The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture
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   Danny Méndez

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   Andrew Shail

8 The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture
   Pop Goth
   Edited by Justin D. Edwards and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet
The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture
Pop Goth

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Contents

List of Figures vii
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: From Goth/ic to Pop Goth 1
JUSTIN D. EDWARDS AND AGNIESZKA SOLTYSIK MONNET

1 Love Your Zombie: Horror, Ethics, Excess 19
FRED BOTTING

2 Vampires, Mad Scientists and the Unquiet Dead: Gothic Ubiquity in Post-9/11 US Television 37
LINNIE BLAKE

3 Being Human? Twenty-First-Century Monsters 57
MONICA GERMANÀ

4 Gothic, Grabbit and Run: Carlos Ruiz Zafón and the Gothic Marketplace 71
GLENNIS BYRON

5 Bella’s Promises: Adolescence and (Re)capitulation in Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Series 84
RACHAEL MCLENNAN

6 “I’ll Be Whatever Gotham Needs Me to Be”: Batman, the Gothic and Popular Culture 96
AGNIESZKA SOLTYSIK MONNET

7 The Monstrous House of Gaga 114
KAREN E. MACFARLANE
Contents

8 Spectral Liturgy: Transgression, Ritual and Music in Gothic 135
  ISABELLA VAN ELFEREN

9 Under Their Own Steam: Magic, Science and Steampunk 148
  GAIL ASHURST AND ANNA POWELL

10 “Boo!” to Taboo”: Gothic Performance at British Festivals 165
  EMMA MCEVOY

11 “Forget Nu Rave, We’re into Nu Grave!”: Styling Gothic in the Twenty-First Century 182
  CATHERINE SPOONER

Contributors 195
Index 199
Figures

0.1 Poster of *Otto; or, Up with Dead People.* 7
0.2 Cover of The History Press’s *Haunted Birmingham* (2006). 11
2.1 Walter Bishop, *Fringe*’s mad scientist. 47
4.1 Advertisement in Sears’ zombie campaign. 72
4.3 Visiting Calle Santa Ana today. 80
6.1 Batman is often illustrated as a sculpted giant. 100
6.2 Bruce Wayne’s haunting eyes from the second origin story in 1948. 102
6.4 Wayne’s inspiration for the bat disguise (*Batman* 47, 1948) 108
9.1 Time Machine. 149
9.2 Clockwork Heart. 156
9.3 Simeon Marsh in the Gothic milieu of a Victorian prison cell at Lincoln Castle. 158
10.1 History as Gothic Spectacle: “Museums at Night.” 167
10.2 Bert Eke as Futter in Stuff and Things’ walkabout act “Futter’s Child.” 169
10.3 Sideshow Illusions’ restoration of Jon Gresham’s original 1950s Headless Lady Side-show. 172
10.4 Copperdollar’s “The Back of Beyond.” Photograph from the Glastonbury Festival website. 176
10.5 Festival-goers at Glastonbury’s “futuristic and dystopian wonderland.” Shangri-La. Photograph from the Glastonbury Festival website. 177
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Introduction
From Goth/ic to Pop Goth

Justin D. Edwards and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet

pop goth: A particular group of people that only dress and act gothic when it’s popular to do so. Hot Topic goes through certain “phases” in their merchandising. Sometimes they cater to the punk kids. Sometimes they cater to the emo kids. Sometimes they cater to the goth kids. But the goth kids I make reference to are not bona-fide goth kids. They are only goth kids when its their turn at Hot Topic. But when their turn ends and Hot Topic turns emo once again . . . they may in fact be normal kids, dressing in normal clothes and acting like normal kids act.


At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the expression “pop goth” has entered the lexicon of popular culture. It is most commonly used in reference to contemporary forms of fashion and music, but it is increasingly employed in reference to a strand of cultural production that appears in cinema, television, young adult fiction, visual culture and even dark tourism. The above quotation from The Urban Dictionary, an online user-generated compilation of contemporary street slang, offers several insights into how the expression “pop goth” is used. Most notable is, for instance, the way it blurs the relationship between performance and performativity. For in this passage the collective—a group of people—“act gothic” through self-presentation and dress, indicating that the fluid subject decides to take up and perform a Goth/ic identity while it is in fashion. This performance, then, presupposes the idea of a pre-linguistic inner core of the “normal kids” who put on the Goth/ic performance. Likewise, it assumes a real Goth/ic identity to which pop goth artificially replicates, represents and even aspires. Yet this definition also suggests that pop goth includes a performativity that is based on the textual and visual language of merchandising, marketing and promotion. For pop goth acts are not only performed by the subject but performatively constitute the subject in that s/he is the effect of discourse rather than the cause of it. Here, pop goth performativity contests the very notion of subjectivity—our inner Goth—by rejecting the very presupposition of a pre-existing subject. According to The Urban Dictionary, then, “pop goth” is the performance of a Goth/ic performance. It is not bona fide Goth/ic; it lacks the subculture’s street cred; it is a by-product of a mass-merchandised style that is sold to “normal” kids who
usually dress “normal” and act “normal.” In this, pop goth is a manifestation of Goth/ic style and aesthetics in mainstream popular culture. But this definition also marks out its difference from Goth/ic: the “real” Goth does not drift from one identificatory fashion to another (one scene to another); instead, s/he lives the Goth/ic life, remains loyal and true to it.

