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Resurrecting the Humanity of the Undead: Humanism and Posthumanism in Zombie Films

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ABSTRACT

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The popularity of zombies has reached new heights within the last few decades, becoming a viral media sensation. The zombie has spread from films into new forms of media and infected many aspects of life, amassing hordes of fans along the way. Zombies have even moved beyond the screen to take over popular events such as world-wide “zombie crawls”, zombie-themed races, and even zombie burlesque shows. No one is safe from the ever-present zombie. This thesis will examine this pop culture phenomenon through current trends in modern zombie films and explore how these films comment on cultural fears and concerns. Ultimately, this project explores how modern zombie films portray the conflict between humanist and posthumanist ideals and ask an especially pressing question of the postmodern era - what does it mean to be human?

**RESURRECTING THE HUMANITY OF THE UNDEAD:
HUMANISM AND POSTHUMANISM IN ZOMBIE FILMS**

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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by

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Introduction

“They’re coming to get you, Barbara!” says Johnny in a wavering voice, attempting to scare his already nervous sister. They continue walking through the cemetery, paying little attention to the shambling figure in the distance. “They’re coming for you!” continues Johnny in a jocular tone, crouching behind a tombstone. “Stop it!” she snaps, “You’re acting like a child!”

“They’re coming for you! Look, there comes one of them now!” Johnny gestures to the approaching figure, grabbing Barbara’s shoulders to add to the dramatic effect. “Here he comes now,” Johnny suppresses a smile, “I’m getting out of here!” He runs past the shambling man, who continues to approach Barbara, steadily closing the gap between them. Barbara starts to walk after her brother, and in the distance, he turns to look at her with a wide smile across his face. As Barbara walks, the stranger approaches her – before she can pass by, he reaches a pale hand out to grab her throat. Barbara screams, attempting to escape the stranger’s grasp. Johnny’s smile falls, and he runs back to pull the strange man away from his sister.

Barbara escapes the tussle and flees to watch the conflict from a safe distance. As Johnny and the stranger grapple, they both fall to the ground. Johnny’s head hits the corner of a tombstone as he falls, and he stops moving.

Thunder rolls across the cemetery and lightning illuminates the man’s face as he looks up toward Barbara; but the dead gaze, the pale face, and the violence of his actions

suggest that he is not really a “man” anymore. He rises to pursue her again, climbing over the still body of Johnny. Barbara turns to run away, dead leaves crunching beneath her feet. The creature stumbles to his feet and continues shambling after her.

This iconic scene from George Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* sets the stage for the zombie plague to infect the silver screen throughout the United States and, eventually, the world. Though the term “zombie” never arises in this particular film, Romero’s reinterpretation and unique representation of this undead creature codified and set the standard for the modern zombie. Modern pop culture relies on this type of zombie in popular media; however, the zombie’s origins lie in Haitian Voodoo. As Afro-Caribbean religion scholar Elizabeth McAlister notes, the first uses of the word “zonbi” trace as far back as 1797 and explained the “slaves’ belief in a returned soul, a *revenant*”; this developed in the 20th century to signify “not a returned soul, but a returned body” (McAlister 459).

A bastardization of this concept arose in 1932, in what was arguably the first popular zombie film in the United States – *White Zombie*. These zombies, as in the Haitian voodoo tradition, resulted from the black magic of a voodoo priest, or *bokor*. Of course, this westernized representation of the Haitian “zonbi” is a distorted vision of the true Haitian culture; nonetheless, it formed the basis of American views of the zombie, which George Romero built upon in his groundbreaking *Dead* trilogy.

The zombie has constantly maintained its popularity since these films; it has spread into new forms of media and infected many aspects of life. Today, the zombie arises in movies such as *World War Z*, the film adaptations of *Resident Evil*, *28 Days*

Later, 28 Weeks Later, Quarantine, and video games like *Resident Evil*, *Stubbs the Zombie*, *Left 4 Dead*, and *Day Z*. Current popular television shows like *The Walking Dead* and *Z Nation* further capitalize on the popularity of the zombie, and this far-from-complete list continues to constantly expand. Zombies have even moved beyond the screen to take over popular events such as world-wide “zombie crawls”, zombie-themed races, and even zombie burlesque shows. No one is safe from the ever-present zombie.

While there is no doubt of current popular culture’s obsession with the undead cannibal, the true question lies in why our generation is so fascinated with this monster. The rise in zombie popularity coincides with a shift in philosophies concerning what it means to be human. The main philosophy that concerns this concept – humanism – has been challenged by the conditions of a postmodern society. The conflict between these philosophies – and the corresponding fragmentation of human identity – cultivates a culture-wide fascination with that which is non-human; the zombie.

This thesis will examine how current trends in modern zombie films portray the conflict between humanist and posthumanist ideals, and how the representations of this conflict relate to philosophy regarding treatment of the Other. This is especially relevant in a postmodern era, in which we frequently question what it means to be human. Our notions of humanity have constantly changed and evolved in regard to new experiences and advancing technology. As I will further explore in Chapter 2, humanist philosophy originally attempted to define what it means to be human. Some threads of humanism often relied on the assertion of an essential “humanness” and grappled with defining human identity through this essentialist lens. Antihumanism and posthumanism evolved

from this philosophy, arguing against essentialism and asserting that the definitions of “human” defended by previous humanists were too confining and ultimately used to oppress others. History has shown the risk of questioning and categorizing the “humanness” of others; this questioning has led to mass dehumanization, reducing other human beings to nothing more than zombies. In order to prevent this type of zombie apocalypse, we must engage with these philosophies and how they are perceived by our society in order to maintain the humanity of others and, ultimately, ourselves.

As Jeffery Jerome Cohen states in his essay “Monster Culture: Seven Theses”, “Monsters are our children. ... These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. ... They ask us why we have created them” (Cohen 28). This thesis attempts to examine why we have created the zombie monster, and how to prevent the inhumanity it represents from taking over in a more literal sense. By engaging with the conflict between humanist and posthumanist philosophies as they are represented in zombie media, perhaps we can prevent the dehumanization of one another that leads to the zombie apocalypse.

Chapter 1: A Brief History of Zombies

In 1932, a new monster broke into American horror cinema. It has stumbled through city streets leaving destruction in its wake, constantly evolving over the decades, comprising the most terrifying creature possible to its respective audiences. The monster still infects populations and destroys American cities in twenty-first century media, perhaps now at a higher rate than ever. This unstoppable terror is the zombie, and it doesn't require much searching to see its prevalence. Popular shows – such as *The Walking Dead* – as well as numerous films, video games, and comics feature zombies as the primary antagonists. From the first zombie film, zombie media has consistently terrified and fascinated its audiences.

The first feature-length zombie film to shamble onto the American silver-screen was *White Zombie* (1932), directed by Victor Halperin. In this film, a Haitian witch doctor controls zombie slaves through the use of voodoo, threatening to subject the American protagonists to the same zombified fate. Elizabeth McAlister discusses how this representation of Haitian culture set up the zombie as “synonymous with a kind of barbaric racial blackness” (472). *White Zombie* capitalized on the western fear of other religions, especially those of a black culture. Kyle Bishop also discusses how Haitian voodoo practices provided the origin for the zombie. By turning this creature into a horror film monster, Bishop explains that “[f]or a western white audience, the real threat and source of terror in these films are ... the risk that the white protagonists might

become zombies themselves” (“The Sub-Subaltern Monster” 141). That is, the fear inspired by *White Zombie* in western audiences does not rely on the risk for people of a different race being under inhumane control of another. Rather, for white audiences, “the true horror in these movies lies in the prospect of a westerner becoming dominated, subjugated, and effectively ‘colonized’ by a native pagan” (142). Bishop discusses how this portrayal of Haitian culture as ultimately “other” inspired racism-influenced fears in western culture. With the release of *White Zombie*, “the zombie, along with the cannibal practices that were imputed to be part of Haitian culture, become the image of the Other through which barbarism comes to be the sign for the Haitian” (McAlister 472). Thus, the zombie initially represented a parody of the Haitian voodoo religion, resulting in the dehumanization of both Haitian culture and people of color.

This view of zombies evolved in 1968 when George Romero released his film *Night of the Living Dead (NOTLD)*, the first of Romero’s iconic “zombie trilogy” (Gagne 21). *NOTLD* takes place in an American city rather than a foreign country. Furthermore, the ultimate cause of the zombies remains unknown, though the film suggests some sort of radioactive element that resurrects the dead. This apparent shift from the voodoo slaves of *White Zombie* into a violent, all-American zombie outbreak earned *Night of the Living Dead* the title of a horror film classic. In fact, Romero is often referred to as the father of the modern zombie. His first zombie film presents a critique of American culture and turns the previous “otherizing” of black culture on its head. As McAlister discusses, the hero in all three films of Romero’s trilogy – including *Night of the Living Dead* – is a black man, while the zombies themselves are “overwhelmingly white”; she

states, “Romero and post-Romero zombies are cannibals, and white people and zombies are both insatiably destructive consumers” (McAlister 479). Romero’s obvious critique of American consumerism in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) supports this statement, as the placement of mindless consumers (zombies) meandering through a mall echoes the mindless consumerism of a capitalist society. Ultimately, Romero’s critique of American racism and imperialism suggest that the “Other” set up by white culture is the real victim, and serves to blur the line between “us” and “them”.

