CONTRIBUTIONS TO ZOMBIE STUDIES

HOW ZOMBIES CONQUERED POPULAR CULTURE

The Multifarious Walking Dead in the 21st Century

KYLE WILLIAM BISHOP

Since the early 2000s, popular culture has experienced a "Zombie Renaissance," beginning in film and expanding into books, television, video games, theatre productions, phone apps, collectibles and toys. Zombies have become allegorical figures embodying cultural anxieties, but they also serve as models for concepts in economics, political theory, neuroscience, psychology, computer science and astronomy. They are powerful, multifarious metaphors representing fears of contagion and doom but also isolation and abandonment, as well as troubling aspects of human cruelty, public spectacle and abusive relationships. This critical examination of the 21st-century zombie phenomenon explores how and why the public imagination has been overrun by the undead horde.

KYLE WILLIAM BISHOP is an associate professor of English at Southern Utah University, teaching American literature and culture, and film and screen studies. He has published papers on popular culture, cinematic adaptation and monster studies.

McFarland

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BISHOP

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Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture. Edited by Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz. 2011

Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition. Edited by Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton. 2011

Zombies Are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead. Edited by Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton. 2011

The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia, Volume 2: 2000–2010. Peter Dendle. 2012

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For Rachel, Xander, and Sydney.

Acknowledgments

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Some of the material in this book has appeared previously (often in abbreviated or dated versions) in a number of different publications. For example, I have been developing the introduction for a number of years; it began its life as one of the keynote addresses at the First International Academic Conference on Zombies, and I then developed it into the Tanner Distinguished Faculty Lecture at Southern Utah University in September 2012. A version of the introduction has been published in French as "L'émergence des *Zombie studies*. Comment les morts-vivants ont envahi l'Académie et pourquoi nous devrions nous en soucier" in the anthology *Z pour Zombies*, edited by Bernard Perron, Antonio Dominguez Leiva, and Samuel Archibald (2015: 31–44, © Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal). Much of Chapter 1 appears in a special issue of *Gothic Studies* as "The New American Zombie Gothic: Road Trips, Globalization, and the War on Terror," first published online 8 June 2015, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/GS.0003 (2015, © Manchester University Press). Additionally, Chapter 2 was initially published as "Vacationing in *Zombieland*: The Classical Functions of the Modern Zombie Comedy" in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* (22.1 [2011]: 24–38, © International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts), and a shorter version of Chapter 4 was published as "Battling Monsters and Becoming Monstrous: Human Devolution in *The Walking Dead*" in the anthology *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, edited by Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui (New York: Bloomsbury 2013), 73–85.

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Preface 1

Introduction—A Multiplicity of Zombies: How the Walking Dead Conquered Popular Culture 5

Part One: Generic Triad

1—The (New) Cinematic Zombie: Road Trips, Globalization and *World War Z* 23

2—The Comedic Zombie: *Zombieland* and the Classical Functions of the Modern Zomedy 41

3—The Young Adult Zombie: Teenage Anxiety in *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* 55

Part Two: Beyond Film

4—The Comic Book Zombie: Human Devolution in *The Walking Dead* 73

5—The Literary Zombie: The Infected City of Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* 89

6—The Stage Zombie: *Dead Set*, *Uncle Vanya and Zombies,* and the Reality-TV Monster 107

Part Three: Broader Horizons

7—The Video Game Zombie: *The Last of Us* and the Digital Evolution of the Walking Dead 131

8—The Non-Zombie Zombie: The Tragically Misidentified Draugar of *Dead Snow* 148

9—The Romantic Zombie: *Warm Bodies* and the Monstrous Boyfriend 163

Conclusion—The Television Zombie: The Future(s) of the Walking Dead 181

Filmography 191

Chapter Notes 195

Bibliography 207

Index 217

Preface

When I first entertained the idea of the zombie, the walking dead, as a serious topic of academic study ten years ago, I had no idea if my first article on the non-literary origins of zombie cinema would have any traction in the professional scholarly community. After it was published in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* in 2006,[1] I wasn't sure if I would be able to pitch the same subject successfully to the University of Arizona as a legitimate dissertation topic. After completing my PhD in American literature and film studies with, indeed, a focus on zombie cinema in 2009, I doubted I would be able to take the next step required of newly minted doctorates and find a press willing to publish my dissertation, which at that point I had developed into a manuscript on the cultural history and significance of the zombie narrative as part of the Gothic literary tradition in the United States. When McFarland readily published the book in 2010,[2] I began to think that, perhaps, zombie studies might—just *might*—pay off for me as a scholar—for a few years, at least. Now, looking back on the unusual and nontraditional academic path I have shambled along so successfully, I cannot help but feel surprise at the longevity of this rather bizarre phenomenon. As I have asserted on numerous occasions, I never thought the zombie narrative would continue to be popular—and viable—for this long. I have never been so pleased to be so wrong.

