

Pre-print version.

Published online on April 2018, following the terms of agreement signed between Universitas Press and me in August 2016.

Full reference:

García, Alberto N. “Zombie Blues. The Depressing Rise of the Living Dead in Contemporary Television”, *Monsters and Monstrosity in 21st-Century Film and Television*, edited by Cristina Artenie and Ashley Szanter, Universitas Press, 2017, pp. 178-198.

Zombie Blues: The Rise of the Sorrowful Living Dead in Contemporary Television¹

ALBERTO N. GARCÍA

“I’m ready to feel again. Anything, good or bad.
I want to be alive, now, more than ever” (Liv, *iZombie*, 1.5)
“When you died, everything turned to shit.
Life didn’t mean anything anymore” (Kieran, *In the Flesh*, 1.2)
“You can feel things that people try to hide from you”
(Virgil, *Les Revenants*, 2.3)

1. Introduction

The three quotations that open this article show anguished characters, worried about their feelings and confused about their identity. They are dialogues that correspond to the types of listless, depressed or existentialist characters, common features in any contemporary television drama. But there is another, very remarkable feature in each of them: the three characters ruminating on their situations in this way are... undead.

The figure of the zombie has infected contemporary popular culture. Something which for many years remained a subgenre found mostly in B movies with relatively few viewers, has in the past decade made its way into the mainstream (Hubner, Leaning & Manning 3-10; Bishop, *How Zombies Conquered* 5-21), even serving as a device on fitness apps that simulate the grunts of undead to stimulate the user to sprint faster. The presence of the zombie currently enjoys an extraordinary vitality in the field of video games (*State of Decay*), Hollywood movies (*World War Z*), literature (*Jane Eyre Z*), graphic novels (*The Walking Dead*) and, as addressed in this article, in contemporary television fiction. Not surprisingly, the TV adaptation of *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010—) has spent six successful seasons garnering global resonance.

¹ This article is based on an earlier one (“Prozac para zombies. La sentimentalización contemporánea del muerto viviente en la televisión.”) published in Spanish in the journal *Brumal*.

While vampire mythology muses about love and sexual desire, and werewolves point to the animalistic nature of man, zombies—brutish, one-dimensional beings who never feel anything for their victims—usually offer a reading that is essentially sociopolitical in nature, or, as summarized by *The New York Times*, “Zombies are from Mars and vampires from Venus” (Stanley). However, following trends in literature and cinema in recent years, it has become possible to detect how zombie television stories have begun to propose a more empathetic, emotional, and complex vision of the undead.

In order to analyze this phenomenon, this article will be divided into three parts. First, we will review the genesis of the figure of the zombie, with special attention paid to its metaphorical power to reflect cultural anxieties of a particular period. Next, we will place the process of sentimentalizing the figure of the zombie that has supported this myth in context, a context that sociology calls “emotional culture.” And finally, following the perspective and methodology of cultural studies, we will take a look at three series which, from complementary ideological therapeutic nuances, show the evolution of the undead in contemporary television: the British TV series *In the Flesh* (BBC Three, 2013-14), the French *Les Revenants* (Canal Plus France, 2012—) and the American *iZombie* (the CW, 2015—).

Choosing these three TV shows allows us, first of all, to give our analysis a global character. They have been produced in different parts of the world, with different traditions and styles of television; however, they reflect a similar thematic pattern, showing the zombie phenomena to be a cultural and aesthetic trend. In addition, all three are proposals that have enjoyed success with the public: *In the Flesh* had a short first season, even by British standards, and was renewed for a second, while enjoying broad critical acceptance in Great Britain both in general-interest newspapers as well as in specialized publications (Jeffries; Mellor). *Les Revenants* has been one of the stalwarts of the new wave of European television production, with series like *Engrenages* (Canal Plus France, 2005—), *Borgen* (DR1, 2010-13), *Gomorrah* (Sky Italia, 2014) and a large etcetera. With its *high-concept* as a lure, this French offering has been broadcast in many European countries, was bought by the US Sundance Channel and even led to an American remake.

Critics as notable as James Poniewozik of *The New York Times* and Todd Van der Werf in *The A.V. Club* greeted its arrival effusively. The third series chosen, *iZombie*, demonstrates less artistic

ambition, but its concept—in the context of a channel aimed at a post-adolescent audience—has been firmly established and the series renewed for a third season, which in the current crowded ecosystem of American television fiction is synonymous with success, especially on the networks.

2. The zombie as sociopolitical metaphor

The metaphorical role of the zombie is not a new one. On the contrary, it is present from its filmic origins, when Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) suggested an implicit reading about the fear of a racial insurgency, both in the Southern United States as well as in the colonies. Since then, its symbolic capacity has moved to the rhythm of the society that engendered it as a cultural product. As Ted E. Tollefson has written: "Films can be an ideal means for generating myths that map the rapidly changing landscape of the twentieth century. . . . These film-myths . . . always bear the stamp of a time, place and specific culture" (qtd. in Browning 14). Much has changed, therefore, in the semantic capacity of the zombie from the decade of the thirties in the last century until today.