Though previous zombie films – like Romero’s – questioned the definition of humanity and explored the relationship between “us” vs. “them”, trends continued to evolve to reflect cultural fears of disease. Previously, zombie films showed voodoo or radiation as the causative agent of infection. This trend continued into the 1990s, and zombie films with poignant social critique (like Romero’s *Land of the Dead* in 1978 and *Day of the Dead*, released in 1985) were released between comedic zombie films that parodied their predecessors – such as a film titled *Night of the Day of the Dawn of the Son of the Bride of the Return of the Revenge of the Terror of the Attack of the Evil, Mutant, Alien, Flesh Eating, Hellbound, Zombified Living Dead Part 2: In Shocking 2-D* (1991). However, zombie films experienced a gradual shift away from voodoo, radioactive or parasitic causes; current zombies often become infected and reanimated through some sort of virus. This invention of a zombie virus not only reflects cultural fears of pandemic; by rooting the causative agent in a scientific background, it also makes the zombie apocalypse seem that much more plausible and, thus, scarier. In his essay “Dead Men Still Walking”, Kyle Bishop discusses the film *28 Days Later* (2002).

In this film, a virus simply referred to as “Rage” infects the citizens of London, turning them into crazed, murderous monsters. Like many current zombie films, it is a viral pandemic that wipes out humanity. Bishop states, “The psychic plague of *28 Days Later* is most likely a reference to AIDS, but it could just as easily reference cholera, smallpox, or anthrax” (“Dead Men Still Walking” 23). Real-life pandemics, such as the ones Bishop references, wreak havoc on our populations. Thus, zombie films reflect this fear of pandemics and viral infection. These films, then, represent illness and people who are sick as dehumanized; zombies are an unstoppable threat to be eliminated, no longer the human beings they once were.

Bishop also discusses the large surge of zombie media in the early 2000s, after a relatively quiet and static prior decade. He relates this reanimated interest in zombies to the 9/11 attacks. The terrorist attacks on American soil created a fresh fear of apocalyptic scenarios. The scenes in *28 Days Later*, though filmed before 9/11, reminded Americans of the empty city streets in New York after the Twin Towers fell and the shocking news footage of an American city covered in debris. As Bishop says, the “end of the world is the ultimate societal fear”, and the apocalyptic imagery of post-9/11 zombie films reminded Americans of that attack, while simultaneously stoking fears of future attacks and infrastructure failures (“Dead Men Still Walking” 22).

These virus-ridden, modern zombies now resonate with the Millennial generation. While this relates to previously mentioned cultural fears, Peter Dendle discusses his view of the zombie as a “creature of paradox” that can also depict the shifting ideas of identity in the age of the internet. Dendle states, “The zombie holds evident appeal to the

technologically savvy, fast-paced generation of young people in the 1990s and 2000s [...] the zombie can serve as a mirror for some of this generation's values and notions of identity" (175). This sets up a conflict between the millennial and older generations; as Dendle describes, "the zombie is also a specter of old age", mirroring the millennial fear of and potential dehumanization of the elderly (183). However, the millennial zombie also represents a more wide-spread trend of dehumanization. With the increase in technological advances creating "an increasingly disembodied-virtual generation, the zombie is becoming increasingly biological" (183). That is, the rise in social media and communication technology unique to this generation leads to a detachment from fellow humans and, as Dendle mentions, a fear of the biological. Furthermore, Dendle expresses the shift from the fear of remote political forces to the fear of local terrorism experienced by the Millennial generation. Though the 9/11 attacks created a new resonance with zombie films, as Bishop described, the Millennial generation has experienced a rise in violence; "Following the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, and the Columbine and Santee school shootings in 1999 and 2001, young people may now perceive terrorism as arising not only from distant regions, but from suburban schools, and perpetuated by disaffected youths that do not look or sound remarkably different from them" (186). The number of school shootings has only increased since Dendle's essay, suggesting that our seemingly normal peers can change into violent monsters just as quickly as a zombie bite can transform an ordinary person into one of the murderous undead.

The idea that the Millennial zombie reflects a fear of dependence on new technology also arises in the essay by Margo Collins and Elson Bond. They describe how

rise in social media compromises the identity of the Millennial generation due to its “dependence on instantaneous technology” (196). The incorporation of technology into our lives distorts traditional views of human identity. Thus, Collins and Bond claim that “modern zombie stories reflect our fear of loss of identity” (204). Yet, the authors also discuss how millennial zombie films tend to end more optimistically than their predecessors. In these works, such as Max Brook’s *World War Z*, survivors “become, in a sense, more fully human” through self-reflection, cooperation, and self-reliance (190). As Collins and Bond describe, “the message seems to be that when individual differences have been elided by death, the only way to meet the threat becomes the elision of human individuality. That is, to protect human individuality, you have to suppress it temporarily” (200). While millennial zombie films mirror the cultural fear of faceless, local terrorists and dependence of fragile technology, they suggest that the “ability to come together, to use our minds and our wits, is what separates us from zombies and gives the slightest hope of saving the world – or at least ourselves – from the ravenous hordes of mindless flesh eaters” (200). Facing a horde of nonhumans, then, allows survivors to become more fully human, offering a path to community that challenges the view of a technologically disaffected generation.

Millennial zombie films may have more optimistic endings in the sense that survivors can form a community that counters the undead horde; these films suggest that humanity can ultimately prevail over the undead threat, and human life can continue. In this way, “zombies are now more often presented as beings from which we recoil utterly, rather than as blighted humans in whom we are intended to recognize grotesque

reflections of ourselves” (188). Millennial zombie films solidify the dichotomy between human and zombie by representing each as separate communities at way. However, as Collins and Bond discuss, the required sacrifice of human individuality in order to survive problematizes this dichotomy. Collins and Bond note that “if individuality has been erased, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the human from the zombie” (200). Despite millennial attempts to solidify the line between human and zombie, they still blur this line through the representation of humans as their own violent horde. In fact, some of these films inspire empathy for the undead, as the living “are depicted as rapacious, unthinking and untrustworthy” (201). These films suggest that humans must sacrifice their own humanity in order to survive the zombie apocalypse, which blurs the line between human and nonhuman.

Like many horror films, the zombie films spanning the 1930s through the 1990s depicted various cultural fears, including the fear of foreign religions, radioactivity and nuclear bombs, foreign governments, pandemic, terrorists abroad, terrorists at home, and our fragile dependence on advanced technology. These themes set up the dichotomy of “us” vs. “them”; however, zombie films have also increasingly problematized this dichotomy through questioning humanity and what it means to be human. These films complicate the current definitions of “human” by juxtaposing survivors with nonhuman zombies, which act as a mirror for the inhumanity of the survivors themselves. Regardless of the changing themes present in zombie films, they all increasingly challenge us to question, what does it mean to be human?

Chapter 2: A Brief Review of Humanism and Posthumanism

Various philosophers have struggled with what it means to be human, and the resulting ideas concerning human identity collectively form the philosophy of humanism. Humanism does not have a simple definition that encompasses all of its metamorphoses throughout the centuries. Rather, it is a shifting ideology that, like anything, depends heavily on its historical and cultural context. However, several threads of humanism arise and intertwine throughout the centuries, presenting various facets important to the understanding of humanism as a whole; these threads include civic humanism, individualism, rationality and essentialist human nature, and a focus on the human condition. Each thread attempts to define what it means to be “human” in specific terms - yet, humanism as a whole faces critiques from anti- and post-humanist philosophies, which assert that the definitions explored by humanism are stifling and fail to address the complexity and changing nature of human identity.

Many of our modern conceptions of humanism stem from the era of the Renaissance (14th to 16th century), in which a new view of ‘Man’ arose, comprising the individualistic and civic threads of humanism. J.A. Symonds – author of *The Renaissance in Italy* – wrote, “The essence of humanism consisted in a new and vital perception of the dignity of man as a rational being apart from theological determinations, and in the further perception that classic literature alone displayed human nature in the plenitude of intellectual and moral freedom” (qtd. in Davies 22). While this asserts individuality as an

important aspect of humanist philosophy, he also notes the large role played by classic literature and art in redefining man's role in 15th century Renaissance society. This type of humanism focused on human beings' capacity to achieve their potential, as shown in great authors, poets, and artists. L. DeSisto explains this as "civic humanism"; there is an emphasis on individual capacity for achievement, but achieving individual potential is then meant to serve one's community (DeSisto interview). Zombie films represent civic humanism in the common portrayal of survivors banding together to create and protect their communities in the zombie apocalypse. Ultimately, civic humanism focused on the defining characteristic of humans as their capacity and ability to reach their unique, individual potential in order to serve their community.

