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BEYOND THE METAPHOR: GAY ZOMBIES AND THE CHALLENGE TO  
HOMONORMATIVITY

When queercore pioneer Bruce LaBruce's first zombie film, *Otto; or Up with Dead People* (2008), was covered by *Slant* magazine in 2009, reviewer Eric Henderson thought it remarkable that this example of avant-garde art-horror would want to convey the message that "gay sex does not in itself imply a political statement."<sup>1</sup> His thoughts were probably inflected by the fact that LaBruce's work has previously resorted to sexual transgression in films such as *The Raspberry Reich* (2004) in order to politicize the queer subject. In *Otto*, the disenchanting teenage zombie played by Jey Crisfar finds himself lost in the streets of Berlin, where he is hired by independent filmmaker Medea Yarn (Katharina Klewinghaus). Her idea for a "political zombie movie" featuring the "Che Guevara" of gay zombies seems, at least initially, to point towards similar revolutionary territory. The film has thus been praised for its use of zombiedom as "a metaphor for dormant political activism," even if Medea's plan for social change disintegrates into little more than meaningless pornography.<sup>2</sup> The reception of *Otto* in popular culture has been positive, but it has almost exclusively paid attention to its parodic aspects and failed to acknowledge its use of sexuality as a critique of artificial constructions of gay identity.<sup>3</sup> On a surface level, *Otto*, and more generally gay zombies, may be seen, as Medea explains, as "just a metaphor" for the struggle of the queer community, who are portrayed as a "gay plague [that has] descended on humanity." After all, in the film's most quoted passage, Otto is asked "to raise [his] hand up out of the grave" and "protest . . . against all the injustices perpetrated against [his] kind," and Medea points out that rising out of the grave is a sign of solidarity with "the misfits and the sissies and the plague-ridden faggots who are buried and forgotten by the heartless, merciless, heterofascist majority." Gay zombies thus chart the

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Henderson, "Otto; or Up with Dead People Review," *Slant Magazine*, February 11, 2009, accessed October 20, 2010, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/otto-or-up-with-dead-people>.

<sup>2</sup> Henderson, *Otto*. There is an interesting parallel between the desubjectified human flesh of the male bodies piling up in the film's final orgy and the superimposed slabs of meat in the butcher's scene, particularly as the latter have been compared by Medea to "mankind's quest to turn the Earth into an industrialized wasteland of casual extermination and genocide."

<sup>3</sup> For example, the blurb accompanying the sleeve of the Criterion DVD version of the film, originally from *GayCelluloid.com*, deems it "an entertaining porn political parody of the zombie genre."

hardships of coming out or of accepting one's sexuality, as well as the social violence still largely visited upon homosexuals.

As the explicitly queer monster gains momentum in popular culture and academia, it is important to offer a critical reassessment of the gay zombie and the limitations of its allegorical potential.<sup>4</sup> *Otto* does not refuse the political value of sex and, instead, utilizes it as the basis for a rejection of a gay community that mirrors its heteronormative counterpart. In this article, I seek to contextualize the apparition and use-value of gay zombies beyond their connotative power to assess their significance for Queer Studies and the gay community, who are their primary audience. Such a project entails superseding the extrinsic sexual specificity of these creatures. The allegorical approach is valid and illuminating, but only insofar as it leads to a theorization of the representational limits of the zombie as a form of negotiation of identity within a wider heterosexual context. Instead, I want to explore the gay zombie as articulating a skepticism of sexual essentialism and the possible benefits of an oppositional stance which rejects heteronormative assimilation.<sup>5</sup> Using recent work on queerness as a form of oppositional politics and as premised on models of subjectivity that do not depend on fabricated notions of the gay community, I argue that this new monster does not necessarily, in itself, challenge heteronormative models of subjectivity and that, unless abstracted and understood as a reflexive meta-commentary on the gay community, may have a limited political value. I focus on LaBruce's *Otto* as an important corrective to the popular belief that gay men living in urban centers have a shared number of affinities extending beyond the sexual, and as one possible move towards a more complex incarnation of the gay undead.