2.1. From voodoo to *The Night of the Living Dead*

Unlike the Central European origins of most monsters and supernatural beings that have characterized the horror genre, the zombie is a figure born of Caribbean folklore. It was originally linked to Haiti and the use of voodoo, revived by the use of black magic, whose sociopolitical readings were bound up with slavery and colonialism. Literary references are scarce—Lovecraft, Shelley, Matheson—and they were portrayed on the big screen only rarely, as in the case of Tourneur and the aforementioned Halperin. This lack of robust narrative precedents allowed George A. Romero to re-found zombie mythology, establishing the characteristics of the creature from which today's subgenre still draws. First of all, unlike other monsters, the zombie exhibits in its own flesh the wounds and putrefaction of its death. Zombies "threaten stability and security not only through their menace to life, but through their very bodies, a stark image of disintegration and harbinger of a crumbling civilization" (Tenga & Zimmerman 78–9).

Despite an animal impulse that leads them to feed on other humans, despite its abject features and disintegrating body, the

zombie retains an ominous similarity to that of other humans (especially when the undead are known to or recognized by other characters),² but are emptied of any hint of cognitive or emotional awareness. The zombies of *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) neither feel nor suffer; they only emit guttural sounds and crave human viscera to devour. Consequently, the terror they provoke comes from the persistent threat of an infectious and cannibalistic death.

But additionally, as Kyle W. Bishop summarizes, these stories are always placed in an apocalyptic landscape that peppers the subgenre with three critical features: the collapse of social infrastructure, the cultivation of survivalist fantasies, and the fear of other humans, a suspicion that reaches levels of paranoia because of the accompanying anarchy and scarcity of resources, and because of the ease with which survivors—even one’s own family and friends—can become zombies with the speed of an unexpected bite (*American Zombie Gothic* 21).

These features allow for the repetition of a basic plot device, with logical variations, within the zombie subgenre: a group of survivors seek refuge in a safe environment in order to deal with a threat that comes from both zombies and another group of human beings (Verevis 17). The survival instinct involves a dramatic leap: “the journey from survivor to vigilante is a short one; with the total collapse of all governmental law-enforcement systems, survival of the fittest becomes a very literal and grim reality” (Bishop, “Dead Man *Still Walking*” 22). In fact, if we look at the long narrative distance traveled by the characters in *The Walking Dead*, we find that the same basic vicissitude—constantly seeking shelter to hide from the menace—is repeated cyclically: Hershel’s farm, Terminus, Alexandria. The novelty the serial story—forced to renew their conflicts—introduces, is the perpetual journey due to the lack of a safe place the characters can inhabit continuously. This implies a nihilistic vision in which the Apocalypse, unlike the first Romero, has already taken place. And it is irreversible.

² It is the same mirage of humanity which, in the popular series *The Walking Dead*, made it impossible for Morgan Jones to pull the trigger in the pilot episode (1.1), gave emotional force to the melancholy “Test Subject 19” (1.6) or turned the unexpected appearance of Sophia on the Hershel’s farm into a kick in the stomach for the viewer (2.7). Even a villain such as the Governor softened in his perversity, during the third season, upon refusing to accept the transformation of his daughter into a zombie.

2.2. Constructing allegories

As we have noted, one of the most striking features of the zombie narrative is its ability to take on sociopolitical and cultural readings. Joe Tompkins noted how both academic and specialized criticism fall into the over-interpretation of the horror film as a way to “enshrine their own interpretive authority and exert their own cultural power” (36). Even bearing in mind Tompkins’ critique, the inexhaustible semantic capacity of the zombie is surprising.³ It is precisely its minimalism—zombies originally were slow, expressionless, cannibalistic, gregarious, primal and instinctive—which allowed them to become creatures open to different meanings, capable of constructing allegories that pointed to the communist terror, repressed desires, civil rights for minorities, militarism and Vietnam, consumerism, pandemic fear or even class struggle.⁴

So, zombies share the symbolic nature traditionally attributed to the Neo-Gothic horror literature, which “helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural” (Hogle 4). As will be detailed below, the uniqueness of the zombie, unlike the vampire’s, is more confined to collective, sociocultural aspects: zombies move in hordes; they are radically impersonal monsters, lacking in will and possessed of a cannibalistic instinct. Consequently, as Verevis writes, it is not surprising that “zombies and zombification become the perfect vehicle for encapsulating cold war anxieties about the loss of individuality, political subversion and brainwashing” (13). However, it is precisely the flat, one-dimensional nature of the zombie—beyond the empty gore of exploitation-type films in the style of Lucio Fulci—which makes these sociopolitical readings unduly literal. This happens, for example, with the criticism of consumerism and media in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978). The four protagonists flee the city and seek refuge in a shopping mall outside Pittsburgh. While watching the throng surrounding the facilities, Francine asks Peter: “Why do they [the zombies] come here?” He answers: “Some kind of instinct. Memory of what they used to do. This was an important

³ For example, two recent books by Lauro, Carrington et. al. attest to the metaphorical survival of the zombie.

⁴ “The zombies enact a kind of hysterical imagining of a proletarian revolution; they are a distorted fantasy of a postapocalyptic, classless society that articulates twentieth-century anxieties toward crowd and mob behavior” (Boluk & Lenz 141).

place in their lives.” Or, later: “What the hell are they?” to which Peter replies with a resounding: “They’re us. That’s all.”