An exaggerated focus on the individual in humanism arises with Jacob Burckhardt's philosophy, which focused on how the Renaissance "was the epoch of the *individual*" (16). This focus on individualism comprised the basis of Burckhardt's work, and deviated from the civic humanism of the Italian Renaissance. As Davies describes, Burckhardt's concept of individualism implied "a universal capacity to think for yourself, in a fundamental way, as an individual [...] as a free-standing self-determining person with an identity and a name that is not simply a marker of family, birthplace, or occupation but is 'proper' – belonging to you alone" (16). Thus, Burckhardt asserts that the individual must be defined separately from typical conventions used for identification. In zombie films, human survivors have notable personalities and individuality that contrasts the homogenizing effect of zombification. This form of humanism, then, insists on some type of essential identity of the individual.

Arthur, the Comte de Gobineau, also focused on individualism; however, rather than focusing on the identity of the individual, Gobineau's philosophy concerned the "the uncompromising selfhood and will to power of individual 'genius', the expression of innate superiority" (17). Gobineau himself stated, "Leave weakness and scruples to the petty minds and the rabble of underlings" (qtd. in Davies 17). Of course, this discussion of "innate superiority" led well into Gobineau's own racism, as he asserted the superiority of the Teutonic (early Germanic) race; a concept which fed the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany. Many zombie films also grapple with this conflict through their representations of the brutality of some survivors. Together, these two philosophers exemplify an added emphasis on individualism in their threads of humanism.

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries followed the Renaissance, changing the way that philosophers thought about human beings and leading to the rationality thread of humanism. Due to the fracturing of the church and a renewed emphasis on science, "philosophers sought to apply the methods of science to the study of human beings. . . . The great hope of the Enlightenment was that scientific rationality could be applied to human affairs, that humanity could leave behind the authority of traditional beliefs and inherited rank and improve the conditions of human life by the use of reason" (Stevenson and Haberman 111). This era of reason gave rise to one of the most influential humanist philosophers, Immanuel Kant. His form of humanism focused on rationality as inherent in mankind; "He lays enormous stress on 'reason'" and "he sees us as free, rational beings who can act for moral reason, not just on selfish desires" (Stevenson and Haberman 117, 119). To Kant, human nature centers

on rationality. Some zombie films represent this form of humanism by suggesting that the rationality and intelligence of the survivors can help them overcome the irrational and brain-dead zombies. For example, in the film adaptation of *World War Z*, the humans ultimately counter the zombie threat through the application of scientific knowledge, creating a biological means of avoiding the zombies altogether. Films such as this follow Kant's thread of humanism, asserting that human rationality can defeat non-human irrationality.

During the same era as Kant, Karl Marx, "one of the founding fathers of sociology", also began to put forth his views on human nature during this time; "What is most distinctive of Marx's concept of humanity is his view of our essentially *social* nature" (140). Thus, Marx expostulations formed the basis of an essentialist human nature thread of humanism. He states, "the real nature of man is the totality of social relations" (qtd. in Stevenson and Haberman 140). Therefore, in Marx's philosophy, Communism is humanism, in that it aims to restore the community and sociality of mankind through the rejection of private property. An example of this concept in zombie films comes from the zombie themselves – though they often travel in hordes, zombies do not have a community and, since they cannot communicate, do not act as social beings. Therefore, from A Marxist humanist lens, these creatures are ultimately nonhuman. Though Kant and Marx focus on different aspects of humanism, they both contribute to a thread of humanism which asserts an essential human nature to all human beings.

Essentialist humanism further evolved in the politics of the eighteenth century.

During this era, Thomas Paine wrote his *Rights of Man*, John Milton noted that “all men naturally were born free” and Thomas Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence* asserted that “all men are created equal” (Davies 25). The focus of these writers on the general “Man” and his rights suggests that universality and essentialism of this humanist philosophy. However, as discussed by Davies, the ideal of free and equal mankind seemed only to apply to the majority – women and people of color were clearly excluded from these discussions, as slavery and the oppression of women continued. Davies writes, “One of the effects of universalizing notions like ‘Man’ is to dissolve precisely such particularities of race, sex and class; and for that reason it is always prudent to ask what specific historical and local interests may be at work within grandly ecumenical notions” (26). For these reasons, among others, anti- and post-humanist philosophy developed in critique of the dehumanization at work in humanism.

This idea of the “centrality of the ‘human’” is further noted in humanist Matthew Arnold’s interpretation of Chaucer’s novels in Arnold’s 1888 essay, “The Study of Poetry”. According to Arnold, Chaucer’s works are superior due to the fact that they “survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view” (qtd. in Davies 20). What makes this author so humanizing, in Arnold’s opinion, is his ability to express all of the characteristics in his characters that make them seem like real people. Though each person has an individual experience, Chaucer seems to show that “[e]ach of us lives our human-ness as a uniquely individual experience; but that experience, we are asked to feel, is part of a larger, all-embracing humanity, a ‘human condition’ [...] an appeal to the essentially, universal human” (21,22). This universal human condition is stressed in

zombie films, in which survivors bond over their common circumstances. Since the zombie apocalypse occurs worldwide, this human condition transcends socioeconomic class, personal history, and national identity. By asserting the importance of a human condition, Chaucer and Arnold further form the basis of existentialism.

During the same era - nineteenth century - writer Thomas Hardy similarly focused on the human condition in his novels. Hardy's thread of humanism returned to a focus on the condition of "human" as an unattainable ideal. As Davies describes, "'Man' figures not as an essential starting point but as a destination, less a given set of intrinsic qualities than the goal of an epochal and never-to-be-completed process. If there is a 'human condition', it is the condition of being always unconsummated, oscillating ceaselessly between the desire for fulfillment and the consciousness of failure" (Davies 31, 32). It is this idea of never-being-human that sets the stage for Nietzsche's insight on the nature of Man. In 1880, he wrote, "There are no absolute truths", including Man, and that the "humanist delusion" is based on "self-ignorance, the attribution of imaginary qualities to the world around us and 'a false order of rank with animal and nature'" (33). These expostulations formed the bases of antihumanism.

Laura DeSisto summarizes antihumanism as "arguing against a particular form of humanism that establishes humans in a place of privilege in the world, especially above nature and potentially even above non-humanized people" (DeSisto 15). This rebellion against humanism, as noted with Nietzsche, rejected the hypocritical, dehumanizing aspects of humanism. It also rejected much of the romanticism associated with humanist individualism, instead viewing man as part of nature, rather than above it.

In the postmodern area, ideas about what it means to be “human” have evolved into a new philosophy – posthumanism. As DeSisto describes, this school of thought is based on the “assertion that critical theory has brought understandings of existence beyond, and in some cases deconstructed, the fixed or deep notions of the self and one’s nature in such a way that renders humanism to be a nonsensical and unproductive approach to making sense of the challenges of living in the world today” (15, 16). This postmodern view of humanity responds to the surge in technology and technological innovations that have inundated humankind, making us further question our identities as human. Further incorporation of this technology into our own lives, and even into our own bodies, seems to break down the barriers between human and machine. Yet, by blurring rather than crossing that line, we complicate what it means to be human. Posthumanism embraces this ambiguity, viewing humanity as perhaps more (or different) than previous notions of human.

It is important to note that humanism, posthumanism, and anti-humanism all overlap in various ways. As noted in DeSisto’s previous definition, “antihumanism” is a term used to define a particular movement away from humanist philosophy. Posthumanism, on the other hand, is an evolution on the idea of what it means to be “human”, by taking into account the broad and evolving notions of human identity as knowledge of ourselves progresses. Since these two philosophies are so closely related in their function – that is, as movements against/away from humanism – philosophers on this subject may sound fairly similar. However, the object of this review is to illuminate how new ways of thinking about humankind have resulted in evolving definitions (or

lack thereof) of what it means to be human. This evolution is most notable in posthumanism, which attempts to reimagine “humanness” in a new context.

Posthumanism, as a reaction against humanism, endeavors to assert a new conception of human that is more widely accessible and that moves away from the mistakes and confines of previous humanists. Neil Badmington, editor of the collection of essays in *Posthumanism*, argues that this philosophy has its roots in Marx and Freud. Marx – as well as the German philosopher Engels – argued against the idea of a “human essence” that exists outside of historical or cultural context; instead, they noted that “[c]onsciousness ... does not determine a person’s social life; it is, rather, social life that determines consciousness” (Badmington 5). This idea revolts against the essentialist humanism previously discussed by Marx, which asserts a pre-existing humanness that determines social life. As Badmington explains, “Eternal Man is no more; ‘he’ now has a history and contingency denied by humanism” (5). By rooting what it means to be “human” in a certain context rather than relying on an undifferentiating essence of Man, Marx and Engels move away from previous humanist philosophy.