#### *Metaphor and Beyond*

It has been clear for some time, particularly since the publication of *Monsters in the Closet* (1997), that to study the representation of homosexuality in horror film can provide a direct insight into discourses surrounding the social formation of queer identity and its exclusion from the heteronormative order. As Benschhoff explains, homosexuals "are often filtered through the iconography of the horror film" when not directly aligned with the monsters themselves.<sup>6</sup> This is possible because fears of homosexuality generally revolve around the same typological threats that traditional monsters embody: both disturb seemingly stable notions of the self (by contagion, be it of AIDS or of homosexuality itself, or by establishing the possibility of difference) and of community (by acting as a direct menace to received social structures like the nuclear family). Both monster and homosexual have been culturally envisioned as social outcasts and have historically met with fitting

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<sup>4</sup> Forthcoming academic collections on this subject include Steve Jones and Shaka McGlotten, *Necrosexuality: Essays on Zombies and Sex* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014) and Darren Elliott-Smith, *Off-Cuts: Queer Horror Film and Television Aesthetics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> In its activist sense, my use of the term "queer" follows Lisa Duggan's understanding of it as reflecting the political struggle of a counter-hegemonic community "unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender." See Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review* 22 (1992): 11-31.

<sup>6</sup> Harry M. Benschhoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 1.

catastrophic ends. Without wanting to conflate both, or argue that they might be contingent, the categories “gay” and “monster” are clearly prey to similar patterns of exclusion and anxiety, those generated by the “normalizing” imaginary. If, as Benschhoff warns, what gay monsters actually signify and how homosexuals are portrayed in films varies considerably according to changing visual codes and attitudes towards sexuality, as well as other socio-political elements that constitute the status quo at any given time, then the study of monsters necessarily illuminates debates on the public representation of the homosexual.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the former have often been read as potentially liberating signifiers of anti-institutionalized patriarchy.<sup>8</sup> Such a strategy, however, relies on a semiology that still fabricates the monster as other, excluded or disengaged. For example, little has been written about how the monster as a contemporary role model may reflect the experience of queer identity. More importantly, as the gay monster moves from mainstream horror to the specialist channels of the gay film, it is pertinent to analyze how films such as LaBruce’s may be addressing problems within gay subculture.

The appearance of the gay monster as main character in horror film is a relatively new development, albeit one which is gaining growing interest in Horror Studies. Its boom in the 2000s is no doubt connected to the huge number of gay films in circulation, both from independent and mainstream quarters, as well as the development of a specific gay entertainment industry.<sup>9</sup> In fact, by the late 2000s and early 2010s, it was possible to have sexy and likable gay monsters in television shows such as *True Blood* (2008-present) and *American Horror Story* (2010-present). Out of this milieu emerges the gay zombie, blossoming in a plethora of shorts and full-length films and spoofs. In a sense, the queering of the zombie is a logical continuation of the use of monsters to comment on the zeitgeist. I have noted that zombies are, in some ways, an unsurprising signifier for the homosexual, particularly as filtered through traditional heterosexual myths that abounded during, and after, the outbreak of AIDS in the 1980s: zombies are generally contagious and may infect victims through direct contact with their bodily fluids; they inhabit decaying and diseased bodies and, most importantly, are eminently “other.” It is natural, then, that the zombie has been re-appropriated by queer cinema: it provides fertile ground for tongue-in-cheek critiques of the hardships of gays and allows the latter to vicariously experience their own social exclusion via fantastic projection. However, gay zombies are now increasingly sentient, and, I argue, this poses a challenge to an exclusively allegorical reading. The origins of the cognitivism which has enabled gay zombies to transcend the representational sphere lie in deeper developments in zombie culture.

A staple of native Haitian folklore and connected to voodoo rites and black magic, zombies were initially either spiritual (*zombi jardin*) or walking

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<sup>7</sup> Benschhoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Michael William Saunders, *Imps of the Perverse: Gay Monsters in Film* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 120–5.

