to the formulation of rational knowledge engendered by the more conventional notion of the gaze. The haptic focuses on surfaces – on texture, grain and skin – whilst the gaze demands depth, distance and perspective. Haptic looking collapses distance and blurs familiarity; it evokes the materiality of the object without trying to forge a symbolic reading of it.⁴ More specifically, haptic film draws the spectator's attention to the surface of the screen. It privileges an evocation of texture, touch and materiality over a concern for the illusion of three dimensional space and narrative privileged by mainstream cinema. Haptic film dwells on the affective and surface artefacts of the moving image – the pixels, grain and glitches etc – that resist the procedures of interpretation and language.

¹ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 88

² George A. Romero, *Dawn of the Dead* (MKR Group Inc., 1978)

³ George A. Romero, *Day of the Dead* (United Distribution Film Company, 1985)

⁴ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xi

The playful subversion of filmic protocols in Romero's films, that I described previously, might be understood as moments of haptic materiality. We witness a glitch in the normative cinematic language – a moment of playful excess and tactile surfaces that suspend and complicate diegetic integrity. As spectators we are seduced by the affective *mechanics* of the moving image as opposed to the *meaning* of the moving image. The hermetically sealed diegetic world in which narrative unfolds is undone by Romero's haptic texture of artificiality. These gory set pieces thus refuse to coalesce with the celluloid illusion of diegetic cohesion. Shaviro goes on to say,

Just as the zombies cannot be categorized within the diegesis (they cannot be placed in terms of our usual binary oppositions of life and death, or nature and culture), so on the formal level of presentation they transgress, or simply ignore, the boundaries between humour and horror, between intense conviction and ludicrous exaggeration.

These films are wildly discontinuous, flamboyantly anti-naturalistic, and nonsensically grotesque. Yet the more ridiculously excessive and self-consciously artificial they are, the more literal is their visceral impact. They can't be kept at a distance, for they can't be referred to anything beyond themselves. Their simulations are radically immediate: they no longer pretend to stand in for, or to represent, a previously existing real. Horror thus destroys customary meanings and appearances, ruptures the surfaces of the flesh, and violates the organic integrity of the body. It puts the spectator in direct contact with intensive, unrepresentable fluxes of corporeal sensation.⁵

Steven Shaviro claims that these moments in Romero's films undo the process of figuration. The zombie, in these instances of affective excess, does not stand for anything other than itself; it does not stay faithful to the coherent meaning of the narrative and instead ruptures its own diegetic continuum by making direct and unmitigated overtures to the spectator's visual pleasures. Undeadliness bleeds beyond the constraints of the horror genre that contains it, becoming, for a moment at least, an affective, subversive, grotesque and slapstick hybrid instead. We do not revel in the representational language of the narrative; rather we respond to the gleeful and gory excessiveness – the haptic texture of low budget artifice – that refuses to coalesce to the celluloid illusion of hermetically sealed narrative coherence. The notion of a consistent cinematic language that demands representative consistency is undone by a fabric of formal surfaces that refuses to *make* sense. We can thus set up the term 'haptic undeadliness' to describe the moment at which the materiality of Romero's filmic language disrupts its own symbolic function.

At the beginning of *Day of the Dead*, we see a woman sitting alone in an unfurnished breezeblock room. She stands up and approaches the far wall, upon which hangs a calendar depicting an image of a pumpkin field. Suddenly, countless zombie hands burst through the wall and try to grab her. The woman spins around in terror, and then Romero suddenly cuts to a shot of the same character coming to her senses in the back of a helicopter.

⁵ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 101

We realise that the previous scene in the breezeblock room was a representation of the woman's daydream.

But as the character spins away from the zombie hands in the dream sequence, she strikes a pose that is overtly stylised and theatrical. Instead of running away – an act that the fictitious conceit surely demands – she holds her hammy stance in front of the camera long enough for us to notice its kitsch artifice. If Romero had cut away from this shot a second earlier we would not notice the acting straying beyond the limits of what we might call naturalistic, but the image remains on screen long enough for us to register its explicitly artificial staging. Again, Romero invites us to recognise this set piece as a hyperbolic spectacle deliberately played to the camera, as opposed to an image that faithfully conforms to the illusion of a self-contained diegesis. This scene is another example of the way in which Romero's films do not attempt to sustain the illusion of a hermetically sealed reality; by revealing – and revelling in – their own artifice, they playfully subvert the normalised “conventions of narrative film”⁶ as identified by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

I propose that the combination of this overt theatricality, and the haptic excess that I discussed a moment ago, construct a particular zombie spectator who is aware of her own distance and detachment from the fictitious conceit of undeadliness. She relishes instead the *affective materiality* of undeadliness that has been prised away from the illusory protocols of narrative cinema. This zombie spectator is interested not in the ostensible unity and symbolic consistency of undead fiction, but in the haptic fragments of undead fiction – the irreverent, playful and unruly spectacles – that interrupt their own diegesis.

