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Undeath in Paradise: The Humanity of the Zombie in (Religious) Utopias

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Abstract

The words 'utopia' and 'zombie' are likely to conjure up strong images in the mind of the reader. The first makes one think of perfection, of happiness, of something new and better; the other, of the monstrous, of death and decay. Despite the fact that these images are arguably the most common, one can question their validity: can it be said that utopias are always perfect, and are the undead always monstrous? In this paper, I aim to explore the concepts relating to both utopias and zombies and the possible connections between the two, including a reading of the undead in light of the ultimate utopia: Paradise. In the light of these analyses, I propose a more positive approach to the figure of the zombie, which will be discussed as a counterpoint to the commonly held views of (religious) utopias.

Keywords : utopia, dystopia, Christianity, Revelation, Paradise, Second Coming, zombie, post-zombie

"They're us, that's all. When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth." - Peter in Dawn of the Dead

"It is hard for us here to believe what we are reporting to you, but it does seem to be a fact." - Newscaster in Night of the Living Dead

A man, dressed in an old, torn and dusty suit, is seen in the distance, staggering between the tombstones as he makes his way towards the two young people, who have come to the cemetery to visit their father's grave. They notice the man, but make fun of him; to them, the figure is not dangerous. Until he attacks them. Part of the opening sequence of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), it was in this film that audiences were introduced to the now iconic figure of the shambling, flesh-eating undead. Cinemagoers saw the dead come back to life, crawling out of the earth as if it were Judgement Day. These creatures may have looked human, but were unmistakably evil, attacking and feeding on anything they could find. This negative image of the zombie existed in horror media before Romero's reinvention of the narrative in the shape of the voodoo zombi of Haitian origins, and this vision has persisted ever since. The undead are the monstrous Other and perhaps the ultimate threat to humanity: as their numbers grow, they replace and incorporate humankind as new people are added to the ranks of the zombie. These beings may appear human, but they are dangerous and should be avoided at all cost. It seems indeed easy to apply a reading to this monster that shows them in a negative light and although the number of interpretations of the undead has grown over the years, the concept of the Other, of a being that has lost itself and is only capable of mindless feeding, has persisted. What I aim to offer here are some ideas on different interpretations of the undead, most notably a more positive reading. Film makers and academics alike have almost universally presented the zombie as a monstrous Other, something which should be avoided and killed. Any relation to the perfection of a (religious) utopia would therefore appear impossible, yet it is the potential of the undead to be seen as more than brainless monstrosities that I wish to address here. What I would like to put forward is a more positive approach to the figure of the zombie, ultimately arguing that the undead may be the only way in which humanity can achieve Paradise. In order to facilitate such a discussion, I will start by examining the terminology used. Reference has already been made to images of perfection and monstrosity, respectively, and it will be beneficial to explore the concept of both utopia and the zombie in more detail, before moving on to a discussion of the idea of the perfect undead.

Of the New Island of Utopia

The term 'utopia' was first used by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 book *Utopia* , describing the ideal society of an island somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. Although multiple readings of the concept are possible (and some of these will be explored throughout this piece), the most common association is that of a good, even perfect, world, as described by Lyman Tower Sargent: "Perfect, perfection, and their variants are freely used by scholars in defining utopias" ("Three Faces" 9). The word utopia represents the idea of an ideal, the image of a perfect world, or at least, a perfect society. This positive reading is inherent to the word itself, which is used "to allude to imaginary paradisiacal places" (Vieira 4), yet at the same time contains a contrast based around its Greek roots: "The basis for the perennial duality of meaning of utopia as the place that is simultaneously a non-place (utopia) and a good place (eutopia)" (Vieira 5). The place may be an ideal one, but its existence is ultimately impossible.

This emphasis on the tension between good and non-place, the illusion of perfection, has translated into the ways in which utopias and utopian literature can be approached. Vieira offers a brief summary of these types of thinking, which is worth quoting at some length:

> *(1) the content of the imagined society (i.e., the identification of that society with the idea of 'good place', a notion that should be discarded since it is based on a subjective conception of what is or is not desirable, and envisages utopia as being essentially in opposition to the prevailing ideology); (2) the literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized…; (3) the function of utopia…; (4) the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in (utopia is then seen as a matter of attitude). (6)*