This *they are us* also enables a Hobbesian reading of society, repeated in almost all the stories of zombies: there are often humans who are much more savage and wicked than the undead themselves. This is one of the recurring motifs of the zombie genre, and is present even today in *The Walking Dead*: “All this time, running from walkers—you forget what people do, have always done,” Maggie laments in “Made to Suffer” (3.8). In fact, the substratum of *homo homini lupus est* permeates the entire canon of zombie narratives, to the point of raising these dilemmas to the category of a pre-political status:

Rick: You really want to debate about saving a guy who will lead his buddies right to our door?

Dale: That’s what a civilized society does.

Rick: Who says we’re civilized anymore?

Dale: No, the world we knew is gone. But, keeping our humanity? That’s a choice. (*The Walking Dead*, “Judge, Jury, Executioner,” 2.11)

In this dialogue between society, civilization, violence and humanity, the classic zombie tale, located in an agonized and apocalyptic landscape, exhibits a paradox: for the human race to survive, you have to stop being human for a time; one must behave in a wild, ruthless, and even utilitarian fashion, if necessary.

2.3. Classicism, generic fatigue and subversion

Every genre implies, as Steve Neale writes, “a contained and controlled heterogeneity,” which plays a balance between “repetition and difference,” between “discursive tension and contradiction.” Thus, following Neale, we could define a genre as a “systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject” (6). This formulation is also applicable to subgenres, as is the zombie with respect to horror; it simply further restricts the defining characteristics, closing the focus in order to isolate a number of common and exclusive features.

But at the same time, genres can also be approached diachronically. It is customary to demarcate stages of experimentation—classicism, mannerism and deconstructionism—in any genre. As Thomas Schatz explains, this evolution comes from the fact that genres “must continually vary and reinvent the generic

formula” (36). Leo Baudry explains this tension between familiarity and difference even more explicitly:

Genre films essentially ask the audience, “Do you still want to believe this?” Popularity is the audience answering “Yes.” Change in genres occurs when the audience says, “That’s too infantile a form of what we believe. Show us something more complicated.” (179)

However, it is unreasonable to view this timeline as being something rigid and shaped like an arrowhead; quite the contrary, it is common for more classical proposals to exist alongside other proposals that renew, disrupt or parody established codes. As Gallagher insists, “a superficial glance at film history suggests cyclicism rather than evolution” (qtd. in Keith Grant 36). So, as we shall see below, it is currently possible for series that stick fairly closely to the essential aesthetic and landscape features of the zombie subgenre (*The Walking Dead*, *Z Nation*) to coexist with others that boldly violate some of its thematic or iconographic constants (*In the Flesh*, *iZombie*).

This fluctuation within the zombie genre, evolutionary and cyclical at the same time, can be synthesized in the work of George A. Romero himself. The psychology of the zombie progresses in his films until, in 2008, he returns to a pre-apocalyptic situation with *Diary of the Dead* and monsters who are once more “pure desiring machines—they are creatures composed entirely of excess desire” (Boluk & Lenz 136). Furthermore, the coexistence of classical, mannerist and parodic periods can be seen, for example, when we note that at almost the same time in which Hollywood’s remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (Snyder, 2004) was enjoying intense media attention with its enraged runners, two other landmarks were released: the insurgent zombie leader Big Daddy (*Land of the Dead*, Romero, 2005), and the ironic and funny look at the genre taken by *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004). Something similar would occur years later: *World War Z* (Forster, 2013) starring Brad Pitt, or the blood and guts episodes of the third season of *The Walking Dead*, coexisted with a “romantic zombedy,” *Warm Bodies* (Levine, 2013).

Following the bloody European take on the genre from the late seventies and early eighties there came *The Return of the Living Dead* (O’Bannon, 1985), which led to a certain renewal of the genre by mixing humor with horror and, above all, by avoiding some of the usual zombie characteristics: they were now able to talk, run, and even keep moving once their heads had been severed. In the early 2000s, at a crossroads where the success of videogames such as

Resident Evil or *Silent Hill*, the gruesome imagery of a post-9/11 world, and the viral terrors of mad cow and avian flu can be traced, the zombie made a permanent comeback, especially following the success of the rabid and accelerated monstrosities of *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002). One of the novelties of Danny Boyle's film was that the zombies were not completely dead, but infected. This undead condition is precisely what will serve to rehabilitate them in some of the contemporary TV series. The generic "sentient zombie" emerges as part of this reinvention.

3. The humanization of the zombie

The thesis of this article is that the humanization that the zombie has undergone in pop culture—more pronounced in recent years—represents an example of a trend that sociology has been termed as "the affective turn" (Clough & Haley). This attitude is linked to the concept of "emotional culture," which refers, *inter alia*, to the growing presence of therapeutic discourse and sentimentalization in all spheres of social life. "Emotional culture" is understood as a "set of cultural meanings and operational codes by which people manage, deploy and understand their emotions and actions" (García Martínez & González 13). As González adds elsewhere, "contemporary selves are not only highly reflexive selves, but, specifically, *emotionally* reflexive selves who continually turn to their emotions for self-knowledge" (González 5).

In this regard, studying the evolution of the zombie while dwelling on some of the latest televised innovations of the monster helps us to think about some of the more prominent manifestations of human behavior in contemporary life. Because it is only from the perspective of this contemporary "self"—obsessed with knowledge filtered through sentiment—that it is possible to understand the tendency to romanticize and sweeten the grisly. This domestication of the horrific is also displayed as a therapeutic vehicle for overcoming trauma, a means of alleviating or living with grief, and a vehicle for resolving questions about our own identity.