<sup>9</sup> See Steven Paul Davies, *Out at the Movies: A History of Gay Cinema* (Harpenden: Kamera Books, 2008), 153–73.

corpses (*zombi corps cadavre*).<sup>10</sup> The second type proved fruitful for filmmakers and writers: it allowed for a revision of systems of control, policing and behaviorism, particularly in connection to colonialism. In fact, as Markman Ellis has noted, early zombie narratives and films are almost invariably concerned, not with the physicality and putrefaction of zombies, but with their potential as effective political metaphors. The zombie in nineteenth century narratives, such as the ghost stories of Lafcadio Hearn or later travel books such as William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929), sparks

[t]he remembering and occultation of the history of African slavery in the American colonies, invoking the memory of slave resistance and rebellion, not as a trope of abolition and emancipation, but as fear about what that resistance implies about the communities and nation states which are its legacy.<sup>11</sup>

This understanding of voodoo as an act of defense against the colonial West was crystallized in many popular films of the 1930s and 1940s. *Revolt of the Zombies* (Victor Halperin, 1936), which relocated the action to Cambodia, went as far to include an American soldier warning against the possible "destruction of the white race" under the hands of enemy zombie hordes. Most memorably, *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) immortalized the voodoo ritual as a form of native resistance against the white bourgeoisie who have taken over an island in the West Indies. The film has Jessica (Christine Gordon) turn into a "white zombie," or slave, to the voodoo priest, whom she must obey as a totally alienated subject. *I Walked with a Zombie* thus reified the early idea of zombiedom as an enforced and even reverse species of slavery or death-in-life.<sup>12</sup> This conceptualization of the zombie as soulless, without feelings and robotic, had first appeared in *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), where a greedy landowner develops a sound, if heartless, business by bringing back the dead and forcing them to work in his sugar cane plantation.<sup>13</sup> The exploited corpses in *White Zombie* would be updated years later to suit the consumerist ethos of neoliberal capitalism in *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1986).

Romero, often credited with having single-handedly changed the face of the zombie myth with his *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), consciously positioned the undead in the context of nuclear war and subjected them to the infirmities of corporeal dissolution. As Dendle has explained, this significant cinematic moment "liberated the zombie from the shackles of a master, and invested . . . zombies not with a function (a job or task such as zombies were standardly given by voodoo priests), but rather a drive (eating flesh)."<sup>14</sup> If the

<sup>10</sup> Shawn McIntosh, "The Evolution of the Zombie: The Monster that Keeps Coming Back," in *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, ed. Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette (Plymouth, Lanham and Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 208.

<sup>12</sup> Patterson has called this form of slavery a "social death." Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 38–45.

<sup>13</sup> *White Zombie* is considered an example of queer cinema by Benschhoff. However, for him it is the villain Legendre (Bela Lugosi) who explicitly harbors homosocial desires and not the oppressed nature of zombiedom that offers the possibility of a queer reading. See Benschhoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 66–70.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Dendle, *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 5.

zombie stops being prey to the master/slave dynamic at this point, s/he is simultaneously imprisoned by the ungovernable power of internal and primal urges. The disintegration of the body and its functions turns the zombie into a thoroughly phenomenological being, one which rejects almost completely the concept of possession. In other words, these new corpses were not manipulated by spirits, but instead embraced anatomy and the biological drives of the human being, even if they would not consciously relate to their predicament. In many ways, the new viral zombies of *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) or *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007) are logical conclusions to the representational shift towards an empirical and biological imperative: devoid of supernatural traces, zombies are created in the test tubes of dubious laboratories or else are the unfortunate consequences of toxic warfare.

The shortening of the distance between human and zombie necessarily entails a complete subjectification of the undead for, if antidotes may be found, then zombies can be conceptualized as “sick” humans. This ontological change is also linked to the development of the thinking zombie. *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985) provided an innovative scenario where a zombie gains a new sense of selfhood through access to language and speech. In the film, the zombie Bub (Howard Sherman) shows an expanding mental capacity mirroring that of a growing child and ultimately generates sympathy from Dr Logan (Richard Liberty), who is unable to discern whether the creature is alive or dead. *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), often cited as the film that introduced the sentient or cognitive zombie to the world, featured a female zombie able to answer questions.<sup>15</sup> When asked “why do you eat people?” her answer – “[i]t makes the pain [of being dead] go away” – incites the immediate reflection from one of the characters that it must “hurt . . . to be dead.”