Freud further contributed to the foundations of posthumanism through exploring the subconscious of the human mind. Freud insisted that many human actions are rooted in unacknowledged, subconscious thoughts and desires; as Badmington notes, “To read Freud is to witness the waning of humanism. Unmasked as a creature motivated by desires which escape the rule of consciousness, Man loses ‘his’ place at the center of things ... psychoanalysis demands a rethinking of what it means to be human” (Badmington 6). By revealing the subconscious state of the human mind, and the

historical and social context that can contribute to these subconscious thoughts and desires, Freud undermines the humanist assertion of man as a purely rational being.

The general idea behind posthumanism might be summarized in Michel Foucault's 1966 essay, "The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences", in which Foucault states, "man is an invention of recent date. And perhaps one nearing its end" (Badmington 29). This move away from humanist philosophy comments on the fact that the invention of "Man" as a humanist definition was in itself historically rooted, and indicates that what it means to be human may also be rooted in context, rather than existing as a universal essence. Furthermore, Foucault highlights that the concept of "human" was not adequately or satisfactorily engaged with through previous humanist philosophy; as Badmington summarizes, "Made possible by a certain reorganization of knowledge, man could, therefore, disappear if a further epistemic shift were to take place" (144). Since conceptions of what it means to be human depend on certain organizations of knowledge, definitions, and historical context, this concept could easily be rearranged into something entirely foreign, or replaced altogether.

Yet, even before Foucault published this essay, humanism was being challenged by the French philosopher and psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon. In his 1961 novel *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon rebels against the European model of humanism. He writes, "Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men wherever they find them ... where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know with what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind" (Badmington 23). In this denunciation of humanism,

Fanon references the atrocities committed by humanism, including (but not limited to) racism, and the genocide of millions of people committed by the German Nazi Party. Badmington summarizes Fanon's views; "Implicit in humanism's will to see sameness wherever it looks is a desire to *make* sameness, to impose a partial world-view as a universal truth. Humanism, therefore, is responsible for a series of atrocities: those who cannot be assimilated must be destroyed" (144). Fanon highlights how the strict definitions given to "Man" by humanist philosophers were in fact used to dehumanize the Other. In contrast to this philosophy, Fanon calls for a new type of humanism that sheds any European humanist influence. "Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation [of Europe], which would be almost an obscene caricature ... For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man" (25, 26). The attempt to "set afoot a new man" might be the goal of posthumanism.

In addition to revolts against humanism, advancing technology has further complicated the idea of what it means to be "human". As Donna J. Haraway discusses in her 1985 article "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", humans have become so dependent on technology that it is nearly impossible to separate the two. Thus, as Badmington notes, this inseparableness "renders the classical humanist framework (in which the human and the inhuman, the natural and the unnatural, are held in binary opposition) obsolete" (Badmington 148). Jean Baudrillard expresses a similar view of humanity's incorporation of and dependence on technology in his 1990 essay, "Prophylaxis and Virulence". Baudrillard also discusses

humankind's dependence on technology, equating us all to the Boy in the Bubble, "the experimental version of the wolf-child ... The parenting in this case, however, is done by computers" (34). In this view of humanity, Badmington summarizes that "as human beings become increasingly dependent on technology, the idea of a 'natural' human condition becomes increasingly archaic" (145). Thus, posthumanism further problematizes humanist philosophy by exploring the extent to which technology comprises what we are, as opposed to a 'universal, essential humanness'.

The conflict between humanism and posthumanism revolves around the belief in an 'essential humanness.' However, this relationship might be better explored as an evolution. Posthumanism used humanism as a foundation for further questioning what it means to be human. This philosophy takes into account changing views and experiences of humankind in order to further analyze previous definitions in a changing world. However, rather than completely negate humanism, many post- and antihumanists instead attempted to rescue humanity from the strict definitions that it was initially imprisoned by. In this way, posthumanism may actually be viewed as a new kind of humanism that continually questions itself in the presence of ever expanding knowledge and understanding, and attempts to maintain humanity in light of the atrocities committed under the guise of humanism.

The struggle between human and nonhuman, and our cultural views on either side, are represented in zombie films. Zombie films not only feed on cultural fears of loss of identity and control; they also ultimately question our definition and classification of "human", and explore the consequences of ignoring the pressing dilemma of definition.

Chapter 3: Humanism and Posthumanism in Zombie Films

The primary conflict in most zombie media arises in humans fighting off the attacking undead, each group intent on destroying the other. Video games in particular, such as *Resident Evil*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, and *Dead Island*, allow players to confront and kill seemingly unending hordes of zombies. Players enjoy exterminating their enemy, and humans must kill zombies in order to survive and win these games. Thus, most zombie media establish and maintain an unwavering and antagonistic dichotomy between human and zombie.

Zombie films, however, with focus on characters and extended plot development, tend to complicate the typical distinctions between humans and zombies. Since the 1932 release of *White Zombie*, hordes of zombie films have allowed this adaptive genre to continuously evolve, keeping up with our cultural fears and views of the essential “Other” – defying the laws of nature and humanity itself. Zombies not only represent everything *not* human; they also effectively replace humanity through their consumption of the living, turning *us* into an undead horde of *them*. However, rather than showing the static, completely un-human zombies common in most stereotypical zombie media, modern cinema complicates the dichotomy between human and nonhuman by exploring the potential remnants of humanity in undead creatures, and the many ways which humans behave like monsters. With the complication of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, zombie films effectively question our cultural definitions for what it means to be human.

Ultimately, the questioning of this dichotomy and representations of humanized zombies portray the postmodern conflict between humanism and posthumanism.

George Romero notably complicates the human vs. zombie dichotomy in the third installment of his “Dead” trilogy, *Day of the Dead* (1985). Through the lens of the zombie apocalypse, Romero illustrates the inhumanity behind institutions such as science and the military, as exemplified in Dr. Logan and Captain Rhodes, respectively. As a group of survivors hide out in an abandoned military bunker, the horde of undead has taken over the world. What remains of humanity consists mostly of several violent military soldiers whose constant racist, sexist comments and antagonistic treatment of fellow survivors almost makes the company of zombies preferable. Captain Rhodes - captain of the soldiers - embodies traits associated with traditional humanism; he leads his men with authority (civic humanism), defends the survivors from zombies through reason and strength (power of rational), and functions as an individualistic leader. However, Rhodes ultimately exemplifies the *inhumanity* of the soldiers. His true monstrosity lies in his actions toward other humans – he constantly threatens the lives of the scientists, treating them as disposable. He also represents the inhumanity of the soldiers, who sexually harass the only female survivor (Sarah) and insult the only Hispanic soldier with slurs like, “You dirty yellow spick bastard!” By acting violently toward and dehumanizing others, Rhodes and the soldiers appear less human and more like monsters.

Dr. Logan represents humanist philosophy in many of the same ways as Captain Rhodes. As the head scientist, he uses his intellect and skills to serve his community by

attempting to find a cure for the zombie infection. Logan focuses even more so on the Kantian aspect of rationality through his use of science, and he constantly asserts the need to behave in a civilized manner. His later actions contest these humanist principles, ultimately acting as another monster and indicating the potential inhumanity in the institution of science. Nicknamed “Dr. Frankenstein” by his fellow survivors, Dr. Logan performs atrocious experiments on the zombies that make him seem just as gruesome as the undead themselves. Though Dr. Logan attempts to behave in a civilized manner, his overtly cruel experiments and disrespect for the bodies of dead humans (which he uses to ‘feed’ the zombies in an attempt to train them) present him as callous and uncaring about human dignity or worth.

By depicting Dr. Logan and his scientific method as more monstrous than human, Romero complicates humanist philosophy in that intelligence and rationality leads to dehumanizing of others. Cold logic and reason without compassion becomes just as monstrous as the mindless zombies themselves, which offers a critique to Kant’s assertions about essential human nature and rationality. In this way, Dr. Logan’s character draws parallels to the humanist Nazis, who used humanism as an excuse for defending their own “superiority” even at the cost of dehumanizing others. Together, Captain Rhodes and Dr. Logan epitomize the ability of humans to be monsters, critiquing the narrow view of humanity outlined in humanist philosophy.

In juxtaposition with these inhumane humans stands a zombie named Bub. While Captain Rhodes and Dr. Logan embody the shortcomings of humanist philosophy, Bub represents further posthumanist critiques of humanism. Dr. Logan attempts to train Bub

to “behave” by keeping him locked up and rewarding him with meat whenever Bub acts like a human – the meat that the demented Dr. Logan takes from the corpses of fellow human beings. Bub acts as though he retains memories of his past life as a human; when the doctor introduces him to common objects (books, a telephone, a razor, etc.), Bub holds them in a way that indicates he has some memory and understanding of their function. Thus, Bub’s remnants of human memories and his ability to “act” human with the given props comprise some of his early humanizing characteristics. His actions may correspond to the “human nature” thread of humanism, but his status as non-human according to the survivors – despite his ability to act out humanizing characteristics – relates to Foucault’s posthumanist assertion that the definition of “human” is contextual. The “reorganization of knowledge” that could destroy the concept of “Man” might also reorganize in a way that Bub could be considered human. If context determines the definition of human, then the zombie apocalypse provides a completely new context that challenges the narrow views of humanity previously held by the survivors.