3.1. Dreaming robots, vegetarian vampires, depressed zombies

This trend towards emotionalization in every sphere of public life is what explains the humanization of, and empathy with, many of

the traditional villains of the fantasy genre. This idea has always been present in science fiction, where one of the generic constants has been precisely the human capabilities of robots, machines and replicants, from Frank Baum's Tik Tok to the cyber dolls of Dr. Calvin in Asimov's *I, Robot* in literature; from the figure of Maria in *Metropolis* to Roy Batty in *Blade Runner* in cinema; or, focusing on television fiction, from Number Eight Boomer in *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi, 2004-09), to the synthetic Ash of *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011—), or the group of rebel androids in *AKTA människor/Real Humans* (SVT1, 2012-14) and its American remake *Humans* (AMC, 2015—). In all of these works, the question of what makes us human, and issues involving the emotional limits of robotic creations, their uprising against their creators and other issues of a fertile metaphorical, anthropological and metaphysical reading are fundamental.

A similar movement can be found surrounding the figure of the vampire. The breadth of the academic literature on this metamorphosis (Kane; Abbott, *Celluloid Vampires*; Clements; Silver & Ursini) pinpoints how the original evil vampire has been exorcised, and softened through a process of "Ricification"—an allusion to the *Vampire Chronicles* series of novels by Anne Rice—in which numerous blood-sucking creatures of the night have eliminated human blood from their diet altogether, sometimes substituting animal blood (Louis de Pointe du Lac in *Interview with the Vampire*) or synthetic drinks (*True Blood*, HBO, 2008-14) for the blood of their human prey. The "fangs of the night" are also found mixing in the most dynamic of social environments (the *Twilight* franchise) or even displaying the most enviable skin tone and physical figures, such as the brothers Stefan and Damon Salvatore in *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW, 2009—).

This updating of the bloodsucker into someone harmless and cool has led Tenga and Zimmerman to state that "the zombie has surpassed the vampire as a source of horror and revulsion because the vampire has become so 'civilised' that it needs an alter ego to bear the burden of true monstrosity" (76). Aldana sees in the corpse as a source of abjection one of the reasons for the differences in the reception that the zombie and the vampire have enjoyed; the body of the latter circumvents corruption and decay, so that "their capacity to stay pristine and untouched by time has, in fact, had a crucial impact on their mainstreaming" (Aldana 61). However, as we are trying to demonstrate in this article, the zombie has in recent years also undergone a similar process of civilization and whitewashing.

3.2. From Bub to R. via Big Daddy⁵

Like many elements of popular culture, the zombie has been recycled in every format imaginable: from legendary music videos (*Thriller* by Michael Jackson, 1983) to recent television commercials (for the courier company FedEx, DieHard car batteries, and the Honda Civic automobile, for example), and even animation for children, such as the delicious and touching *Paranorman* (Fell & Butler, 2012), or a funny episode of *George of the Jungle* (“FrankenGeorge,” 1.11).

However, beyond these playful readings, it is important to note how the progressive humanization of zombies in films that make up the canon of the subgenre can be seen. In order to achieve this, it was necessary for the interstitial, the impure—to use the notion of horror in Carroll (55-6)—to cease to exist and a progressive recovery of the human form occur: that is, that beings capable of thinking, expressing will and showing emotions emerge to take the place of the classic figure of the zombie. Consequently, it is easier for the viewer to identify with and feel empathy towards the monster. Without being exhaustive, we can recall, once again, how George A. Romero was the first to open the way for this humanization in *Day of the Dead* (1985). The character of Bub, a pupil of Dr. Logan, had the ability to recall certain actions from when he was a living being (such as a military salute or shaving), to experience feelings of anger upon learning of the murder of his trainer, and even to display a basic cognitive ability (his capacity to be triggered into a rage and pursue Rhodes until he succeeds in killing him).

From the perspective of parody, the outcome of *Shaun of the Dead* “projects a future in which the horror is domesticated and integrated into quotidian living” (Boluk & Lenz 139). Giving an ironic twist to the slavish nature of the original, pre-Romero figure of the zombie, the closing of Wright’s film defuses any hint of a purulent bogeyman by inserting it into relief efforts or domestic help. Not for nothing does he have Ed, Shaun’s inseparable friend, close the film in the shed, extending one of the visual motifs from the beginning of the film: the two thirty-somethings wasting time playing videogames. Ed is now literally, and not just metaphorically as at the beginning of

⁵ A more detailed analysis of these film characters who gradually humanize the figure of the zombie can be found in Bishop (*American Zombie Gothic* 158-96; and *How Zombies Conquered* 163-79).

the film, a zombie. A similar use—as servants—awaits the zombies that have been domesticated in *Fido* (Currie, 2006), a Canadian zombedy set in the Fifties.

In 2005, with *Land of the Dead*, Romero returned to the subgenre that had made him most popular. This time, the plot is situated years after the outbreak, in a walled city that confronted with a fierce class struggle. In this environment, Romero presents zombies, led by former gas station attendant Big Daddy, capable not only of feeling sorry for the death of the other members of their “race” and anxious for revenge on the villain of the film (the treacherous ruler of the city), but also of organizing a quasi-military army to storm the fortress where the privileged of the city dwell.