Gay zombies are inextricable from the evolution of zombies towards subjects aware of their own circumstances and biology. Although earlier films such as *The Mad Ghoul* (James Patrick Hogan, 1942), *Teenage Zombies* (Jerry Warren, 1959) or *Orgy of the Dead* (Ed Wood, 1965) had clear homoerotic subtexts, zombies with manifest homosexual or non-heteronormative desires only appear in the late 1990s and the 2000s, arguably after zombie subjectivity had been fully explored in mainstream releases. The canon for this new cinematic figure is somewhat disparate and includes straight-to-VHS films (*La Cage aux Zombies*, Kelly Huges, 1996), low budget art-pornos (*At Twilight Come the Flesh Eaters*, Vidkid Timo, 1998), commercial shorts (*Gay Zombie*, Michael Simon, 2007), “Youtube” spoofs (Fronk and DeGo’s *Gay Zombies*, 2008; Sadya Lashua and Aaron Mace’s *The Flaming Gay Zombies!*, 2007), full-length features (*The Nature of Nicholas*, Jeff Erbach, 2002; *Creatures from the Pink Lagoon*, Chris Diani, 2006) and art-house films (*Otto*; LaBruce’s *L.A. Zombie*, 2010). The gay zombies represented in these texts are also very different and range from zombies with gay sexual inclinations manifest in their discriminatory choice of male victims, to gay men who become zombies and need to adapt to their new circumstances, and even gay men who think or

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<sup>15</sup> See Steve Jones, “Porn of the Dead: Necrophilia, Feminism, and Gendering the Undead,” in *Zombies Are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead*, ed. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton (London and Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 40–61 (46).

see themselves as potential zombies.<sup>16</sup> All of them are generally characterized as effeminate or camp and thus reify ideas of homosexuality as finding expression through radical or counter-heteronormative gender performativity. However, these characters show different degrees of political engagement. The queer zombies who remain non-subjects, i.e. not shown as conscious or thinking beings, sometimes serve as a reminder that sexual minorities are forced into social oblivion. They also position the gay zombie as a form of threat that needs to be eradicated, as in Fronk and DeGo's trailer. The thinking zombies aware of their sexual difference, as in Simon's *Gay Zombie*, often negotiate anxieties about coming out, the consequences of life-changing sexual diseases, or the cult of beauty governing the gay scene.

Problematically, these films, with the exception of LaBruce's work, sometimes encourage uneasy laughter. What distinguishes a short like *Gay Zombie* from *Otto* is not only tone and execution, but purpose. *Otto* launches a remarkable attack on the established gay bourgeoisie, pitting its melancholic main character against the superficial homosexuals who populate clubs appropriately named "Flesh" and who dress up as zombies.<sup>17</sup> *Gay Zombie*, whilst thought-provoking as a niche product, eventually allows for a species of comedy that disarms true political potential, making its gay zombie complicit with reigning social discourses on sexual deviancy. The gay zombies in Simon's short ultimately decide to live a romance moulded after a largely conformist heteronormative model. In the case of Frank and DeGo's spoof, which ends with the catchphrase "this summer the dead are cumming" and a crazed zombie asking for "penis" instead of "brains," are potentially offensive because they perpetuate pejorative stereotypes of gay men as sexual predators. The gay zombie also runs the risk of becoming an exploitative reification of the gay as monster.

In the case of *Otto* and *LA Zombie*, whose homeless main character (François Sagat) believes himself to be a zombie from outer space with the duty of bringing the corpses of dead gay men back to life through sexual intercourse, zombiedom works both internally and externally. This is to say that the discourse of monstrosity is invoked because the homosexual is perceived as, on one level, partaking of the same parameters of exclusion and horror as the zombie. S/he produces disgust, fear or, in the worst cases, active hatred in the broader context. On another level, however, these characters are marginalized from the gay community; they are intrinsically different from other gay humans, with whom they only share their sexuality and the prejudices visited upon social outcasts. LaBruce's gay zombies offer nuanced commentaries on gay identity and sexuality, and thus surmount and complicate the potential representational pitfalls of their artistic contemporaries. LaBruce proposes a modern monster particularly invested in a troubling consumerist logic to expose the state of the gay male body in the twenty-first century. His hatred of what he terms the "politically correct