Of note are Vieira's assertions about the imaginary state of the utopia, of its emphasis on fiction, as opposed to any concrete place. Within this lurks the idea of desire, of the creation of a world as one would like to see it. Utopia is not-here, not-now, better-than-now. It positions itself as a counterpoint for the current state of the society the author finds themselves in, yet the images and associations will always be positive ones: "Utopia is then to be seen as a matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives" (Vieira 7). These different possibilities are something worth noting: ideas on what a utopia is or should be like abound and depend only on the imagination of

the author. Yet despite the fact that it is imagined, utopia is still the ideal: who, at any one point, may not have wished they lived somewhere else, somewhere better? In *The Concept of Utopia* , Ruth Levitas draws attention to the process of creation of the fictive ideal:

> *Utopia expresses and explores what is desired; under certain conditions it also contains the hope that these desires may be met in reality, rather than merely in fantasy. The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire – the desire for a better way of being. It involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved. (191)*

Rather than discussing the realization and actualization of perfection, Levitas argues that utopian literature seems to concern itself with the *desire* for something better. The important factor in her discussion is that utopianism concerns itself with something which is actively wanted, rather than simply wished for. This longing is formulated differently by Sargent, who approaches the phenomenon of utopianism as "social dreaming – the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" ("Three Faces" 3). In Levitas, a description similar to Sargent's idea of social dreaming can be found: "Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that. The construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality, takes place in one form or another in many cultures" (1). It is a coming together of people in order to live together in a new way, as Sargent explains: "[A utopia] must be a society – a condition in which there is human (or some equivalent) interaction in a number of different forms and in which human beings (or their equivalent) express themselves in a variety of ways" ("Three Faces" 7). Ultimately, then, utopias are the fictionalized idea of an ideal society, depicting a world, or part of a world, in which humans live together in peace and happiness. It is the desired state – that which is actively wished for by the author; the utopia may simply be *somewhere else* , somewhere not here, but it will always be something better. Indeed, each of the authors I have referred to uses a similar kind of language, of desire, of hope, of the wish for something better, albeit fictional. Perhaps the concept of utopia could be described as a thought experiment, as a means of expressing a specific set of ideas in a specific way. Utopia is the

ideal as created and imagined by us, by humans. It is the world as we want it to be, and based on our background and cultural context, it may take on any variety of shapes.

Given this emphasis on a good, albeit imagined place, it is questionable whether such fantasy of perfection would include the living dead. The concept of the zombie is one loaded with negative connotations. At first glance, it would appear impossible to link any kind of undead monstrosity to the imagined ideal of the utopia. The iconic figure of a shambling, rotting corpse is the most persistent of them all, and it is this monster and its interpretations which requires closer attention.

"They're coming to get you, Barbra..."

In order to offer an adequate reading of the undead, it will be necessary to pay some attention to the figure of the zombie and the ways in which it has developed. A (very) brief history of the creature, as described by Boluk and Lenz, paints a picture of a specific kind of monster:

> *Responding to the specific technological and cultural anxieties of each historical era, the evolution of the modern figure of the zombie can be roughly divided into three generations: the Haitian voodoo zombie, George Romero's living dead, and the pathologized, infected humans who behave as if they were living dead. . . . (3; emphasis in original)*

The zombie has always been the subject, rather than the object, as argued by Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry: "In its history, and in its metaphors, the zombie is most often a slave" (87). The zombie started out as the zombi of Haitian legends, a person who may not be dead, but rather controlled by the powers of another. In its adoption by George Romero and American popular culture, its role began to change: "In its passage from zombi to zombie, this figuration that was at first just a somnambulistic slave singly raised from the dead became evil, contagious, and plural" (Lauro and Embry 88). The quiet worker would now attack, infect and reproduce itself. As a result, the figure seems to gain in power yet at the same time remains mindless and is often equated with the dark side of capitalism: "As a nonconscious, consuming machine, the cinematic zombie terrifies because it is a reflection of modern-day commercial society, propelled only by its need to

perpetually consume" (Lauro and Embry 99). It is the incarnation of Romero's mindless, shambling undead, rather than the voodoo zombi, which I will be referring to in this paper.

What becomes clear from this brief discussion are the changes that have occurred to the zombie and what it represents since its first appearances. One thing, however, always remains at the forefront: zombies, in a way, are the most human of all the classic monsters. As Simon Pegg argues: "Where their pointy-toothed cousins [vampires and werewolves] are all about sex and bestial savagery, the zombie trumps all by personifying our deepest fear: death. Zombies are our destiny writ large" (n.pag.). Zombies are death personified: the zombie body is deceased, yet still moving; often, it is wounded, yet these wounds have no consequences. The form is human, but the behaviour and appearance is not, instead showing us what we will become: rotting and revolting. It is this process that is described in detail by Fred Botting:

Zombies are distinctly abject figures in form and effect: dead, rotting flesh, ripped skin, mutilated features, broken limbs and bodies that continue to move as though they were alive, these nonbeings are without any redeeming features – compassion, feeling, intelligence, or wit – and remain intent on reducing every living thing to their level, feasting relentlessly and mechanically on the blood, brains and bowels of other beings. Just as one cannot love one's abjection, casting it out in order to survive, so one cannot love one's zombie, contrary to some critical assertions. (187)

Zombies are closer to us than any other monster, yet as Botting points out, this is not a desirable state of being. The transformation from human to zombie is a step down the evolutionary ladder, an unmaking. Becoming undead signifies not only a change in state from living to dead, but ultimately a loss of what makes us human:

Humanity defines itself by its individual consciousness and its personal agency: to be a body without a mind is to be subhuman, animal; to be a human without agency is to be a prisoner, a slave. The zombie(i)/e is both of these, and the zombie(i)/e (fore)tells our past, present, and future. (Lauro and Embry 90)

The shape might be human, and they may still move upright (if possible), but there is no consciousness. Loss of self, of agency, is inherent to becoming a zombie: "To succumb is to become, and once you have become a zombie, self is lost irrevocably to the other" (Boon 35). According to Lauro and Embry, it is this aspect that makes the zombie so frightening a creature:

> *Nowhere is this drama more acutely embodied than in the model of the zombie attack: for the zombie is an antisubject, and the zombie horde is a swarm where no trace of the individual remains. . . . There is the primary fear of being devoured by a zombie, a threat posed mainly to the physical body, and the secondary fear that one will, in losing one's consciousness, become a part of the monstrous horde. (89)*

Yet, although a human may become a zombie, the primal difference, the loss of self, of the individual, of the rational, creates a rift which cannot be bridged, as Gerry Canavan argues: "The audience for zombie narrative, after all, never imagines itself to be zombified; zombies are always other people, which is to say they are Other people, which is to say they are people who are not quite people at all" (432; emphasis in original). In fact, any interaction between the two is problematic: "The zombie's mutilation is not one we can easily imagine for 'ourselves,' however that 'we' is ultimately constituted; the zombie is rather the toxic infection that must always be kept at arm's length" (Canavan 433; emphasis in original). Canavan takes his point even further; interaction is not just problematic, but impossible: "Zombies – lacking interior, lacking mind – cannot look; they are, for this reason, completely realized colonial objects. Zombies cannot be recognized, accommodated, or negotiated with; once identified, they must immediately be killed" (437). Ultimately, there is no way in which the Other can be accepted or incorporated. The monster is only that, monstrous, and cannot be part of society. All it is capable of is hindering any sense of community, of attacking civilisation from the inside. The idea of the ideal zombie seems counterintuitive: there is no goodness in the monstrous, nor any option for human survivors to build something in the wake of the apocalypse without continuously putting themselves in danger, let alone for this new construct to progress. In these scenarios, the survivors are simply being rather than living, improving. Zombie narratives are dystopian narratives, a warning of the real dangers that may befall humanity. They are not Paradise; they are the Apocalypse.

Is Big Brother Watching You?

It is this view of the zombie as monstrous Other that has dictated most of the academic discourse on the undead. Zombies may appear like us, yet ultimately there is no connection. Rather, the transformation into the undead signifies a loss of humanity and everything that comes with it: ideas of society, of community, of peaceful living. Through their existence, the undead oppose the ideals of the utopia.

Despite this, I would like to put forward that it is problematic to argue a complete separation between utopian and monstrous states. The first problem arises with the way in which utopias are most commonly presented, and how I discussed them at the beginning of this paper, as something which is uniformly positive. The desire for (an individual within) a society to find somewhere better and the dream of a perfect world are well-known assumptions, yet when returning to and expanding upon Sargent's words, this is exactly where the difficulties arise: "Perfect, perfection, and their variants are freely used by scholars in defining utopias. They should not be" ("Three Faces" 9). Rather, he posits that "[w]e hear that utopia is dead because it does in fact lead to totalitarianism" ("Three Faces" 25). In a later paper, he goes on to explain that "there are very few utopias in the corpus that can reasonably be described as 'perfect,' and most of those are in some version of heaven" ("What Is" 156). Perceptions of perfection are often deceptive: although the greater good is the ultimate aim, the way in which this is achieved might not be as desirable. The reasoning behind this is perhaps obvious, as described by Sargent:

> *A utopia is a blueprint of what the author believes to be a perfect society, which is to be constructed with no significant departure from the blueprint. It is perfect, and any alteration would lower its quality. But this is impossible because there is no such thing as a perfect society, and even if there were, it could not be constructed since it would require perfect people and we know there are no perfect people. ("Three Faces" 24)*