In this evolution, the zombie continues to acquire an ever-greater ability to feel and act with free will (in the dramatic proposals by Romero), and even become someone who is well-regarded by humans (in the *Fido* and *Shaun* comedies). The next step in the genre’s innovation was to make the zombie into the object of romantic love—and this is what *Warm Bodies* accomplishes. Additionally, the story in this film is told from the point of view of the monster, named R. These precedents have paved the way for the arrival of the zombie in the broader, mass medium of television, and, what is of most interest to us here, in portrayals that continue delving into the humanization of a creature that, until recently, was exclusively viewed as terrifying and slimy.

4. TV Zombies: viscera become mainstream

This grotesque and bloody figure has become the common currency of television fiction. Beyond appearances on episodic classics like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997-2003), *Supernatural* (The BW/The CW, 2005–) or even *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989–), it was a British miniseries that first captured the *zeitgeist* of gore and recycled it for the general public on the small screen. Created by Charlie Brooker, *Dead Set* (E4, 2008) consists of five episodes which, full of hematologic excesses, slips glaringly into a critique of society and the media from its very first episode, in which a virus zombifies the entire UK, except for the isolated inhabitants of the house on the reality show Big Brother.

But the real punch was delivered, as we have noted previously, by one of the most successful series of the last decade: *The Walking Dead*. The AMC epic successfully updated the classic tropes of the subgenre: a mob of slow, hungry zombies; post-apocalyptic

scenarios; explicit violence; the collective imaginary of fear; the Other (human) as a threat; the openness of the text to political readings; and a plot involving the impossibility of escape and the search for fragile refuge. In *The Walking Dead's* wake, a number of other TV fictions have appeared: *Z Nation* (Syfy, 2014–) is an approximation to the classic formula, albeit with an absurd script and sometimes self-parodying tone; or *Helix* (Syfy, 2014-15), which presents a group of scientists stranded in an Arctic research station, where a virus is infecting their workers. This trend has continued to adopt innovative points of departure that provide new horizons for the genre, as we will see below.

4.1. *In the Flesh*: guilt and identity politics

Following a civil war against the zombies, humans have emerged victorious and society has managed to partially cure the state of the “rabids”—as they are called in this British TV series—and categorize it as a chronic disease. They have been confined to enormous health centers where physicians, biologists, and psychiatrists treat those affected by “Partially Deceased Syndrome;” when they are “cured,” they are sent back home to resume their former lives. The series explores, therefore, themes such as returning home to a family that has no instruction manual for the return of the dead; the confrontation with a hostile environment, in a small town that had created a militia to fight the savages; and, above all, the teenaged drama of someone who cannot find his place in the world. It is no coincidence that one of the first scenes shows us the protagonist receiving—as if he were a patient with depression—a kind of therapy in which the physician-scientist tries to convince him of his lack of guilt, and having to go out into the world as soon as possible: “That’s exactly why you’re ready: you’re feeling!” The “emotional culture” which we cited earlier is presented here explicitly as a catalyst: what makes the character socially adept, even acceptably human, is his ability to feel.

Shortly afterwards, when Kieran expresses his fear that his parents will not accept him because he is a “rotter” and has killed people, the doctor forces him to repeat to himself a phrase that dispels the stigma of everything he has done, even of his own nickname, “zombie:” “I am a Partially Deceased Syndrome sufferer. . . . And what I did in my untreated state was not my fault” (1.1). This scene from the pilot makes clear that the “rabids” who were defeated by the humans retain their memories of the barbaric actions

committed after rising from their graves, which burdens their social and family reintegration with additional layers of guilt and shame. As Abbott has noticed, proposals like this one on BBC Three are symptomatic of the contradictory relationship that Western society maintains with death:

If, as Gorer and Kameron argue, contemporary society is uncomfortable with the reality of death, preferring to keep “death out of our sight” (Kameron 30) and avoid the hard truths of death and decomposition through denial, the zombie narrative forces both the audience and the characters to face this reality through the zombie’s corpse-like appearance, maintaining the evidence of its death. (“Loss is Part” 164-5)

So, in *In the Flesh*, for example, Kieran still has the scars from when he cut his wrists and needs, like all rehabilitated zombies, contact lenses and makeup to simulate an outwardly human appearance. That is, differences are concealed in order to appear normal, which leads to Amy’s revolt in the first season, and that of Simon, one of the leaders of the “Undead Liberation Army,” in the second. The zombies of *In the Flesh* not only struggle to regain their individuality, but to demonstrate it in the social sphere. In this sense, the series rejects the mass, assimilatory drive that characterizes the traditional zombie narrative: that of a creature seeking to infect others with the radical depersonalization to which it has succumbed. However, although this may sound paradoxical, the plot transforms Kieran’s initial aspiration to externalize his own personal identity into the expression of a collective identity.

For this reason, beyond the subsidiary, symbolic function horror fiction can have on the viewer by naturalizing death, *In the Flesh* also demonstrates the current validity of what has been called identity politics. As Carolyn D’Cruz writes, in *identity politics*⁶ “markers such as gender, race, sexuality, class, and nation attempt to maintain their grounds as fundamental organising principles from which to position theoretical perspectives and political strategies for changing relations of powers” (2); political strategies that necessarily require visibility in order to achieve the political goals of one group or another.

⁶ “Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination” (Heyes).