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<sup>16</sup> I am focusing on the image of the male gay zombie because it has produced more examples than its lesbian counterpart. I would not want to deny the existence of the latter or to imply that lesbian zombies are not worth exploring. In fact, *Lesbian Zombie Apocalypse* (Peter Bennett, 2010), *Lesbian Zombie Hunter* (Ann von Hagemann, 2012) or the forthcoming *Lesbian Zombies from Outer Space* (Jave Gault-Miller, 2013) attest to the contrary and are not considered here for the sake of concision and because they do not alter the thrust of my argument.

<sup>17</sup> As it happens, *Otto* is mistaken for a gay man dressing as zombie and is warned not to go into club "Flesh" because everyone in there is "dead."

version of gay men," that is, homosexuals who subscribe to the "heterosexual paradigm" by becoming its "respectable replica," is only matched by his engrained hatred of "the inanity that is gay culture" and its "rank conformism."<sup>18</sup> It is no surprise then, that Otto is both an exploration of the complexities of gay identity and a critique of gay lifestyles.

As Medea explains after a charged credit sequence combining a dramatic orchestral score with images of bombings, the events in *Otto* take place in a "not too distant [or different] future" where zombies are no longer extraordinary. These creatures have become more "refined" and have developed a limited capacity to speak and reason. Some speculate that these new cognitive traits may be an evolutionary consequence of years of sustaining endless bashing and murder from a living world which understands them as an uncomfortable and unnecessary memento mori. More importantly, however, these zombies are also seen to reflect the "somnambulist" and "conformist" behavior of humans.<sup>19</sup> The zombie as reminder of a sheepish or hypnotized humanity is not particularly innovative, but the idea that the living might be troubled by the realization that they are conformist necessarily evokes the type of oppositional gay identity that will be the subject of my later discussion in the next section. It is important to note, at this stage, that within the first five minutes of LaBruce's film, gay zombies have already been introduced as counterhegemonic, disruptive, and crucially, as a metaphor.<sup>20</sup> What follows is Otto's own account of the hardships of being a zombie, which seemingly overlap with those of being a gay teenager. Although his self-professed "identity crisis" is connected to his initial eating of "non-human flesh" and his lack of ability to relate to the living, it is obvious that his problems adjusting to life in an urban capital articulate those of young homosexuals struggling to come to terms with their sexuality. Medea informs the audience, in a documentary sequence, that Otto reminded her of all the other dispossessed and low-spirited boys that she hired for her project. According to the dyadic logic of the film thus far, gays are zombies and heterosexuals are the living. But *Otto* soon complicates this straightforward association by featuring men acting as zombies (both the players in Medea's film and the men who dress up as zombies in nightclubs) and assimilated gay men (who make fun of Otto). These, as well as the patent failure of Medea's political "dissertation on the dead" (the film within the film titled *Up with Dead People*) seem to point towards a more elaborate critique of gay subculture.

It is precisely as such, as more than abject explorations for the hardships of homosexuals, that I want to consider contemporary gay zombies. I mentioned before that this entails the abstraction of this figure from its representational remit. It means moving from the zombie as gay metaphor to

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce LaBruce, *The Reluctant Pornographer* (Ontario: Gutter Press, 1997), 42, 41, 87.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that, although the film never makes this explicit, these are mainly Medea's thoughts, which are obviously heirs to her Marxist feminist politics. It would be interesting to analyze how Medea's own reading of zombies may itself be a form of ideological imposition, determining the signifying limits of the zombie and exposing them as final (i.e. a historical account). The film even goes as far as to meaningfully color-code Medea's sequences (black and white) differently from Otto's (full color).