The Digital Zombie

In contrast to this analogue rendition of undeadliness, contemporary zombie fiction now uses a lot of digital imagery as its prevailing means of representation. In the first episode of the HBO series *The Walking Dead*⁷ we see a zombie whose entire body has been eaten off up to its ribcage.

The festering corpse drags itself along the ground with its exposed spinal cord trailing behind. The effect is impressive, but at the same time the gore remains faithful to the diegesis; by looking so ‘realistic’ the effect heightens the integrity of the hermetically sealed narrative. And because of this, the cinematic language retains a prevailing consistency at the expense of the playful irreverence that Romero brings to the genre.

This *digital* attempt to accurately represent broken and decaying undead bodies destroys the blatant artifice and the affective materiality of Romero's *analogue* zombie. As a result, recent zombie films have all started to look the same. And this homogenised realism is symptomatic of a larger stagnation within the genre. Generic zombie fiction now reproduces a range of over saturated tropes: the ostensibly isolated attacks that soon proliferate into a

⁶ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in: Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000; An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 988

⁷ Frank Darabont, *The Walking Dead* (AMC Studios, 2010)

full blown zombie holocaust; the media descending into anarchy as chaos takes hold; the coma patient waking up to a scene of undead desolation; the character who must slay the undead corpse of a loved one; these scenarios have now become over-saturated motifs within the popular and highly-commodified zombie genre. The vertiginous and abject weirdness of a walking corpse that defiles all systems of meaning and categorisation has become itself a category, both for us as viewers and for the protagonists within zombie fiction. For example, in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*⁸, made in 1968, the character Barbara is thrown into paroxysms of hysteria as an anomalous corpse stumbles towards her in a cemetery. However, in the ongoing *Resident Evil*⁹ franchise, Milla Jovovich's character Alice is readily accepting of undeadliness as the condition of her apocalypse. She barely registers the endless hoards of undead corpses that populate her world; they have become no more than an irritatingly persistent annoyance that she dispatches with a weary familiarity and contempt.

Of course a few exceptions remain; in particular Bruce le Bruce's conflation of gay pornography and undeadliness has led to some wonderfully provocative imagery that deliberately transgresses the diegetic consistency and continuity of his films. In *Otto; or, Up with Dead People*,¹⁰ a horny zombie inserts his erect penis into the abdominal wound of his freshly devoured boyfriend. Whilst the bloody hole is prosthetic, the erect penis is not; we find ourselves watching highly stylised but un-simulated sex – an unmediated erotic spectacle between two men, as opposed to two *characters* within the fictitious conceit, that irreverently ruptures the self-contained coherence of the narrative. However, contemporary undead fiction does not typically confound us with a deliciously obscene defilement of its own diegetic integrity; it has instead spawned a series of instantly familiar tableaux that are now ubiquitous to the genre. Undeadliness has lost its weird haptic irreverence and become part of the normative language of cinema.

A Contemporary Problem

I have just attempted to outline the shift within the zombie oeuvre from irreverent analogue mayhem to normalised digital consistency. If we understand this shift as a move from radical difference to one-dimensional orthodoxy, we can start to recognise a political dimension to this discussion of zombie aesthetics. I will now try to sketch out these politics in more detail.

Mark Fisher argues that late capitalism's most pernicious strategy is its ability to suffocate any discourse that radically opposes its own hegemony. Potentially subversive dissent is assimilated *within* the prevailing political vernacular, and then held up as proof of the system's ostensible commitment to freedom of speech, democracy and liberal plurality. In this way oppositional discourse is turned against its own ends, becoming part of the very system it sets out to interrogate. Radical content is nullified within a field of what Marianne Dekoven calls "non-contradictory difference"¹¹. Capitalism consumes everything in its path – like the oozing ball of death

⁸ George A. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (Pickwick Group Ltd., 1968)

⁹ Paul W. S. Anderson, *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (Screen Gems, 2010)

¹⁰ Bruce LaBruce, *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* (GMfilms, 2008)

¹¹ Marianne Dekoven, *The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 29

from the 1950's horror film *The Blob*.¹² Only it is worse than that, because we are not being confronted with the gooey sprawl of capitalism's frontier, we have *already* been dissolved within it – swallowed up and masticated into a pulp of indeterminate consistency. This homogenising procedure creates a ubiquitous orthodoxy in which highly ideological political procedures are presented as an inevitable and objective reality to which no alternative exists.¹³