Bub continues to act human in his emotional attachment to Dr. Logan. Though Logan commits twisted and disturbed actions throughout his scientific experiments - such as excessively butchering the bodies of zombies and seeming to enjoy it - Bub nonetheless views him as a father figure. When Captain Rhodes later kills Dr. Logan, Bub acts in a way that signifies grief over the loss of a close friend. In revenge, Bub hunts down Rhodes, shoots him several times, then leaves him to die at the hands of a voracious zombie horde. Interestingly, Bub separates himself from other zombies in his use of a gun, rather than the typical zombie method of hands-on killing and consuming.

Bub did not kill Rhodes out of the seemingly natural instinct of zombies to kill humans – rather, he acted out of an emotion, which further humanizes Bub. He regained control over his own will in order to act out his grief-fueled revenge. This emotional and impulsive action represents Freud’s posthumanist discussion of subconscious drives, which negates Kant’s humanist assertion of inherent human rationality. Thus, Bub’s destruction of Captain Rhodes parallels the conquering of posthumanist philosophy over humanism, complicating the human/zombie dichotomy, and illustrating how the subconscious drives of Freud’s posthumanist philosophy overcome Kant’s humanist assertion of humans as inherently “rational beings”.

The complication of the human vs. zombie dichotomy continues through representations of monstrous humans in the *Resident Evil* series. While *Day of the Dead* presents the inhumanity of institutions such as science and the military, *Resident Evil* delineates the monstrosity behind corporations. The Umbrella Corporation holds the primary responsibility for the undead apocalypse, as they created the zombie-causing “T-virus”. The representatives of the Umbrella Corporation take several forms - Major Cain in *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) represents solely the interests of the corporation, and by doing so, he acts more antagonistic than the zombies themselves. Like Captain Rhodes and Dr. Logan, Cain represents many of the values of humanist philosophy, such as individualism, rationality, and civic humanism. Cain allegedly uses his own rationality and the resources of the Umbrella Corporation to serve his community by perfecting the biotechnology behind the T-virus, which theoretically has the potential to cure devastating diseases like polio. However, Cain plays a leading role in turning an innocent

human named Matt into a deformed, zombified, brain-washed super-soldier called Nemesis using this virus. Cain forces Matt - now called Nemesis - to fight the film's heroine and Matt's friend, Alice. In the process, Cain also kills innocent and helpless civilians to force others to adhere to his will. Due to his exploitation of and disregard for human life, Cain represents the monstrous abuse and inhumanity present in many corporate institutions; he also depicts the historical misuses of humanist philosophy. Like the humanist Gobineau, Cain ascribes to a philosophy of an individualistic "innate superiority"; of course, such an assertion proves problematic and Cain ultimately uses these humanist values to dehumanize others.

The humanized zombie, Matt (a.k.a Nemesis), counters the inhumane Cain and the monstrous Umbrella Corporation. Initially, Matt/Nemesis seems to have no control over his actions, as the T-virus takes over his body and the Umbrella Corporation controls his mind. However, once Cain forces Matt to fight his friend Alice, Matt momentarily breaks through his zombified state to save Alice and the surrounding innocent civilians. Rather than follow Cain's order to kill Alice, he instead kills the surrounding Umbrella soldiers so that Alice and the other innocent civilians have a chance to escape. This self-sacrificial decision ended Matt's life, but his actions suggest he died as more human than he was while living, due to his compassionate response to his friend and to saving the lives of innocent people. By valuing and protecting human life, as well as sacrificing himself to save others, Matt challenges the boundaries between human and zombie through his human-like actions. The creation of Nemesis through technology also corresponds to posthumanist elements of the discussions by Donna

Haraway and Jean Baudrillard. These posthumanist philosophers discussed how technology has developed a relationship with human identity such that the two cannot be considered separately. The Umbrella Corporation used both biotechnology and mechanical engineering to construct Nemesis – his humanized portrayal in the film suggests that his status as “human” changes with the incorporation of technology, but this humanized aspect is accented, rather than obliterated. This representation of Matt/Nemesis parallels posthumanist philosophy, as it considers the important role that both context and the evolution of technology play in human identity.

While the previously discussed films explore the inhumanity of various institutions through representations of monstrous humans and humanized zombies, films like the horror mockumentary *American Zombie* (2008) further complicate the human vs. zombie dichotomy on an individual level. This “documentary” film follows the “lives” of several zombies “living” in Los Angeles. The fact that they are dead provides the only immediately apparent indication that they are no longer human. Otherwise, they attempt to lead perfectly normal (albeit undead) lives. Judy follows an organic vegan diet, and enjoys scrapbooking and gardening. Ivan works at a gas station to afford rent money. Lisa does artwork and funeral arrangements. Joel leads the *Zombie Advocacy Group* and fights for the equal treatment of zombies. Their perfectly normal, “human” lives provide the most humanizing characteristics of these zombies. Much like Bub, they can perform as human (though at a higher level). In this way, the humanizing aspect of these zombies relates to the humanist concept of an essential human nature and condition, as well as a rational state of being; of course, the zombies simultaneously challenge this definition, as

they are no longer technically “human”. This representation of humanized non-humans suggests that being “human” transcends mere biology, and humanist philosophy does not adequately grapple with the complications of human identity.

The characters in *American Zombie* further challenge humanism through their subconscious desires. Regardless of their attempts at leading human lives, they are still dead and have no recollection of their previous human lives. This lack of a personal history creates a void in the zombies, making them feel that their existence no longer has any meaning. Lisa deals with that sense of emptiness through artwork – but every piece of work she creates looks the same; like a dark, empty void. By the end of the film, the filmmakers realize that the zombies are not completely harmless. After all, they are still zombies, and their eventually uncontrollable urge to consume the living outweighs their abilities to act human. However, this struggle against a darker nature as well as a sense of aimlessness and meaninglessness in the zombies may be more humanizing than their explicit actions, for many humans constantly struggle with these same concepts.

Like Bub, whose grief led him to kill Captain Rhodes, the negative emotions of these zombies nonetheless lend a sense of humanity to them. The struggle of these zombies with their subconscious drives and desires parallels Freud’s philosophy, which helped form the basis of posthumanism. Zombies act as a mirror for humankind, showing how we all often act on subconscious drives rather than solely on the rationality espoused by humanist philosophy. This creates a sympathetic portrayal of these humanized zombies, who struggle with the very “human” concepts of self-identity and life’s meaning.

In the television series *The Walking Dead*, Philip (a.k.a The Governor) serves as yet another example of humans acting more monstrous than zombies, further challenging our definitions of “human” within the individual. His monstrosity lies in the fact that he acts as a power-hungry, hyper-violent madman who wants to kill everyone outside of his own group. He manipulates and lies to the town (the one that he acts as the “governor” of) so he can remain in control, murders other survivors for their resources, and keeps the reanimated zombie heads of his victims in fish tanks to add to the disturbing ambience of his home. Despite the main protagonist, Rick, attempting to compromise with him, the Governor constantly targets Rick’s group up to the point of declaring an all-out war. Yet, the Governor’s antagonism does not necessarily come from self-defense – rather, he kills others for his own pride, control, and personal and political gains. His violent, selfish, power-hungry, and manipulative actions toward other survivors make him one of the most notorious, monstrous villains in zombie history. Like the previously mentioned survivors, The Governor represents the humanism concepts of rationality and civic humanism – he initially uses his intelligence and leadership to protect his town. However, in the same way that humanist philosophy was used to dehumanize others, The Governor uses his influence to wreak havoc in the lives of fellow survivors, whom he views as little more than pawns in his game.

The exploration of monstrous humans and posthumanist critique of humanism also arises in Romero’s first zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). This film set the standard for all of the zombie films following it, and asserted Romero as the father of the modern zombie. Throughout *Night of the Living Dead*, a ragtag group of survivors

congregates in a farmhouse in order to fight off a horde of the living dead. Though the “ghouls” constantly claw at the doors and windows of the farmhouse and brutally murder any humans they can get their hands on, conflict between the remaining humans further threatens the lives of the survivors. Their inability to work together causes the deaths of several of the survivors. One of these humans – Ben – survives the entire night of the undead onslaught. As he sits by a window of the farmhouse in the morning, a passing sheriff’s posse mistakes him for one of the undead and immediately shoots him. Their lack of differentiation between human and zombie, and their apathy in killing him, indicates that humans can behave just as monstrously as zombies. Ben survived a full night of fighting off the dead, but in the end, he could not survive a confrontation with the living.