Thus, according to the open work that characterizes the subgenre, Dominic Mitchell, the creator of the series, deploys a premise where allegories can range from the difficulties of the conflict in Northern Ireland or post-traumatic stress, to racism, homophobia, AIDS or euthanasia. It is no coincidence that, in the first season, the three characters most affected by “Partially Deceased Syndrome” are a soldier killed in Afghanistan, a victim of leukemia and an unstable young man who committed suicide. That is, in all three cases, the lives of the now resurrected and cured had violent, agonizing, or unexpected deaths. In any case, the ex-zombies are outsiders; people who fall outside what is considered normal. The series itself strives to present them in an environment that welcomes visitors with hostility, where the prevailing prejudice, hatred and social humiliation in the second season, for example, forces everyone to go through a course in social reintegration, perform community work and wear phosphorescent vests reading “I am a Partially Deceased and I’m giving back [what I’ve taken away from society].” This oppression, which may be real or perceived, is what allows us to connect *In the Flesh* with the contemporary trend of identity politics: the self is, above all, defined by its collective features, assiduously linked to victimization, and a political agenda guided by feelings rather than by reason.

4.2. *Les Revenants*: mourning and the *unheimlich*

Clearly, including here this mysterious and hypnotic story set in a small town in the French Alps creates taxonomic problems. The revenant is not a zombie; however, as part of the evolution and domestication of the living dead, the French series is a step in the same direction. As explained in the *Encyclopedia of the Zombie: The Walking Dead in Popular Culture and Myth*, the revenant (sometimes referred to as the revenging revenant) is “[t]he form of the ghost which most resembles the zombie. . . . This reanimated creature is typically the corpse of a deceased person who returns from the dead to haunt the living, usually the individual(s) who wronged the person while in life” (Fonseca 110).

The Canal Plus France series, which underwent a failed remake entitled *The Departed* (2015) on the US network A&E, and which shares a similar premise with *Resurrection* (ABC, 2014–), draws upon this creature to establish a reflection on the sorrow of absence and mourning the death of loved ones. *Les Revenants* possesses an enigmatic, fascinating and poetic style that departs from the

traditional visual elements of the horror genre. At the same time, its schematized plot connects with the genre's typical tropes; what changes is the deliberately ambiguous way it confronts the prodigy of the dead returning in body and soul.

As Jowett and Abbott explain, this is one of the elements that differentiates the cinematographic narrative from the televised one: instead of focusing on the shock, and the repeated and explicit spread of horror, the expanded story allows for the exploration of issues such as the collective fears and emotional responses of the characters to paranormal, horrific, or supernatural events (31-55). In a metaphysical movement similar to the one later used in *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014—), *Les Revenants* uses the inexplicable to explore family ties, the desire for motherhood, post-traumatic stress, the validity of religious faith or the weight of the past. Consequently, with *Les Revenants* the figure of the risen veers from a social and political interpretation to a deeply intimate and psychological reading.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the *mise-en-scène* aspires to the precious aesthetic smoothness of melodrama while the traditional shocking elements of the horror genre remain virtually absent. In fact, despite the disturbing nature of aggressive *revenants* such as Milan, graphic violence seldom emerges in the series. Zombie iconography is also sparsely employed: Camille's decomposition at the end of the first season (1.8); the silent and gregarious nature of the group of undead who, in the second season, are on the other side of the flood; the brutal kicks Adèle receives in her stomach (2.1) from the child she conceived with Simon, who now feels like an aberration; and, above all, the guts of Sandrine being devoured by her daughter (2.8), in a direct visual reference to Romero's seminal *The Night of the Living Dead*.

Precisely as a result of its glacial pace, its refined style and its contempt for providing answers to mysteries, *Les Revenants* emphasizes its exploration of the emotions of loss and grief, and it does add some nuances to what Freud termed the uncanny (*unheimlich*): "That species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124). The characters who return from the grave maintain their appearance intact; they are "well known" and "familiar," without any external mark that distances the living from the *revenants*. On the one hand, the addition of this kind of emotional upheaval—being able to once more embrace a loved one believed to have been lost forever—allows the writers more latitude in playing with the characters' emotions.

But it also implies confronting the unfathomable mystery of their return from the dead, and the inability to discern the “us” from “them” implies a constant source of anxiety.

The return of Camille, Simon, Serge, Madame Costa, or the inexplicable presence of little Victor has almost nothing of the monstrous or threatening in it; on the contrary, they are not even aware of their own deaths, nor of the time that has passed, which supposes a painful surprise and sometimes unbearable contradiction for those who are once more able to enjoy their presence, long after having mourned their loss. The undead act as emotional engines: they bring up the past, stirring up guilt and remorse in the process (Pierre’s involvement in the murder of a child, the barbaric crimes of Serge); they complicate the course of present events (as happens with Adèle’s pregnancy and the death of Thomas); and determine the future, as evidenced by the redemption of Jérôme within his family, Lena and Claire’s situation, or the happy beach scene where we bid farewell to Julie and Victor.

Thus, *Les Revenants* confirms Abbott’s intuition: contemporary horror TV aims “to evoke not the fear of pain and death to oneself but the fear of death to family and loved ones, thus triggering the trauma of loss, grief and mourning” (“Loss is Part” 158). A trauma that also benefits from the elasticity of the television format: the ability to have 20 hours to tell this story of dead returning allows a palette of much wider emotions for each character, providing emotional echoes, dramatic iterations and a long, narrative progress in the lives of this bunch of the undead and their loved ones. The six-month time jump that triggers the second season means *Les Revenants* doesn’t have to deal with the suffering of mourning interrupted by the enigmatic, as in the first season, but with the trauma in a community devastated by the scourge of the inexplicable.