Perfection comes with requirements, and to meet these requirements, changes need to be made in order to accommodate the new world order. As Sargent argues, a specific society is in need of a

specific person to agree with its ideals and to work towards the greater good with questions so as to achieve and subsequently sustain the utopia. The difference between cultures and individuals will be a massive hurdle in this process, and adaptation is needed. The new world order needs new people, perfect people. It might just be possible to create this kind of person, yet violence may be the only way to achieve this:

Force will be necessary either because people question the desirability of the eutopia or because there is disharmony between the perfect blueprint and the imperfect people. Eutopians will not, and cannot, give up the vision because it is perfect, and people are perfectible even if not yet perfect. Life in a perfect society is best even for imperfect people because they will accept it as better or law (force) will impose it. (Sargent, "Three Faces" 24)

As a result, the ideal society is often a violent and strictly regulated one, yet if perfection and eternal happiness is the goal, the end always justifies the means.

A secondary issue in notions of utopia is the variety of forms the idea of 'a better world' can take. If one keeps in mind the idea that utopias are common to many civilizations, there are further implications as described by Sargent: "Every country, every culture, will have some way of social dreaming, dreaming about a better way of life, whether it be in the past, the future, after death, or whatever. This indicates that we must be ready to accept that utopias will not all look alike" ("What Is" 155). It is this idea that the title of this section refers to: what may seem ideal for one society will not be for the next; what is paradise for one, is hell for another; what is perfect for one person, is hopelessly flawed for another. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* , one of the most famous dystopian novels, the system of government led by Big Brother has created a society that is a utopia, shaped by those in positions of power; to them, it is a perfect system of order and regulation. How many of Orwell's readers, however, will be left unmoved by what we encounter as gross violations of human rights, when one is no longer able to think for oneself? In any scenario, the social dream has every chance to become a nightmare. Force has become a justifiable means to reach the ultimate end: a better world. Some form of ideal is achieved for someone, but how this comes out and, ultimately, what shape it takes, is often questionable. The greater good is not always what one wished for or the ideal that one desired.

Within the context of zombie narratives, it is not totalitarianism, but rather violence that becomes the driving force of much of the action. At first glance, these displays of force do not appear to achieve any perfect, or even liveable, state. The survivors of the infection are struggling to stay alive, frantically trying to keep the undead at bay through the use of any possible means. Yet utopia can be found within the apocalyptic dystopia, as is demonstrated by Emma Vossen in her paper "Laid to Rest: Romance, End of the World Sexuality and Apocalyptic Anticipation in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* ." Using Kirkman's work as her case study, Vossen argues that the comics have offered a view of the creation of a new world order within the bleakness of the zombie infection/invasion: "Instead of representing utopia as an unrealistically perfect place, these texts instead represent a future that can only be achieved through destruction of current society" (93). She argues that:

> *These dystopian zombie narratives no longer represent our dread that the world might end, and instead offer a fantasy in which we anticipate and invite the apocalypse, hoping that it will liberate or relieve us not only from our debt and more quotidian economic constraints, but also from our increasingly bleak looking future. . . . The post-apocalyptic world is one in which it is hard to take anything for granted. Having lost their quotidian luxuries and possessions, survivors are forced to acknowledge and appreciate the simple pleasures of companionship. (Vossen 90)*

Rather than complete destruction "[a]t some point in recent years, the end of the world stopped representing horror, and began representing hope" (Vossen 93). The apocalypse became a way to achieve true freedom from the pressures of life, whether social or financial, and its aftermath offers survivors a new way of life. What Vossen describes, then, is a vision of a new community which allows humanity different choices and a different basis for these decisions. Societal constraints and common perceptions no longer have the impact they once had, with accepted views changing as Kirkman's survivors adapt to their new state of being. Their plight remains and they are fighting for survival, but the world of the Walking Dead in which they now find themselves is, as Vossen argues, ultimately presented as the better option. The apocalyptic dystopia has gained some semblance of a utopia: a return to different times and values, to a way of thinking and acting which modern man has lost. Difficult times are ahead, difficult decisions need to be made, but maybe, underneath it all,

this is what humanity needs, and even desires. Yet despite the fact that this seems to signify a change as to what may constitute a new society and a better world, Kirkman's undead landscape is still centred on the humans. No matter how this new life might turn out, and how free this band of survivors has become from the pressures of their old lives (whether social, material or financial), their actions are taking place against the backdrop of the monstrous. Humans are fighting against the odds, and against the Other, to (re)establish their version of utopia, in which there is no place for the undead.