Fisher self-consciously frames his diagnosis of the contemporary condition as a development of Fredric Jameson's argument in the 1991 text *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson claims that a "fundamental mutation of the sphere of culture"¹⁴ has taken place whereby "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production."¹⁵ He continues,

...some of our most cherished and time-honoured radical conceptions about the nature of cultural politics may thereby find themselves outmoded. However distinct those conceptions – which range from slogans of negativity, opposition, and subversion to critique and reflexivity – may have been, they all shared a single, fundamentally spatial, presupposition, which may be resumed in the equally time-honoured formula of "critical distance."¹⁶

He uses the term "critical distance" to evoke the notion of an oppositional and counter-cultural space from which autonomous critical arguments might be formulated in response to a hegemonic status quo. He then claims that "the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital... has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism."¹⁷ However contested the term postmodernism has become in the intervening two decades since Jameson made this claim, the proposition that we have witnessed the erasure of oppositional cultural spaces that might resist their own assimilation into capital concerns remains continually pertinent. Benjamin Buchloh offers a more recent articulation of this very point when he claims that "spaces of subversion, resistance, critique, utopian aspiration"¹⁸ have been "eroded, assimilated, or simply annihilated"¹⁹ by the "homogenizing apparatus"²⁰ of contemporaneity, and that this "necessitates a rethinking of what cultural practice can be under the totalizing conditions of fully advanced capitalist organization."²¹ And Fisher brings us up to date with his notion of "precorporation" – a process that pre-

¹² Irvin Yeaworth, *The Blob* (Paramount Pictures Umbrella Entertainment, 1958)

¹³ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Ropley; 0 Books, 2009), 16

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, in: Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism; A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 86

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 87

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87

¹⁸ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh et al., *The Predicament of Contemporary Art*, in: Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, David Joselit, *Art Since 1900; Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2004), 673

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 676

formats culture to the point where it is contained within the dominant political climate from its very conception:

What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.²²

The notion of an exterior critical space that can operate as a counterpoint to dominant culture, even if it later becomes assimilated into the mainstream (like punk for example), has been eradicated. Instead, Fisher claims that contemporary cultural productivity – and indeed human life itself – is already contained within, and internal to, the logic of capital. 50 Cent captures this pre-existing co-option of human life in the title of his album *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*.²³ Life is measured solely on a continuum of financial solvency and commercial success; life is wealth, and death becomes inseparable from the absence of it.

A further example might illustrate this condition that Fisher describes. During a performance by The Vines on the Late Show with David Letterman, the lead singer Craig Nicholls gives an impressively off-piste rendition of the hit single *Get Free*.²⁴ Large sections of the catchy song are rendered unrecognisable by Nicholls' howling vocals and squawking guitar; he ends up prostrate and writhing on the studio floor while his bandmates desperately try to maintain some semblance of the song. Nicholls eventually destroys the drum kit in a blaze of rock'n'roll cliché, and then the camera cuts back to a grinning Letterman. The unruffled host shares a bemused joke with his sycophantic musical director before announcing the advertisement break. Despite Nicholls' nihilistic and raging self-sabotage, his protest becomes exactly what he is protesting against, namely his own assimilation within the commercial mainstream. His is a perfectly hollow rebellion packaged into three minutes – a purely stylistic spectacle of dissent that dovetails seamlessly with the TV schedule, raising the stock of The Vines immeasurably.

Haptic Undeadliness as a Political Theory

In the first section of this paper I claimed that the haptic materiality of analogue zombie cinema momentarily ruptures its own diegetic integrity with a dose of formal irreverence and excess. I then went on to discuss how the contemporary political climate presents itself to us as an objective reality to which no alternative exists. To conclude, I would now like to explicitly pull these two lines of enquiry together. If the analogue zombie breaks the diegetic reality of narrative cinema, might we similarly imagine a rupture to the 'diegetic reality' of capitalism? Crucially, Romero's zombie films irreverently antagonise the cinematic conventions of undead fiction whilst remaining *within* that particular category; analogue undeadliness is a critical mole – an internal saboteur – it mounts its challenge from inside the system that contains it. The analogue zombie thus offers us a blueprint for how we

²² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Ropley; 0 Books, 2009), 9

²³ 50 Cent, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (Aftermath Entertainment, 2003)

²⁴ The Vines, *Get Free*, on: *The Late Show with David Letterman* (Worldwide Pants Incorporated, 2002)

might contest a political homogeneity that forever assimilates our complaints into its own operations.