<sup>20</sup> Medea's exact phrase is "still others say it was, and always had been, just a metaphor." The gay inclination of these zombies is later spelled out, and the gay variety receive the moniker "purple peril."

the gay zombie as an “othered other” registering a growing dissatisfaction with the political structures of neoliberalism, as well as the rigid queer models premised upon conformism and assimilation.

*A Challenge to Capitalist Homonormativity*

*Otto* literalizes the ideal role of queer identity voiced in critical work on the limitations of neoliberal capitalism and the broader dissatisfaction with queer liberalism that has pervaded Queer Studies in recent years. David L. Eng has, for example, described the historical emergence of queer liberalism as “articulat[ing] a contemporary confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law.”<sup>21</sup> In his view, the process of integration of gays and lesbians into traditional social structures, through same-sex marriage or the right to adoption, has had little more than a placebo effect on queer identity, forcing it to mold to the heteronormative order. Simultaneously, the acceptance of a “mass-mediated queer consumer lifestyle” has deflected attention from the more pressing matter of the still marginalized nature of queer identity.<sup>22</sup> Although his aim is to provide a sustained challenge to the allegedly color-blind attitude of much queer liberalism, Eng’s ideas point towards a reality where “the right to exclude remains a historical constant, one [which] ultimately render[s] liberal notions of continuous social progress illusory.”<sup>23</sup> In popular culture, queer identity is still a problem, but as it is gradually accommodated by heteronormative and patriarchal structures, it stops constituting a major area of political unrest. Although this is not necessarily the reality for homosexuals in the many states of America and parts of Europe where marriage or adoption are still illegal, it might be possible to argue that an increasing visibility of homosexuals may have diffused the transgressive potential of queer identity.

The benefits of an activist stance premised on the disappearance of difference have also been questioned, even more fiercely, by Lisa Duggan. She has seen in the “emergent ‘multicultural,’ neoliberal ‘equality’ politics” highlighted by Eng “a stripped-down, non-redistributive form of ‘equality’ designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward redistribution of sources.”<sup>24</sup> Testimony to this is, for example, the fact that gay organizations and civil rights groups seem less interested in challenging the system than in embracing the commodification of sexual identity. Or rather, both spheres are separating to the point that it is entirely possible to be gay without being actively involved in campaigning of lobbying. A good example of this is the increasing market upscaling of gay prides, which also function as public relations media campaigns. The gay community finds itself embedded within rigid structures of economical hierarchy that, as Duggan notes, even the dominant national lesbian and gay civil rights organizations are “no longer representative of a broad-based

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<sup>21</sup> David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2–3.

<sup>22</sup> Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 12.



progressive movement” associated with the post-Stonewall years.<sup>25</sup> Instead, a number of gay writers, some of whom are affiliated to the International Gay Forum in America, like Bill Dobbs or Bruce Bawer, are explicitly rejecting progressive ideas of radical social change or social restructuring.<sup>26</sup>

What critics like Duggan find most objectionable about changes to the social dynamics of gay identity is that a reactionary mindset, one uncomfortable in its own skin, is being championed. That homosexuals should be content with the right to sociality needs to be questioned as well as the concept of a gay public life itself (one is allowed to be gay so long as this is not actively encouraged) and the privatization of gay identity through surrender to mammonism (gay is as gay can buy). This attitude, warns Duggan, leads us headfirst into “homonormativity,” “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them; it promises the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>27</sup> Its underlying reliance on essentially heterosexual moral codes necessarily shapes and colors the ways gays living in neoliberal capitalism perceive issues such as sexual promiscuity or hedonism, which threaten the core of the reproductive familial structure upon which heteronormativity and the state are built. Duggan’s advocacy for a return to a democratic politics shows the more general dissatisfaction of Queer Theory with gay groups and movements that have left their activist roots behind and amplifies the concerns once raised by critics like Andrew Ross with regards to the post-Stonewall commercial control of the gay community as subculture.<sup>28</sup> It would appear that, in some respect, homosexuals are still, as Leo Bersani once put it, “[f]requently on the side of power, but powerless; frequently affluent, but politically destitute.”<sup>29</sup>

It is against this backdrop of political discontent, that oppositional models like the one recently proposed by Lee Edelman have blossomed. His formulation of queer identity is one which lies outside of assimilation, which is not contained by, or content with, being subsumed within a wider heteronormative order. Edelman very specifically pits queerness against what he sees as the driving force of heterocentrism, namely the emphasis on “reproductive futurism.”<sup>30</sup> According to this ideology, the figure of the child is generally imagined as an “innocence [which] solicits our defense,” a protection jeopardized by queerness and its “fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and,

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<sup>25</sup> Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 45. I am not judging the fact that funding is necessary to run such events or that protection, in the shape of security guards, is needed, but rather the potential exploitation of gay capital through, for example, overpriced entry tickets.