I am Dead, but It's Not So Bad

What I would like to put forward, however, is that the utopia-within-dystopia is not necessarily associated with the new communities created by the survivors, but rather to describe the state of being achieved by the undead. It is not the survivors, but the zombies who are living the social dream of a better society. Although Vossen presents a strong case in relation to Kirkman's work, the images she describes are still reminiscent of so many zombie movies. The situation of the survivors is wrought, far from ideal, and leads to continuous confrontations: between the undead and the living, and between the survivors themselves. Rather than following Vossen's image of the utopian dystopia, most zombie films show the remaining humans as the real monster. As argued by Paffenroth, the divide between living and living dead is often marginal: "The living and undead are repeatedly equated in these films, and where any comparison is made, it is usually to the detriment of the living, who are shown to be more cruel and deadly to their fellow survivors" (22). In her paper, she states that "[t]here is, in other words, nothing very complicated or mysterious, ultimately, about zombies" (19); they were human, and ultimately, they are still (part of) us. Reading the undead in this light, Paffenroth raises the question which state is more desirable, as the survivors "are constantly fighting each other as well as the living dead, who show no tension or disagreement among themselves" (20). It is the remaining humans who are a catalyst for violence, against the zombies and against themselves, using this to carve out a place in the new world order. Similarly, it can be argued that the zombies are trying to do the same.

In his conference paper "Searching for Redemption in the Withered Flesh of My Future Self," Lee Miller offers a new approach to the undead:

[Zombies] are a culture of inclusion. Everyone is welcome to join the zombie collective. . . . Compare this to the aggression and exclusivity of every survival group you've ever seen in any film. . . . Even after the world has ended, these groups are engaged in popularity contests as they are trying to survive. ("Searching" n.pag.)

Miller identifies the development of the zombie figure addressed in this paper and proposes a new type: the proto-zombie, "zombies that seem to know what they are, that yearn to be more, or perhaps less" ("Searching" n.pag.). Like Pegg, Miller emphasises the humanity of the zombie: "[I]t is not bent on revenge, it doesn't have an agenda, it bears no ill will, and is devoid of malice. As killing machines go, it is about as benevolent as they come" ("Introduction" 198). Instead of intentionally scheming and operating on ulterior motives, of trying to get something out of the situation for themselves, as is often the case with the survivors,

[z]ombies have taken a higher road, recognising that we are all the same under the skin, and anyway skin will soon be falling off and exposing us for what we are, so we might as well get along nicely. And what is fascinating to me is that all this harmonious coming together occurs after death. Once the breathing stops, the ability to see the bigger picture starts. ("Searching" n.pag.)

Rather than the distinction between us and Other, made by Canavan, there is no distinction, not beyond the one made by humans. The difference between the living and the living dead is one that we create, and it is here that a more positive view of the zombie can be constructed. In their loss of humanity, the undead may experience a loss of self, but it similarly liberates them of a set of distinctly human urges. A number of basic urges remain, to feed and to infect, yet issues of relationships, financial and material gain, feelings of jealousy and anger, are lost in the transformation. Where the survivors often lose out to their emotions and selfish needs, the zombie's loss of humanity creates a blueprint for a different kind of being. The monstrous loss of self instead offers a new outlook and new freedoms. Rather than the in-fighting and the rifts which exist amongst the human survivors, the undead signify a new beginning and approach to what it means to be human.

In Miller's analysis, the zombies are united, working together on an equal basis of a culture of inclusion. Although, as I have stated earlier, utopias can take on many different forms, the basic concepts of humans living side by side in harmony, of a society which is at peace in some way, are most likely universal. The way in which the equilibrium is achieved can be through the use of force, yet equilibrium is the goal, and, as Miller argues, it is something which the zombies have already achieved:

> *When seen from the outside, zombie attacks are an example of the importance of community, with sacrifice of the individual a regular price paid for the good of the group. . . . Zombies seem to instinctively sense that the only way for the group to survive is to set aside selfish needs, and instead appear to serve a collective need, however accidental this might be. ("Introduction" 197)*

It is here that a link can be created between the collective need of the undead and the concept of unity within the utopian society. Sargent, in particular, offers some ideas on the shape this better world should take, and who should inhabit it. He bases his views on the existence of an "intentional community," "a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some mutually agreed upon purpose" ("Three Faces" 14-15). This group "must share some project, values, goal, vision, or what have you" ("Three Faces" 15). It is easy to see Sargent's words reflected in Miller's description of the zombie community. Anyone who is turned will belong to this group, a group which continues to grow beyond boundaries of household, family, friends, instead forming a new unit. The undead continue to add, and need to add, as McGlotten and Jones argue: "Zombies are social monsters, and their monstrosity is a reflection of our own. Lone zombies are ineffective, comical rather than frightening. En masse, however, the zombie swarm is terrifying. Zombies reproduce socially itself as a kind of latent zymotic disease that threatens humanity's existence" (4). In order to be successful, the undead need to operate as a social community, with one common goal. Coming together and working together as an unintentional community, they become intentional in their quest to feed and to multiply.