When attempting to imagine a critical strategy that might trouble the ubiquity of contemporaneity, Mark Fisher claims that, "Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible realism turns out to be nothing of the sort."²⁵ This manoeuvre would involve asserting that "capitalist realism" is a contingent ideology as opposed to a naturalised fact. Fisher goes on to suggest that, "One strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us."²⁶

I propose that the formally irreverent and self-reflexive procedures of analogue undeadliness encourage us to explore the haptic materiality – the "Real" – that underlies our own cultural and political diegesis. This would involve exposing and eviscerating the manmade armature – the network of ideologically determined formal conventions – that supports our ostensibly objective reality. Just as Romero's zombie momentarily renders the cinematic image as a material form as opposed to a representational narrative device, so too would the "Real" of contemporary politics reveal the *mechanics*, as opposed to the *meanings*, of political discourse. The analogue zombie encourages us to conceive of what we might call a *politics of materiality* that playfully undresses the standardised protocols determining our formal engagement with politics. We can then imagine how the illusion of normalisation specific to late capitalism might be infected with a zombie-like contagion of haptic weirdness.

But what does this mean on a more practical level? What might an emphasis on the material dimensions of contemporary politics actually look like? If we recognise the analogue zombie as a formal antagonism to the narrative order that contains it, would it be politically pertinent to ape undeadliness directly in order to confound our own normative political behaviour? When we are expected to *do* politics (whatever that typically entails), should we just start acting like lo-fi zombies instead? In short; no. Mimesis will not suffice; we cannot simply *pretend* to be zombies, because the image of undeadliness has already been lost to the spectacle of capitalist commodification. Sarah Juliet Lauro explores this very point in her essay *Playing Dead; Zombies Invade Performance Art*. She attempts a political reading of the recent phenomena of zombie walks and flash mobs, in which the public assemble en masse in full undead regalia, and then proceed to stumble unannounced through high streets and city centres. Whilst these events might have been *initially* unprecedented and deliciously devoid of any normative rationale, they have inevitably been hijacked by commercial zombie conventions to the extent that "the zombie walks that began as a playful resistance to consumer culture are becoming the very thing they set out to mock."²⁷ The flash mob phenomenon has become a highly choreographed, organised and endorsed set of events that trade in the saturated and over-familiar image of the zombie that I discussed earlier.

²⁵ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Ropley: 0 Books, 2009), 16

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18

²⁷ Sarah Juliet Lauro, *Playing Dead; Zombies Invade Performance Art*, in: Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (eds.), *Better Off Dead; The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 228

So we now need to respond to the zombie in a very different manner. I propose that we understand haptic undeadliness as a methodology that we can *replicate*, without literally copying the image of the zombie on a visual level. Haptic undeadliness invites us to activate in our own political lives a performative interruption – a glitchy weirdness – that might upset the prevailing procedural norms of contemporary cultural and political production. This practice would not *resemble* undeadliness, but would function *like* undeadliness in its efforts to confound the ostensible realism of the status quo.

So I claim that we might adopt the stupefying haptic irreverence of Romero's analogue zombie as a methodology that informs us how to swamp our prevailing political protocols with an unruly dose of excessive nonsense. This strategy, devised from watching zombie films as a self-reflexive spectator, would eviscerate the normalised political event, collapsing its prevailing orthodoxies with a sudden texture of proximity and affect. I do not claim to be doing anything more than laying the theoretical ground work for what a politics of haptic materiality might be. How this would manifest practically is still very much up for grabs. I imagine it might function as a moment of vertiginous estrangement – of awkward and cringe-worthy oddness – that derails the mainstream political spectacle. It might induce a giddy vertigo – an excess of disorientation that momentarily bends prevailing perception. It is the political equivalent of moving forward with a video camera whilst zooming out (the classic cinematic technique used on a character whose mind is about to implode under the weight of a sudden and cataclysmic realisation). It might be understood as a form of protest, but it must not look like anything already understood as such; it must retain a resolute unfamiliarity – an out-of-place and weird irreverence to what *should* be happening – if it is to function at all. And it must not be in any way violent; the target of this procedure is formal political orthodoxy, not people's fundamental wellbeing. Instead of emanating from an authoritative centre, it would spread rhizomatically like a libidinal contagion infecting an ever-growing number of consenting constituents. So it must not be violent... though it might be embarrassing. It might be playful when the situation demands solemnity; crass and inappropriate when careful diplomacy is called for; stuttering and stupid instead of verbose and erudite; weird, odd, glitchy.

This procedure might be understood as a performance of sorts, but it would not amount to anything as coherent as a cultural insurrection or an oppositional *détournement*. However, it might manifest as an unwillingness to coalesce absolutely to political standardisation, and remind us that the ubiquitous procedures that determine our socio-political behaviours are contingent negotiations rather than essential conditions.

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