Deborah Christie discusses how *Night of the Living Dead* relates to Richard Matheson’s novel *I Am Legend*, and how they each represent the conflict between humanism and post-humanism. The definition of post-humanism that Christie uses for analysis comes from Robert Pepperell’s book, *The Post-Human Condition*; one way he defines “post-human” is “to indicate that our conceptual construction of what it means to be human is undergoing a profound transformation” (Christie 68). This definition hinges on the posthumanist philosophy of Marx and Foucault, who noted that context provides the root for human identity, rather than the existence of an essential human identity. *I Am Legend* ultimately serves to question “our definition and even prioritization of humanity” which, as Christie states, “has been flawed from the outset” (68). Similarly to *Night of the Living Dead*, Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (a novel later resurrected as multiple film

adaptations) imagines a world in which non-human beings infect the human population, taking over the world with vampire-like monsters. Each of these, Christie notes, presents a common theme of a new society that “supersedes humanity” (68). *I Am Legend* presents a post-human view, suggesting that “we have been identifying humanness within an outdated context” – the very same flaw committed by the novel’s protagonist Neville, who “has failed to recognize his own too-narrowly defined classification for humanity, and in his error he has been the agent of humanity’s destruction” (76). He did not recognize that other forms of humanity could exist and, therefore, automatically delegated them as nonhuman and killed them indiscriminately. That is, by prioritizing his own humanity and definition thereof, Neville ultimately became the destroyer of evolved/different forms of humanity.

A similar struggle arises in *Night of the Living Dead*, which “demonstrates most clearly the flaws of human judgment and its inability to discern its own capacity for inhuman behavior” (Christie 80). Christie references the fact that in *Night of the Living Dead*, the humans comprise as much of a threat to each other as the zombies. By the end of the film, the main protagonist – Ben – survived the night of the zombie attack. Despite his survival against the enemy Other, a posse of survivors comes through, mistakes Ben for one of the undead, and shoots and kills him. This apathetic murder of the only man to survive the night in that house could be a comment on racism (Ben was the only black character in this 1960s film), but Christie suggests that it is “indicative of a far more universal blindness or apathy” (80). This film, then, suggests that not only are we unaware of how to identify between human and nonhuman, but that we also have no

interest in making that distinction. In this case, however, that disregard and inability to navigate between the human/nonhuman dichotomy leads to indiscriminate killing of both.

Robert in *I Am Legend* “too narrowly” classified humanity, and the posse in *Night of the Living Dead* did not seem to bother strictly enforcing any classification, leading to Ben’s murder. Each of these approaches ends catastrophically. Interestingly, the classification of the humanity of *others* leads to these disasters and a lack of introspection into the humanity of *oneself*. As Christie notes, she is “interested in applying [post-humanism] to the dead/Other rather than the technological/Other, to consider whether ‘reading the zombie as an ontic/hauntic object’ reveals our own denial of that which is inhuman in all of us” (69). While the characters in the previously discussed films struggled to classify the humanity of others, it is their own humanity – or lack thereof – that is ultimately brought into light; or, perhaps, left in darkness.

The trend of humanized zombies and posthumanist critique continues in the 2014 film adaptation of Isaac Marion’s novel *Warm Bodies*, which draws many parallels to the situations in *Night of the Living Dead* and *I Am Legend*. Instead of a vampire plague leaving behind only one man, the zombie plague has led to the apocalypse with only a small group of survivors fighting off the undead. These zombies display traditional undead characteristics – slow-moving, shambling undead, under the control of a virus that drives them to consume human flesh. However, this film shows the zombies have inner thoughts; eating brains allows the zombies to imbibe the memories of the living, which momentarily relieves the pain of being dead. Nonetheless, the desire to murder the living seems out of the zombies’ control. This film stands out from the others in its

indication that the zombification process can be undone. As the main character, a zombie named “R”, attempts to protect a living girl (Julie), they eventually become friends. Though R is, in fact, an undead, brain-consuming zombie, he can overcome his urge to kill while he protects and develops an attraction to Julie. Like Bub, Matt, and the undead in *American Zombie*, R can act according to his own will, rather than acting solely under the control of an outer agent. Furthermore, he shows “human” emotions, such as regret, pain, friendship and, eventually, love. As the two become close friends, R slowly comes back to life – his heart starts beating again. Julie’s treatment of him as a human and a friend, rather than a monster, triggers this change. R’s transformation reaches completion when he sacrifices his own life to save Julie – at that point, he becomes completely human again. Thus, the theme of self-sacrifice plays an important role in humanizing these zombies.

Unlike many zombie films, *Warm Bodies* gives the audience the perspective of one of the undead, R. Though he cannot speak and has little control over his desire for human brains, the viewer can hear his thoughts as if he was just another “normal”, living person. The distinctions between human and nonhuman are again blurred here, and the film challenges the definition and prioritization of the humanity of the surviving humans. However, this time, the audience gets the perspective of the individual who struggles to re-validate his humanity. Initially, the human survivors dehumanize and indiscriminately kill others (in this case, zombies), a situation witnessed in previous films. This lack of differentiation, or the inability to perceive varying modes of humanity, serves to maintain the status quo and division of human/nonhuman, much like in *Night of the Living Dead*

and *I Am Legend*. This maintains the status quo because treating the zombies as nonhuman solidifies their status as such; however, once R becomes friends with Julie and she treats him like a human, he slowly becomes human again. This shows the literal (re)humanization of the other. Therefore, the film suggests that the human survivors maintain their own zombie apocalypse by refuting the humanity of others and insisting solely on the prioritization of their own form and definition of humanity. Once the survivors implement a more post-human view, they can accept the unique humanity of the zombies, combining their two communities into one powerful, unified force.

Though *Warm Bodies* advocates for post-humanist views in regard to the Other, the issue of the “Bonies”, the “truly” dead and completely dehumanized ones that have no chance of (re)humanization, complicates this discussion. The Bonies are zombies that have completely decomposed to little more than skeletons with a thin layer of skin. R says, “They’ll eat anything with a heartbeat. I mean, so will I, but at least I’m conflicted about it.” Thus, the Bonies have no morality, logic, or internal thoughts, unlike the zombies; they don’t exhibit any of the humanizing characteristics evident in the previously discussed humanized zombies. The zombies and humans team up to kill the Bonies, a course of action that reflects the humans’ seemingly antagonistic choice to indiscriminately kill zombies. The Bonies are undoubtedly dangerous – but the zombies also committed their own atrocities and still had the chance to reform. This killing of the Bonies challenges the alliance forged between human and zombie. However, the Bonies may still represent the post-humanist views of the rest of the film, as they embody the internal nonhuman. All humans can easily become zombies, and all zombies inevitably

become Bonies. This makes the logical end of the path of existence the Bonies, indicating that the potential to be this irretrievably dehumanized resides in everyone; humans and zombies alike. Our own ability to act in nonhuman ways comprises an essential piece of being human. To acknowledge this thing of darkness as ours, as paraphrased from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, is to respect the humanity of others, as well as to further analyze what makes us human.

Simultaneously, the conflict of the rehumanized zombies vs. the Bonies resembles the conflict between humanist and post-humanist ideologies in modern society. Western cultural humanism relies heavily on logic and reason as the unique and inherent qualities of all human beings. Post-humanism, on the other hand, suggests that what it means to be human goes beyond such strict regulations and definitions, and that the qualities described in humanism are subjective and culturally determined. From a post-humanist perspective, that retention of something "human" in the zombies suggests that our definitions of "human" are flawed.

The conflict between humanist and post-humanist ideals also applies to a real-life situation: war soldiers. In the essay "All Dark Inside: Dehumanization and Zombification in Postmodern Cinema", Sorcha Ni Fhlainn explores a different type of zombie that is more prevalent than the brain-consuming, walking corpse of lore. Fhlainn discusses how postmodern war films depict soldiers – especially in the Vietnam War – as dehumanized zombies. According to Fhlainn, this process of dehumanization is inflicted upon soldiers in order to make them the perfect killing machines. She asserts that they "are, in varying degrees, zombified through the process of dehumanization, mental breakdowns, and self-

annihilation, hybridized, transfigured, and mutilated to the point where all rational thinking and reason is abandoned or removed, leaving a destructive and destroyed shell in its wake” (Fhlainn 140). The situation of the soldiers destroys their humanity, leaving something seemingly inhuman behind.

Interestingly, Fhlainn focuses on one major aspect of a zombified state as being one reduced to primordial rage (the zombie-like virus in *28 Days Later* is even specifically called the “Rage Virus”) which acts “as a frightening reminder of the body driven to violence when reason and order have collapsed or have been (temporarily) eclipsed” (Fhlainn 141). This suggests that a lack of reason/logic leads to the zombified state, which then results in hyper-violent acts. Humanist philosophy might agree with the assessment that a loss of logic reduces the “human state”, as this philosophy celebrated the ability of human beings to reason as what separates us from other animals. Thus, in this philosophical view, a loss of reason would lead to a dehumanized state and, therefore, zombification.