In contrast to what Miller states, however, I would like to argue that such a quest is actively pursued, rather than the result of an accidental cooperation. From other readings it has become

clear that to become undead is to lose oneself and this issue indeed raises the question whether it is still possible to speak of Sargent's concept of an "intentional community" when referring to the living dead. Zombies do not discriminate, because they do not think about it; zombies work together because they simply do. Are zombies actively uniting, and are any decisions being made? Can any type of consciousness be ascribed to a mindless being? What I would like to put forward is that some agency remains indeed in the zombie, and to remind the reader of the solution offered as to how to deal with these monstrosities in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* : to remove the head and destroy the brain. Although the undead are arguably nothing more than shambling corpses, the idea that the only way to ensure their destruction is to sever any connection with the brain seems to presuppose that some neurological input still remains. The zombie brain is still active and continues to propel them forward. Basic instincts cause the undead to feed and to band together for protection, as if they were animals; even zombies know that there is strength in numbers. The new society of the living dead may not be built on communication and lofty political goals, yet an equilibrium is reached. Human urges and needs, concerns over relationships, finances and material gain, none of these matter any longer. In the loss of self, inherent in achieving the zombie state, societal constraints and distractions are lost. Like the force and violence necessary to achieve so many utopias, the bite of the zombie signifies the transition from the old world to the new, in which differences no longer matter. A young child, just able to walk, or an old woman, each becomes a contributing member to the zombie collective. Everyone is needed; no one is discounted as being 'outside' of what constitutes an upstanding member of society who is able to pull their weight. The undead band together and work together on an instinctual level; no one is discriminated against or excluded.

Take, eat; this is my body

(*Scofield Reference Bible* , Matthew 26:26)

What I would like to propose next is to take this reading of the zombie community one step further and to focus on a particular type of utopia: a religious one. As Sargent argues, "Death seems an odd way to achieve a good life" ("Three Faces" 13), yet as I have argued, this state of death, or rather undeath, can be a positive transformation and a necessary means to achieve the desired

better world. Within the context of religion, then, it is possible to suggest a reading of the zombie as a means to achieve what is often regarded as the ultimate state of utopia: Paradise. Following on from the problematic interpretations and readings of utopias as discussed earlier, the concept of religious utopia raises similar issues. As Sargent explains, due to the doctrine of original sin and the fall of man, "[f]or the Christian, apparent perfection must be flawed or even a delusion foisted upon unsuspecting people by Satan or the antichrist" ("What Is" 156). Because of this, "No Christian can believe perfection on this earth or in this life is possible before the second coming or the Millennium" ("What Is" 156). It is this second coming which is the goal, and after the loss of Eden, the only means by which Paradise can be achieved. Judgement Day and the destruction of the world as we know it in a final Apocalypse is the only way in which (some form of) Eden can be reached. The final utopia shall rise from destruction.

The clearest descriptions of the second coming and the return of Christ can be found in the last book of the Bible, Revelations. In it, the prophet John describes his visions, in which God showed him the return of Jesus Christ and the resulting judgement. The idea of reading these passages of the resurrected dead (or, indeed, the second coming of Christ) as a zombie narrative is not new. Pippin, in particular, presents an interesting analysis in her description of this new Christ:

> *Jesus is in this sense the king of the living dead, a revenant, at times a vampire, at other times a zombie roaming the future, gathering his zombie army from the dead for the final earthly battle. There is endless Parousia in the new testament – a Parousia that is almost, in the form of vivid apocalyptic dreams so real and to some, so desirable. (40.1)*

In this new form, Jesus has the same abilities a zombie might have, in that he can take over and remove the self of others: "The king of the undead can make us all, including our earth, like him, our subjectivity and uniqueness erased and reconstructed" (Pippin 40.1). As can be glanced from these quotations, and what rapidly becomes clear when reading Pippin's essay, the reading of biblical zombies is once more a negative one. Indeed, Pippin clearly states that she "question[s] the positive spin of the resurrection of the dead" (40.8), instead arguing that the risen dead are a different type of zombie invasion, which ultimately bring the monstrous to the realm of God, thus creating a form of the monstrous which is more dangerous than the familiar shambling figure: "The

biblical revenant live forever; zombies can be smashed in the head and destroyed" (Pippin 40.8). Christianity offers images of resurrection, yet these depictions are even more frightening than Romero's living dead.