<sup>26</sup> Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Ross expressed concern over the fact that “the commercial categorizing of sexual identities made it easier to socially control and ‘quarantine’ groups identified by sexual orientation.” See Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 144.

<sup>29</sup> Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (1987): 197–222 (205).

<sup>30</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

inevitably, life itself.”<sup>31</sup> The queer subject is disavowed by both the liberal left and the conservative right, as both are complicit in the configuration of reproduction as the *sine qua non* of society:

For the liberal’s view of society, which seems to accord the queer a place, endorses no more than the conservative right’s the queerness of resistance to futurism and thus the queerness of the queer. While the right wing imagines the elimination of queers (or of the need to confront their existence), the left would eliminate queerness by shining the cool light of reason upon it, hoping thereby to expose it as merely a mode of sexual expression free of the all-pervasive coloring, the determining fantasy formation, by means of which it can seem to portend, and not for the right alone, the undoing of the social order and its cynosure, the Child. Queerness thus comes to mean *nothing* for both: for the right wing the nothingness always at war with the positivity of civil society; for the left, nothing more than a sexual practice in need of demystification.<sup>32</sup>

In either case, queerness loses its power, which is something Queer Studies should be reluctant to surrender. In its disavowal of teleology, the refusal of reproductive futurism and its defiance of stable meanings, queerness, much like the contemporary gay zombie, stands as the only alternative political position the non-heteronormative subject can afford to adopt. It is one that, argues Edelman, queers should not accept with resignation but instead embrace passionately. In its radical potential to deny all received social formations, indeed to refuse the drives behind them, queerness can become a negative force denying a future based around hope and reliant on the symbolic mechanisms of heteroreproduction.

Some of these ideas have found their way into the gay zombies of LaBruce: they are inherently subversive, yet remain skeptical of the neoliberal system that professes to give them a sense of community through subcultural capital. In fact, LaBruce’s zombies could be seen to stand for the “no future” ethos of gay communities as they become excuses for a rechanneling of political forces into coercive subjectivity-forming transactions. Otto’s disengaged experience is premised on the negation of external normalizing forces desiring his destruction for looking and acting “other,” but also on the rejection of the accommodated individuals of the gay scene who are portrayed as superficial and virtually indistinguishable. LaBruce thus rails against the bourgeois gay community and its shallowness, and proposes a new, if uncertain, space for queer activism. On the one hand, “activism” gains a new meaning when referring to creatures that are technically dead and therefore may offer a contrapositional stance by virtue of their very existence. Such a view is not predicated on acceptance via assimilation, but through a reification of ontological difference. Since gay zombies are also sentient, their capacity to think separates them from the ordinary mindless corpse. On the other hand, Otto is driven by a desire to be cherished, to find “others like [him],” and his zombiedom can partly be explained as a self-induced state of melancholia caused by loneliness. The strength of LaBruce’s film lies, then, in the negation of the social systems in place, particularly those available to homosexuals. The figure of the gay zombie is more

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<sup>31</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 28. Italics in original.

appealing in its seeming negation of life as socially constructed. After all, it is implied that Otto's zombiedom is encouraged, in part, by the abrupt termination of his love affair with Rudolf (Gio Black Peter).<sup>33</sup> It could be argued that this shattering of the heterosexual fantasy is the cause of Otto's autistic state, and that zombiedom is presented as a restorative allowing queer subjects to exist physically whilst markedly lying outside "normal" society.