Thus, with the revenants transformed into a kind of zombie existentialists, both the living and resurrected in this small Alpine village share the same eternal concerns: Who am I? Why am I here? Is there life beyond death? So, we hear Virgil instruct Camille about his identity, “How do you know you’re immortal?” (2.2); or Milan lamenting his violent personality, “I was mistaken. Death has no meaning” (2.8). For all the characters, the return of the past implies that emotionality, peppered with existential doubt, comes radically to the foreground in a vain attempt to make sense of the inexplicable.

4.3. *iZombie*: empathy and heroism

“It’s probably wrong that every time I see a dead body I think, ‘what the hell am I doing with my life?’” This thought, articulated in a voice-over by Olivia “Liv” Moore, the main character of *iZombie*, encapsulates many of the innovations that the series created by Ruggiero-Wright and Thomas offers with respect to the subgenre we are studying. The plot premise revolves around a young, dynamic medical student who suffers a zombie attack and, as a result, her everyday life, in both the professional and romantic spheres, changes drastically. She leaves her fiancé, becomes withdrawn and starts working in a morgue in order to have easy access to brains, which keep her “stable.” That is, zombies retain a normal appearance and personality, memory and intelligence... provided they do not neglect their diet of human brains. In fact, *iZombie* is not “a show about zombies, but rather a show about people *trying not* to turn into zombies after they have been infected” (Brown). Actually, this produces the series’ first break with the canon of zombie narratives: the evil of the myth can be contained. As was the case in the humanized vampires of *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*, Liv has found a formula for controlling her wild, bloody impulses.

This lack of cannibalistic violence—an integral part of series such as *The Walking Dead*—is no coincidence. *iZombie* airs on The CW, a youth-and-teen-oriented public network, responsible for series such as *Smallville* (2001-11), *Gossip Girl* (2007-12), or *Arrow* (2012—). The network has traditionally been accused of offering up shows with excessively melodramatic touches, aimed at the broadest possible audience in their morality. *iZombie*, therefore, usually opts for black humor, virtually parodying its most potentially bloody situations, while facilitating its audience’s identification with the zombie protagonist in choosing an attractive young actress, Rose McIver.

The use of voice-over also presents a self-aware zombie, using this cinematographic device to make the viewer complicit in the intimate doubts and problems of the creature in adapting to its new condition. Nor is this the only narrative resource it shares with *Warm Bodies*. In Levine’s film, R. falls in love with Julie after she has eaten her boyfriend’s brains. In an analogous way, in *iZombie* the brains stolen from the morgue on which Liv feeds allow her to develop an extreme form of empathy: she has flashbacks from the memories of the dead, sharing their skills and even adopting certain personality traits from the offal she has just consumed. This converts the CW series into a psychological thriller *stricto sensu*: every brain serves to start a new case each week. Liv works with the police, hiding her

knowledge of the secrets of this or that victim under the excuse that she possesses psychic powers. This revolutionizes the genre completely: the zombie, a mythical figure of terror in the sixties, was previously pure animal instinct, incapable of feeling; here it has been transmuted into a being that can literally take on the minds and souls of others. It can recall their memories, use their skills and feel their affections. This radical metamorphosis contradicts Tenga and Zimmerman's assertion (76), which was cited above: the zombie is no longer outdoing the vampire as a source of fear and disgust; on the contrary, it is imitating it in its socially-positive, civilizational, and inclusive process.

Because the other grand innovation of *iZombie* is the introduction of yet another 180-degree turn in zombie morality: it's not just that it is no longer the villain of the story—something that other projects have conjured up, as we have already discussed in these pages—but that here it is directly cast as the hero, even possessing some empathetic abilities approaching superheroism. The parallel is such that the series even emulates a standard trope in the comics' universes of Marvel and DC Comics: Liv enjoys the complicity of a confidant, Doctor Ravi Chakrabarti, who knows her secret identity. From those grotesque, violent, and lawless hordes has emerged a beautiful superheroine, capable of solving the most intricate cases, thanks precisely to her status as one of the living dead.

5. Conclusion

As we have tried to show throughout these pages, the zombie, not only in cinema but also on television, is being tamed and humanized, transformed from being the monstrous and nauseating horror device that defined its essential nature for decades. Three elements go hand in hand in this change: first, the innovative logic of a particularly fertile time on television and the need to overcome mere shock, in order to engage viewers in a more emotional, and therefore lasting, way. Second, the persistence of a dynamic proper to artistic genres in which innovation is a vital necessity. And finally, the omnipresence of an emotional culture that allows even the greatest taboos to act as vehicle for therapy, bereavement and grief.

To illustrate the transition of the zombie, our article has detailed how the undead are presented in three, successful contemporary television series. *In the Flesh* neutralizes the emotion of guilt and demands individuality while making a commitment to collective

identity to portray “the rabid” as a denunciatory allegory of various social ills. In *Les Revenants*, meanwhile, the boundaries between life and death are diluted to construct a story—sometimes sinister, always melancholy—in which the wounds of loss, grief, and bereavement can never heal. Finally, the juvenile and friendly offering, *iZombie*, subverts the myth of the undead, marrying it with the heroism and generosity of its protagonist. Liv is infected, but far from generating terror and repulsion, she becomes a key figure in fighting crime, injustice and seeking the common good.