Thornton, in his reading of the figure of zombie Jesus, questions this negativity within the religious view: "[E]ternal life in Christ is consistently presented as good and desirable, whereas the eternal undeath of the zombie . . . is invariably portrayed as unpleasant and undesirable" (28). The secular undead remain bad and monstrous, yet the Christian revenant in the form of Christ offers his followers a better existence in Paradise. However, as Thornton argues, the connection between Christianity and the undead goes beyond the Second Coming as described in Revelation. In his paper "Take, Eat, These Are My Brains: Queer Zombie Jesus," the author creates an interesting link between the flesh-eating habits of the zombie and the practice of the Eucharist: "In John particularly, eating Jesus' flesh is directly linked with life, eternal life, and resurrection into immortality. Like the undead zombie who must eat the flesh of the living, the Christian believer must eat the flesh of Jesus in order to be resurrected to eternal life" (24). Thornton posits that the common idea of Zombie Jesus, the Resurrected Christ, is a misnomer, as "[o]nly followers eat Jesus' flesh: Jesus himself does not eat anybody's flesh, but he gives his flesh to be eaten by others. All zombies, on the other hand, eat human flesh. In this instance, Christians have more in common with zombies than Jesus himself does" (30). Ultimately, however, Thornton seems to share Pippin's views: "Zombies' resurrection is no divine gift of eternal life, but a nightmarish twist . . . or perhaps even a divine punishment" (27). Zombie Jesus may be the ideal, but a simple zombie will remain a simple zombie, exemplifying the flesh-eating monstrous.

In light of what has been discussed so far, however, I would once more like to question the fact that the undead are universally coded as negative. Throughout his paper, Thornton draws certain connections between Christian believers and zombies which go beyond ritual: "For both zombies and Christians, earthly distinctions and identity categories fall away, replaced by an overriding common identity and the pursuit of a common goal" (32). Here a reflection of Sargent's intentional communities and Miller's cooperative undiscriminating zombie can becomes apparent. In these readings, zombies can be seen as a new form of believer, bound together by a single goal of consumption of the flesh in order to bring about rebirth and thus reaching a higher state of being.

The transformation of the physical body is the ritual put into practice and the turning from living to living dead becomes something very real, allowing new souls to join the collective of the undead. Rather than a mindless horde with no sense of self, the zombie is preparing for judgement in its endless hunger for conversion.

In light of this, Revelations and its narrative of resurrection offers an interesting new reading of the risen dead. In chapters 20 and 21, John speaks of two resurrections: firstly, of "the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God" (*Scofield Reference Bible* , Rev. 20:4), who are to reign with Christ for a thousand years. Secondly, there is the process of the judgement, in which John "saw the dead, small and great, stand before God. . . . And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works" (*Scofield Reference Bible* , Rev. 20:12-13). This process of resurrection and judgement gives way to "a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (*Scofield Reference Bible* , Rev. 21:1) and to the holy city of New Jerusalem, which descends from heaven. Here, God shall dwell with those who have been brought back and take care of them, a new world order in which "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (*Scofield Reference Bible* , Rev. 21:4). John is shown the city by God and able to describe it in some detail, with the final assertion that "there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither worketh abomination, or a lie" (*Scofield Reference Bible* , Rev. 21:27). In New Jerusalem, there is a place for the risen dead, but not for the abject and the monstrous: in their resurrection, the undead have been made whole and have been accepted into Paradise, where they will reside with God. Through the violence and force of the zombie apocalypse, the dead shall rise and a new earth shall be created. It is the transformation and conversion to the legion of the living dead which will allow humankind to free themselves from the bonds of society and selfish needs, and ultimately offer us salvation.

We ARE the Walking Dead

Although throughout this piece I have argued for a positive reading of the zombie as perhaps the only way in which utopia and ultimately Paradise can be reached, one issue still needs to be