The process of zombification is much more pressing than just a loss of reason, as this loss results from extremely violent conditions. As Fhlainn discusses, other contributing factors – as evidenced in war films like *Full Metal Jacket* – include a loss of individuality coupled with repeated humiliation and even physical and emotional abuse (Fhlainn 143). As shown in the postmodern war films, this treatment serves to break the psyche in a way that leads to zombification – this “break”, as Fhlainn discusses, is the focus of the postmodern, for “cinematic representations of the end of the world, or indeed, the breaking point of the mind (which, in philosophical terms, is the end of the

world) are crucial if we are to fully understand the underlying emotions of terror, rage, and needless destruction which have accompanied the chronicling of these historic moments” (142). In this way, the psychological breaks of the dehumanized, zombified soldiers represents American reactions to the wars referenced in these films; “ the ‘break’ we commonly identify with concerns the horrors of war catalogued during the Vietnam era” (142). Ultimately, Fhlainn refers to this dehumanization/zombification as us “witnessing our (d)evolution toward the post-human plane, as we perilously slip, ever closer, into the devouring darkness” (157). By Fhlainn’s analysis, postmodern conditions make the death of our notions of “human” inevitable.

While Fhlainn discusses this routine dehumanization as evident in the military’s treatment of soldiers in war films, the concept of interpellation affecting zombification is also shown in *Warm Bodies*. The anti-humanist concept of “interpellation” originates in the writings of Louis Althusser. He states, “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (Althusser 173). Interpellating - or “hailing” - someone as a certain subject causes them to become that subject. Althusser uses the example of a police officer chasing someone and shouting, “Hey, you there!”; though the police officer doesn’t know the name of the pursued individual, the hailed individual turns around because “he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him” (174). By being hailed or interpellated as a certain subject, an individual becomes that subject. This concept challenges humanism by asserting that individuals exist as an effect rather than an essential, pre-existing cause. *Warm Bodies* illustrates this concept in that Julie treats R like a human, causing his heart to eventually start beating again. Julie interpellates R as a

human, which allows his (re)humanization.

Unlike the situations depicted in war films, in which war converts human beings into monsters, the treatment in *Warm Bodies* suggests the possibility of the reverse process - turning zombies back into humans by treating them humanely. This interpellative process may provide an alternative to Fhlainn's "(d)evolution toward the post-human plane", by offering hope of restored humanity rather than the permanent dehumanization suggested in Fhlainn's analysis of war films. As she discussed, the respect of individuality and the ability to reason may prevent the "break" that leads to zombification. Thus, even though these films present post-humanist views, they simultaneously cling to humanist values in order to preserve humanity and prevent the zombie plague from completely taking over.

These zombie films offer both humans and zombies that blur the line between human and nonhuman. The humanization of zombies allows these films to illustrate the conflict between humanism and posthumanism. The representation of humanized zombies embodies posthumanist philosophy by indicating the importance that context, incorporation of technology, and subconscious drives play in constructing human identity. Zombie films simultaneously critique humanism by depicting monstrous humans, who represent the historical use of humanism to oppress others and the flaw of prioritizing certain definitions of humanity. Though these films often take a posthumanist approach, they also depend on certain humanist characteristics to create humanized zombies, such as rationality and self-control. Therefore, there is no clear line separating human from nonhuman, which films like *Warm Bodies* solidify through the

implementation of interpellation. Ultimately, these films indicate that our conceptions of human identity are more complex than previously imagined, and that previous humanist philosophy does not sufficiently engage with this complexity.

Chapter 4: Zombie Crawlers and Doomsday Preppers

The incoherent moans and grumblings of thousands of zombies pervade the air, echoing off of the surrounding buildings along the street mall. As buses stop along their route, these zombies await the unsuspecting humans as they step outside, joining the horde, completely absorbed into the sheer mass of no-longer-people. Any icon ever held dear, from superheroes to political figures to cartoon characters, is now defiled, killed, and reborn as a new, zombified version. Humans with literal targets on their backs dodge through the crowd, yet never get far before a zombie tackles them to the ground and “eats their brain”. Moments later, the human rises for another round of this morbid game of tag.

While the image of the horde of zombies wandering through the mall can be taken directly from a Romero film, the “Zombie Crawl” occurs on an annual basis in major city centers throughout the world. In Colorado’s downtown Denver, people dress up as zombified versions of their favorite characters, head downtown to 16th Street Mall, and spend the day as a horde of the undead. The zombies transform the entirety of the mall into one massive zombie party. The first horde of humans stumbled through Toronto in 2003; since that first fatal zombie gathering, the trend has infected the entire world, including Brazil, England, Australia, and Poland (do Vale 191). Denver boasted a 30,000-person attendance in 2014 alone, and every year, the organizers aim to break a new world record (Nicholson 1).

While these events provide common ground and entertainment for fans of the genre, Simone do Vale also notes that “the main goal of the zombie walk is the simulation of an invasion of zombies who feed themselves on human flesh” (do Vale 192). The attendees (especially in Brazil) tend to have similar aesthetic tastes, which – as do Vale notes – relates to “1950's and 1960's trash culture, their ultimate aesthetic theme” (192). Many Zombie Crawls also incorporate some sort of food drive or other charity during the event, although this seems to be a side-note rather than the main purpose. Overall, the widespread popularity of Zombie Crawls suggests that this monster resonates with fans all over the world.

For a completely dehumanized, flesh-eating, undead monster, the zombie garners a large fan base. The global popularity of zombie crawls begs the question of why ordinary people (hundreds of thousands of them!) are so fascinated with acting out the very antithesis of “human”. While do Vale notes how zombies represent cultural fears of “mass alienation, the loss of identity, and the fear of homogenization and disregard for singularity”, embracing these fears through embodying the very monster that represents them may serve an important cultural purpose (do Vale 197). He states that “the zombie walk could be understood as a carnivalization of fear”, and “a political manifestation, however deprived of the modern idealism of the term, as an ironic act of resistance against the dictatorship of fear in contemporary mass-mediated culture” (199). In this way, the mass popularity of zombie crawls indicates reclamation of power – as zombies represent ever-shifting fears of control, the humans finally regain control by becoming the monsters themselves.

Of course, celebrating reclamation of power in this way simultaneously subverts the notion of fighting back against homogenization, as the goal is solely to join the horde (as previously discussed, the various cities that have their own zombie crawls all compete for Guinness World Records for largest attendance). This joining of a mass group should theoretically erase self-identity, a fear often addressed in zombie films. Yet, the participants apparently retain some sense of individuality through unique costumes, signs, and the very fact that they are zombies in a human-dominated world. Despite these attempts at individuality, everyone's a zombie at this event – there is nothing unique about this seemingly shocking metamorphosis when surrounded by thousands of others who have undergone the same gruesome change. Perhaps the power lies in releasing notions of self-identity and uniqueness in order to join a much larger, much more powerful mass – even if that mass is dead. Vale discusses this as a community event, stating that “a clear desire for closeness and distinction moves zombie walk participants” (do Vale 198). Sarah Juliet Lauro may disagree with this sentiment; as she states in her essay “Zombies Invade Performance Art”, community and action are concepts that the “zombie mob only played at” (Lauro 230). Like zombies themselves, Lauro describes the mob as “devoid of content”; unable to present true social change, only an empty embodiment of the generation's wish to truly speak out .

A different movement aims to survive the zombie apocalypse, rather than join it. These individuals stock up on many years' worth of food, ammunition, water, and other necessary supplies. Many of them even have bunkers or hideouts in undisclosed locations, to which they will “bug out” at the first sign of the end of the world, from solar

flares to volcanoes, earthquakes, and pandemics. This movement exploded into pop culture and now boasts its own television show, *Doomsday Preppers*, which follows various families as they prepare for the end of the world. While these “doomsday preppers” are not necessarily preparing for a zombie attack (though many jokingly allude to it), the obsession with the apocalypse is clear. While many people store survival supplies in case of emergencies, doomsday preppers more obsessively dedicate their time and resources to perpetually preparing for a hypothetical end-of-days.

While the “Zombie Crawl” participants represent a “carnivalization of fear” and, thus, reclamation of power, preppers reclaim power in an entirely different and more literal way. While both parties indicate an obsession with apocalyptic themes and are united in the fear of pandemic and loss of identity, zombie crawl participants seem to accept and satirize this fate, while preppers fight against it. By literalizing and acting out these situations, each group copes with intangible fears; one group with costumes, and the other with guns.

In this way, these preppers serve as real-life versions of the survivors in *Warm Bodies*. The survivors in the film, headed by the unyielding Colonel Grigio, build fortified walls around their settlement to protect themselves against the zombie plague that has swept the country, turning its victims into brain-consuming, walking undead. Grigio and other survivors indiscriminately kill zombies, seeing them solely as non-human antagonists. However, as Grigio’s daughter Julie makes friends with a zombie named R, this status quo is challenged. Julie’s friendship with R eventually begins to turn him human again – his heart starts to beat, and the other zombies, realizing they can

change, follow suit. Thus, the rehumanization of zombies is possible and ultimately ends the apocalypse in *Warm Bodies*. However, this also suggests that the survivors maintained their own apocalypse through their routine dehumanization/demonization of the zombies.