After analyzing these examples in depth, in which zombies embrace all the characteristics of contemporary emotional culture, it seems that the witty phrase of Alessandra Stanley with which we opened this article (“Zombies are from Mars, vampires are from Venus”) is no longer relevant. We will have to find newer, more horrifying monsters on the red planet of the horror genre, now that even zombies demand hugs and get prescriptions for anti-depressants to turn around the blues.

Works Cited

- Abbott, Stacey. *Celluloid Vampires: Life After Death in the Modern World*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.
- _____. "Loss is Part of the Deal: Love, Fear and Mourning in TV Horror." *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series*. Ed. Alberto N. García. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 155-71.
- Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Baudry, Leo. *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002.
- Bishop, Kyle W. "Dead Man Still Walking: Explaining the Zombie Renaissance." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2009, pp. 16-25.
- _____. *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.
- _____. *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture. The Mutifarious Walking Dead in the 21st Century*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015.
- Boluk, Stephanie, and Wylie Lenz. "Infection, Media, and Capitalism: From Early Modern Plagues to Postmodern Zombies." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2010): 126-47.
- Brown, Cameron. "iZombie Season 1 Review Is This a Zom-com?" *Couch Potato Psychology*. 15 November 2015. Web. 3 July 2016.
- Browning, John Edgar. "Survival Horrors, Survival Spaces: Tracing the Modern Zombie (Cine)Myth." *Horror Studies* 2.1 (2011): 41-59.
- Carrington, Victoria, Jennifer Rowsell, Esther Priyadarshini, and Rebecca Westrup, eds. *Generation Z. Zombies, Popular Culture and Educating Youth*. Singapore: Springer, 2016.
- Carroll, Noël. "The Nature of Horror." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46.1 (1987): 51-59.
- Clements, Susannah. *The Vampire Defanged: How the Embodiment of Evil Became a Romantic Hero*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011.
- Clough, Patricia Ticineto, and Jean O'Malley Halley. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- D'Cruz, Carolyn. *Identity Politics in Deconstruction: Calculating with the Incalculable*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008.
- Fonseca, Anthony J. "Ghosts." *Encyclopedia of the Zombie: The Walking Dead in the Popular Culture and Myth*. Eds. June Michele Pulliam and Anthony J. Fonseca. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014. 109-110.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.
- García, Alberto N. "Prozac para zombies. La sentimentalización contemporánea del muerto viviente en la televisión." *Brumal. Revista de investigación sobre lo Fantástico* [Online]. 4. 1 (2016): 13-34.

- García Martínez, Alejandro, and Ana Marta González. "Emotional Culture and TV Narratives." *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series*. Ed. Alberto N. García. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 13-25.
- González, Ana Marta. "Introduction: Emotional Culture and the Role of Emotions in Cultural Analysis." *The Emotions and Cultural Analysis*. Ed. Ana Marta González. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 1-15.
- Heyes, Cressida. "Identity Politics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2014 Edition)*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. 2014. Web. 20 June 2016.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. "Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 1-20.
- Hubner, Laura, Marcus Leaning, and Paul Manning, eds. *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave, 2015.
- Jeffries, Stuart. "The Superb *In the Flesh* is a Timely Allegory of Racism, Intolerance—and Zombies." *The Guardian* 5 May 2014. Web. 21 June 2016.
- Jowett, Lorna, and Stacey Abbott. *TV Horror: Investigating the Dark Side of the Small Screen*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2013.
- Kane, Tim. *The Changing Vampire of Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Growth of a Genre*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006.
- Keith Grant, Barry. *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*. London: Wallflower, 2007.
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet. *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.
- Mellor, Louisa. "In *The Flesh*: Celebrating BBC Three originals." *Den of the Geek*. 1 January 2016. Web. 20 June 2016.
- Neale, Steve. "Genre and cinema." *Popular Television and Film*. Ed. Tony Bennett. London: BFI Publishing, 1981. 6-25.
- Poniewozik, James. "Review: In *The Returned*, the French Zombie Drama Deepens." *The New York Times* 28 October 2015. Web. 24 June 2016.
- Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981.
- Silver, Alain, and James Ursini. *The Vampire Film: From Nosferatu to True Blood*. 4th ed. updated. Montclair, NJ: Limelight, 2011.
- Stanley, Alessandra. "The Walking Dead: The Undead Are Undaunted and Unruly." *The New York Times* 28 October 2010. Web. 21 June 2016.
- Tenga, Angela, and Elizabeth Zimmerman. "Vampire Gentlemen and Zombie Beasts: A Rendering of True Monstrosity." *Gothic Studies* 15.1 (2013): 76-87.
- Tompkins, Joe. "The Cultural Politics of Horror Film Criticism." *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 12.1 (2014): 32-47.
- Van Der Werf, Todd. "In the Terrific New Horror Series *The Returned*, the Monster is an Emotion." *The A.V. Club*. 30 October 2013. Web. 14 June 2016.

Verevis, Constantine. "Redefining the Sequel. The Case of the (Living) Dead." *Second Takes: Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel*. Eds. Carolyn Jess-Cooke and Constantine Verevis. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010. 11-30.