The gay zombie in LaBruce is dead to the world, yet still "lives" and even has a conscience. He also, by nature of his destructive hunger and negation of life, runs counter to economies of heteroreproduction, denying any human exchange other than that based on pure physical intercourse. LaBruce complicates this matter by sentimentalizing his zombies: Otto finds himself walking northward in search of other gay zombies as a means to construct a meaningful sense of subjectivity. According to the queer thinking I have discussed in this article, Otto's unhappiness may stem from his incapacity to accept that his sexual urges have little to do with, in his own words, "find[ing] more of [his] kind" and "learn[ing] to enjoy their company." Abandonment to the need for a species of social integration by searching for other similar (in)human beings (the dead gay as opposed to the living gay), relies on structures of community-building that seem to prioritize deadness in lieu of gayness. Whilst this is interesting because it proposes that a sense of community may circumvent sexuality altogether, it is even more productive to see the gay undead as a negotiation of Edelman's rejection of futurity. Zombiedom is, after all, still being challenged at the film's denouement, as Medea asks Otto whether he still "think[s]" he is dead.<sup>34</sup> Otto's reply is that he does not "think" he is dead, he simply *is* dead. But regardless of whether his deadness is real or a delusional state of mind, *Otto* proposes a staunch denial.<sup>35</sup> His confession that at one point he thought about committing suicide, imbues the film with a final nihilistic note that both emphasizes the impossibility of his mission (to find other zombies capable of cognition or as authentic as he is), and, more importantly, stands for a total rejection of the subcultural gay community in Berlin.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that the breakup is largely caused by Otto's eating disorder, as Rudolf finds it difficult to cope with his illness, and therefore the former could be considered the main problem. However, this does not deny the fact that Rudolf could not be the supportive partner Otto hoped for.

<sup>34</sup> Fritz (Marcel Schlutt) has also, by this point, referred to him as "homeless, delusional, and possibly schizophrenic."

<sup>35</sup> Some scholars have read Otto's denial as a form of indifference or political apathy. See Shaka McGlotten, "Dead and Live Life: Zombies, Queers, and Online Sociality," in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, ed. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 182–93.

<sup>36</sup> The word "authentic" is used by Medea when describing Otto, mainly in order to differentiate him from other gay "lost boys; damaged boys", but as the sequence that follows shows, where Otto is first approached and then ignored by two gay zombies, this appellative might apply to the latter category too. The ambiguity regarding Otto's zombiedom is further emphasized by the fake zombies of Medea's project, which may be read as a further critique of the "banality of gay male subcultures." See Darren Elliott-Smith, "'Death is the New Pornography!' Gay Zombies and Hypermasculine Cannibalism in Queer Horror," in *Screening the Undead: Vampires and Zombies in Film and TV*, ed. Leon Hunt, Milly Williamson and Sharon Lockyer (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 148–72 (156).

Gay zombies, in order to have a political dimension and reach out beyond the mere metaphor, have left behind the cozy but reactionary rom-com and embraced oppositional queerness and ontological indeterminacy through sentience and marginalization. The gay zombie can be of interest to the gay community, its main consumer, but only insofar as it may be able to transcend what has become a trite and somewhat offensive allegory. Much as Otto is at one point described as an “empty signifier” upon which others can “project [their] political agenda[s],” the value of gay zombies may lie in their ability to engage viewers in the free-floating and ambiguous semiotic process that goes behind attempting to taxonomise deadness, incarnating, as it does, an utter denial of sexual life as currently organized in heteronormative society. As zombiedom stops signifying gayness, and as the boundaries between the dead and the undead grow increasingly indeterminate, gay zombies can start becoming complex negotiations of gay subjectivity as nuanced and irreducible. In their capacity to mirror, yet avoid direct connection with, sexual specificity, that is, to invoke an alternative ontological model through, as LaBruce would have it, “a whole new way of death,” gay zombies may externalize and popularize the critical struggles behind the process of situating queerness in relation to the contemporary neoliberal context that allowed homosexuals to find a voice in the first place. A thorough representational challenge begins with the acceptance that homosexuals have little in common beyond their struggle for social rights, their plight for an unencumbered form of visibility and their sexual preference.

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