Today, zombie scholars need no longer hide in the shadows or struggle to come up with legitimizing euphemisms for their chosen scholastic passions; in fact, "zombie studies" can readily be found in college curricula, in academic publishing, and all across the Internet in both scholarly and journalistic circles. In February of 2014, Erica E. Phillips from *The Wall Street Journal* contacted me for a story she was writing on the rise of zombie studies in college and university curricula.[3] Thanks in a large part to the commercial success of narratives such as AMC's *The Walking Dead* television series (2010–), entrepre-

neurial faculty around the country have been using zombie studies as a way to (re)animate their otherwise zombie-like students. Arnold T. Blumberg was one of the first academics to offer such a course on zombie studies back in 2010 at the University of Baltimore as part of the school's new pop culture minor,[4] followed by Kelly Murphy's religion course at Central Michigan University titled "From Revelation to *The Walking Dead*."[5] In addition, Emily Hicks instructs her students in zombie culture at San Diego State University,[6] and Glenn R. Stutzky—with support from Keesa V. Muhammad, Christopher Irvin, and Hailey Mooney—teaches Michigan State University's fully online course SW290: Surviving the Coming Zombie Apocalypse—"Disasters, Catastrophes, and Human Behavior."[7] In fact, Phillips surveys a handful of high-profile zombie courses from such varied institutions as the University of Pennsylvania, George Mason University, Columbia College Chicago, Peru State College, the University of Texas at Tyler, and even Harvard University.[8]

Before McFarland published my first book on the American zombie Gothic cinematic tradition, only a few books dedicated exclusively to zombie studies were available on the market. Two of these were insightful surveys of films featuring zombies or zombie-like creatures, including Peter Dendle's *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* (2001) and Arnold T. Blumberg and Andrew Hershberger's *Zombiemania: 80 Movies to Die For* (2006), and Jamie Russell provided a critical overview of zombie history in his *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema* (2006). Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette produced the first collection of scholarly articles on the zombie phenomenon in 2008 with their landmark *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, followed by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro's collection *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (2011), Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz's anthology *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture* (2011), and Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton's dual collections *Zombies Are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead* (2011) and *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition* (2011). Dendle has now published a second volume of his *Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* (2012), and both *Book of the Dead* (2014) and *Zombiemania* (2015) are reappearing in new, revised, and expanded editions to join the ranks of such volumes as Alain Silver and James Ursini's *The Zombie Film: From* White Zombie *to* World War Z (2014) and Ozzy Inguanzo's *Zombies on Film: The Definitive Story of Undead Cinema* (2014), not to mention the latest scholarly anthology, *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture*, edited by Laura Hubner, Marcus Leaning, and Paul Manning (2015). In fact, enough academic books on zombie narrative and culture have now been published that McFarland has created

an entire "Contributions to Zombie Studies" series (to which this book belongs).

But most of the works I have mentioned focus primarily on zombie cinema, as does my own initial book. This volume hopes to expand that reach, while limiting the discussion to texts appearing during the current Golden Age of the zombie, the so-called Renaissance of the monster and its narratives. While much has already been said about the walking dead—that essentially modern creature born from Haitian folk tradition and refined through the inventive efforts of George A. Romero and his followers—more critical, analytical, and scholarly work remains to be done. The zombie as we know it today is a monster that has developed over the past 100 years through adaptation, mutation, and fusion with other monstrous traditions, not to mention appropriation by other genres and media. As long as filmmakers, authors, computer game designers, television producers, playwrights, musicians, poets, and other artists continue to reinvent and redeploy the zombie figure, students will have fresh material to study and scholars will have more arguments to make. The walking dead will continue to teach us about our own repressed (and revealed) anxieties and tensions, and they will find new ways to continue to horrify and entertain the masses. Perhaps my more cynical declarations regarding the zombie craze have now been thoroughly refuted. Perhaps the zombie is really here to stay.

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