Thus, “doomsday preppers” similarly seem to maintain their own apocalypse by constantly preparing for significantly unlikely scenarios, in fear of (or maybe even excited for) whatever brand of apocalypse finally wipes out humankind. Like the zombie crawlers, the preppers create their own community based on similar interests – however, the latter breeds more isolationism than the mock community formed by the human-zombie hordes. Perhaps those who occasionally play dead are more alive than those whose entire lives are dedicated to surviving the end of the world.

The clash between the zombie crawlers and doomsday preppers creates a literal embodiment of the conflict between living and undead in zombie films and, therefore, also present a further conflict of humanist and post-humanist ideals. The preppers – representative of humanist ideals – insist that enough preparation, intelligence, and hard-work can (literally) save mankind from extinction, prioritizing human life and worth over all else. Zombie crawlers, on the other hand, celebrate the inhuman in all of us and blur the lines of conventional definitions of what is “human”. Perhaps the zombie crawlers are ahead of the game – while preppers prepare for the inevitable apocalypse, zombie crawlers know that it is already here; the death of what we perceive as “human” arose in the postmodern era with posthumanism.

Chapter 5: Resurrecting the Humanity of the Undead

The popularity of zombie films, and the integration of these situations into real-life through Zombie Crawls and doomsday preparations, suggests that our creation of zombies represents widespread cultural concerns. While zombie films grapple with the conflict between humanism and posthumanism, this conflict spreads into our everyday interpretations of humanity. Yet, the sharp contrast in responses to our human and posthuman conflict - as evidenced in the zombie crawlers and doomsday preppers - suggest that there is no consensus on how to address the differing views of human identity in the postmodern era.

Humanism and posthumanism presents a dichotomy in itself, leaving little room to navigate between the strengths and shortcomings of each. Philosophy of the postmodern era critiques the flaws in humanism, such as erasing important differences (“humanism’s will to see sameness wherever it looks”) and ultimately dehumanizing others. However, critiques of posthumanism also do little to bridge the gap in communication between different human beings, as this philosophy tends to support solipsism and irreconcilable differences. Critiques of postmodernism itself establish a need to move on from the fragmented existence that it perpetuates. Lorenzo C. Simpson, author of *The Unfinished Project: Toward a Postmetaphysical Humanism*, discusses this postmodern view:

What gets called *postmodernity*, on the other hand, is the stage at which those who live modernity's fragmentary existence have given up the belief that *any* whole can soothe what ails us. All totalizing schemes and narratives have lost credibility, and there is no longer even any *sense* of where to look to repair the lack. . . . The postmodern attitude is one of ironic, if not cynical, detachment, a detachment characterizing our relationship to the world, to structures of meaning and to canons of rationality. (Simpson 7)

This detachment, as Simpson discusses, results in a "cynicism, irreverence, and distrust, linked to an aesthetic spirit of play" that "lead to a fascination with surfaces. The world loses its weight, and within the ambit of this unbearable lightness of Being, any representation of the self, the other, or the world is taken to be just another interpretation" (7, 8). Postmodernism, then, fails to address the pressing questions of humanity, leaving little room to resolve the conflict between human and zombie.

Due to the "playful" nature of postmodernism and the distrust of any systems, it fosters an all-consuming and paralyzing solipsism that, rather than addressing the critiques of humanism, only perpetuates a fragmented and aimless existence, an obsession with Self that obliterates the Other. Ultimately, this means that posthumanism often commits the same crimes that it accuses humanism of. Each philosophy views differences in opposite extremes. Simpson states:

We have become accustomed to only two ways of responding to difference in our public world. One is to ignore it, for what counts about

humans is what we all share ... This makes differences between groups of people inessential to what really counts about them. The other is to construe difference and use it to mark a crucially important distinction among persons, one so fundamental that the search for commonalities or universal descriptions of what binds persons together is seen as wrongheaded. (Simpson 9)

These two philosophies provide opposite of extremes of how to view difference and, therefore, how to view humanity as a whole. Because of these extremes, neither philosophy adequately addresses the differences between humans while also promoting meaningful connections.

These potential meaningful connections necessitate a commitment to some kind of system. As the postmodern novelist Angela Carter writes, "Our systems are what keep us human. ... any system of knowledge is better than none, any taxonomic system an improvement upon primal chaos" (Carter). Though posthumanism attempts to address the flaws of humanism, the postmodern attitude inherent within necessarily challenges any system we could attempt to apply to the human subject. It does bring to light important distinctions but, at the same time, rejects any totalizing claims, including the essence of the human being. Without committing to any essential human, posthumanism falls short of addressing the problem of dehumanization.

An attempt to reconcile the dichotomy of humanism vs. posthumanism arises in the philosophy of postmetaphysical humanism. Simpson discusses this type of humanism as "the possibility of an always provisional mutual understanding effected through

dialogical interaction on the part of participants who bring their differences with them to the negotiation – one that holds out the possibility of a moment of community that would not be assimilationist” (10). After all, as Simpson asserts, we need community now more than ever. The postmodern era and advancing communication technology has united the world on a grand scale, yet divided and minimized human interaction on the individual level. Community may ironically appear as an outdated concept in a highly connected world. Postmetaphysical humanism provides a way of navigating complex human differences without allowing them to be irreconcilable. This allows the formation of a community and connection with fellow human beings. As shown in *Warm Bodies*, this connection allows the humanization of others.

Though zombies are not real (at least, not yet), representations of zombie nonhumans may provide a tool for (re)humanizing others. The dialogical interaction suggested in Simpson’s discussion of postmetaphysical humanism relates to the rehumanizing interpellation in *Warm Bodies*. Though Julie saw R as a member of a completely separate community (a zombie, no less), she could still commit to some sense of him as human. This commitment allows her to view and treat him as human, which eventually literally rehumanizes him. The relationship between Julie and R comments on the ability to overcome the debilitating solipsism of postmodernism. Julie’s initial view of R dehumanized him, as postmodernism’s solipsistic obsession with Self eradicates Other. However, her commitment to a sense of humanity opened a dialogue between the two; R’s literal return to life corresponds with the rehumanization of R in Julie’s own mind.

The relationship with Other, as illustrated in the relationship between Julie and R, addresses the critique of humanism's tendency to make Other the Same. Julie recognizes R's "otherness" without attempting to discount or obliterate it, and while still treating him like a human. This illustrates an important aspect of postmodern humanism as a respect for differences and an open relationship with Other. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas discusses these aspects in his collection of essays, "Humanism of the Other". In a postmodern move, he states, "If humanity were to lose or forget or abolish these particularities, these idioms, it would lose the invaluable treasures of significations" (Levinas 19). Differences and context are important to understanding ourselves and the Other, and ignoring these differences results in a breakdown of communication. Levinas also writes, "Does not sense, as orientation, indicate a thrust, an outside of self toward the other than self, whereas philosophy wants to absorb all Other in the Same and neutralize otherness?" (25). Again, rehumanization of the Other requires a move away from the postmodern obsession with Self. As Julie in *Warm Bodies* shows, this move can be accomplished through communication and a commitment to the humanity of others.

The rehumanization of R also hinges largely on his own actions. R becomes more human as he forms an emotional attachment to Julie, and crosses the boundary to fully human once he sacrifices himself to save her. Other zombies are also represented as humanized based on their actions in helping or saving humans. These films suggest that our relationships with others and serving others comprise the most humanizing characteristics of an individual. Regis University teaches the importance of the Jesuit mission of "men and women in the service of others"; serving others acts as the outward

thrust away from the self that Levinas discusses. Therefore, our ability to connect with and serve others creates a connection between Self and Other that (re)humanizes both parties. This connection through service opens a pathway for dialogical interaction and commits to the humanity of others. Ultimately, these zombie films suggest that service for others individually rehumanizes them in each of our minds (as R was rehumanized in Julie's mind) and also helps us become more human ourselves.

The message that arises in the popularity of zombie media is clear; societal conceptions of what it means to be human are constantly changing and being challenged in this postmodern era. The widespread confusion about what it means to be human leads to a lack of commitment or dialogue, resulting in the routine dehumanization of others. Yet, more and more zombie films are portraying humanized zombies that challenge us to reconsider both the humanity of others and the inhumanity of ourselves. Ultimately, these films suggest that our relationships and connections with others humanize us all. Though what it means to be "human" may depend on societal context, an act, or an unattainable ideal, a commitment to this ideal through connecting with others provides an alternative to the postmodern solipsism and dehumanization that plagues everyday life; we are, in many ways, the undead. However, through serving and connecting with others, we can resurrect the humanity of one another from the undead grasp of postmodernism and prevent the zombie apocalypse.

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