addressed. The analysis offered here is based almost solely around Romero's image of the zombie as the living dead, the shambling figure. Throughout its existence, however, the undead have always developed, moving from voodoo slave to living dead, and from living dead to infected aggressor. In some examples of recent zombie media, the undead take on a different role: rather than a mindless monster, a number of books and films have shown what could be seen as the human zombie, a zombie which retains or recovers a semblance of humanity. Although other examples exist,[1] the process appears to have started with *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004), the zombie romantic comedy (or zomromcom) starring Simon Pegg and Nick Frost as best friends Shaun and Ed, fighting their way through a zombie invasion. After numerous hardships, Ed gets bitten and turns as a result. At the end of the film, Shaun can be seen sneaking into the shed at the back of his house. It is here that he keeps Ed, now a zombie, to still be friends and engage in the activities they both enjoyed when Ed was still human (primarily videogames). Despite being a monster, Ed retains some of his old characteristics and capabilities, enough for Shaun to regard and treat him as the friend he used to have (albeit one he has to keep chained in the shed). A similar moment occurs when Shaun's stepfather, Phillip, is revealed to be bitten and later turns. He and Shaun settle their differences before Phillip turns into a zombie, and rather than being shot, he is left behind. Similarly, the film *Colin* (Price, 2008), reportedly shot with a L45 budget, takes a different approach and shows the zombie inside us. Title character Colin joins the ranks of the undead early on in the film and the viewer is then offered a glimpse of the world from the perspective of the undead. He is, however, a zombie with distinctly human characteristics, who seems to remember faces and people from his previous life, following a girl who resembles his friend Laura and ultimately finding his way to Laura's home. Yet *Colin* is not alone in this approach: Isaac Marion's novel *Warm Bodies* , released in 2010 and adapted into a film by Jonathan Levine in 2013, similarly draws attention to the idea of a possible cure. The story of *Warm Bodies* is told through the internal monologue of R, a male zombie in the early stages of decay. The now traditional need for cannibalism is described, and a reason is offered as to why a zombie always goes for the brain: it allows them to briefly relive the feelings, thoughts and memories of their victims. It will prove to be human emotions, in particular his love for the living girl Julie that ultimately cures R of his zombie-ism. The loss of humanity is not irreversible, and it is that exact same humanity that will revive the dead. The approach in the BBC miniseries *In the Flesh* (Campbell,

Thomas 2013) is more practical than the power of love. After a zombie outbreak, global governments have been able to isolate and find a cure for the virus, or at least, to suppress the violent urges that come with it. The undead exist together in rehabilitation facilities, where they get their medication, as well as group therapy, to deal with memories of their violent acts during the outbreak, with the ultimate goal to reintegrate them back into normal society. Zombies are returning to their humanity; the undead are returning to the living. The loss of self is abandoned in favour of regaining human needs and desires and a return to the community of the survivor, creating a new figure of the zom-vivor. One may question what this will mean for the ideals presented by the society of the undead as rebirth is replaced by reintegration. The transformation from zombie to human may relieve us of the urge to consume the flesh that would have led to resurrection.

The utopian state is the perfect state, a thought experiment based in fiction, in desire and in dreams of a different future. It offers a view of a better society for all, yet, as has been argued, it is often questioned at what cost this new world order comes about. Scholars such as Sargent have drawn a link between utopia and violence, between the new state of being and the means necessary to achieve it. The zombie state is both monstrous state and utopian state as, as Miller argues, the undead can be seen to form new communities, unintentionally creating intentional societies, and using what brain activity remains to band together towards a common goal. By contrast, the survivors in many of the classic zombie narratives reflect the imperfection of humanity and the commitment to selfish needs, which is listed by many as the downfall of utopia. Humankind is not perfect, and will need to be made perfect by force in order to achieve a better world: through the bite of the zombie, resurrection and a new world order can finally be achieved. The developments described in these 'human zombie' narratives, however, raise new questions: If zombies are able to once more become human, what will this mean for the utopian dream? In (partially) leaving the zombie state behind, will these individuals be the better for it, remembering the transformation and continue to work together, or will the newly changed undead become zom-vivors, with the same quarrels and hostilities as their human counterparts? In a similar vein, one can ask if it is possible to speak of the zombie state as a better one if it means a surrender to the monstrous and a loss of self: Is the utopia a utopia if it cannot be consciously experienced? Perhaps

the ultimate question is what the zombie state might offer those who become part of it. Ultimately, as Miller describes, the only difference between dead and undead is perception, and a similar argument is found in Vossen: "In these narratives, a beating heart is not enough to evince life. . . . [O]ne is never fully alive, or fully dead; they are instead a human existing somewhere in between these two extremes" (96). The Other could be monstrous, or it could be a reflection of (a better version of) ourselves. The loss of self, of society, and of the world will have impact, but what, one cannot say. As Emma Vossen argues, "This monstrous world overrun with the dead may initially seem daunting, but it may also be an improvement compared with the world as it currently exists" (105). Ultimately, perhaps, zombification is the only way for us to reach some form of Paradise and become a better monster.

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[1] George Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985), for example, features such a character: "Romero includes in this film a 'smart' zombie, Bub, who shows himself in many ways to be preferable to the more evil humans, Rhodes and Logan" (Paffenroth 21).