In response to such reductive views of “pop goth,” this volume explores what we are branding Pop Goth, a popular form of contemporary cultural production that fluidly moves both inside and outside of Goth/ic. Thus, in *Pop Goth: Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture*, we are not necessarily proclaiming the death of Goth/ic—or, for that matter, any other subculture that is threatened to be killed off by mainstream appropriation—rather, we seek to examine how a strand of Goth/ic aesthetics has become increasingly fashionable and has been woven into the very fabric of twenty-first-century popular culture. From the teen fictions of the seemingly endless *Twilight* saga to films like *Zombieland* (2009) and from album such as Lady Gaga’s *Fame Monster* (2009) to BBC television shows like *Being Human* (2010), the tropes, politics and aesthetics of Goth/ic are omnipresent. Yet definitions of Pop Goth are varied and illusive, even at times spectral. For some, Pop Goth is one more manifestation of Goth/ic’s staying power—its ability to live on in various forms and guises from the 1780s to the 1980s to what we see on our contemporary screens and texts (and purchase in our shopping malls or High Streets). For others, though, Goth/ic popular culture is not really Gothic at all; rather, it is—along with expressions like “Goth Lite” and “Black Dresser”—a commercialised aesthetic and commodified style that is associated with dressing dark and whiting-up. In this, “Pop Goth” is consistent with other “pops”: pop psychology, pop philosophy, pop music, even a fashion boutique called Pop Life. Here, the prefix “pop” refers to a popular form that is accessible to the general public and that is seen to, by extension, lack authenticity—it is pseudo and derivative, not bona fide and certainly not the “real thing.”

This raises several questions we seek to address in this volume: Is popular Goth/ic an inferior copy of a more sophisticated original? Might we conceptualise Gothic popular culture as a counterfeit form of Goth/ic? Or should we simply dismiss Pop Goth as something tainted by poseurs and wannabes? As a starting point, we propose that one way to address these questions is by regarding Pop Goth as an offshoot of Goth/ic and, as a result, arising out of a form of cultural production that has always been concerned with blurring the boundaries between the real and unreal, authentic and inauthentic, copy and counterfeit (Hogle 295; Spooner 37). From this perspective, the cultural phenomenon of contemporary Gothic pop culture is, among other things, the revenant of the counterfeited medieval narrative of Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764) or the fake translations and forged bills of exchange in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1800). For the presence of Goth/ic in contemporary popular culture bears an uncanny resemblance to other
Introduction

periods of Goth/ic production and proliferation; our use of the expression “Pop Goth” thus highlights a slippery signification that is simultaneously inside and outside of Goth/ic. And there is an ambiguity here (a doubleness?) whereby Pop Goth moves fluidly between trends in popular culture—a series of “pops”—and an aesthetic (a lifestyle?) associated with Goth/ic. In recent Gothic popular culture, then, we find both continuity and rupture, a form of popular cultural production that reaches beyond binaries (either/or) as simultaneously Goth/ic and not Goth/ic.

*Pop Goth: Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture* is not interested in Goth/ic subcultures per se. Instead, we examine how aspects of the various waves of Goth/ic (from, for instance, the 1790s, 1890s and 1990s) have become translated into the ubiquitous Goth/ic stylings of popular culture from 2000 to 2010. Over the last decade, the mainstreaming of a Goth/ic aesthetic has been unprecedented; however, we also recognise that Goth/ic has always been profitable and lucrative. In the 1790s, for instance, Ann Radcliffe received the unprecedented sums of £500 for the copyright of her hugely popular gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and £800 for *The Italian* (1797); likewise, popular Goth bands such as The Cure sold out large venues in the 1980s, and Marilyn Manson packed arenas in the 1990s. Yet Pop Goth marks out a new stage in the genealogy of Goth/ic, for its influential stylings have moved well beyond the publishing and music industries, infecting all of the cultural industries: the film versions of *Twilight* (2008) and *Eclipse* (2010) have gross revenues of over $392 million and $693 million respectively, television programs like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) have attracted massive international audiences, the shopping-mall clothing chains Hot Topic, Le Chateau (in North America) and Marks and Spencer (in the UK) continue to market Gothic fashions, and some of the most popular video games include zombies (*Burn, Zombie, Burn!,* 2009), ghosts (*Ghost Master,* 2003) and vampires (*Blade,* 2000).

Thus, the aesthetics of what Goodlad and Biddy call “death chic” of the 1980s and 1990s—emaciated whiteness, black clothing, melancholy and imagery associated with death, dying and the undead—had by the start of the new millennium moved from the dark shadows of a subculture into the limelight of mainstream popular culture (23). Goth/ic sold. And one reason for its mass appeal is its ability to capitalise on the rebellion, alienation and melancholy of Goth/ic while also distilling it: pop Goth/ic successfully packages a whiff of the subculture’s subversive, creative and “auratic potential” by selling Goth/ic’s profound aestheticism of everyday life and packaging the world’s destructiveness stylistically to appropriate Goth/ic’s signification of difference through stylistic innovation (Goodlad and Biddy 11–13). If, as we suggest, the waves of Goth/ic from the 1980s and 1990s disseminated a discourse of anti-commercialism while also being driven by commodification and market-oriented consumption, then Pop Goth is the return of that which has been repressed: it is a high-profile manifestation
of the Goth/ic participation in the market and the recognition that Goth/ic cannot deny its ties to commodification and consumption.

ENGENDERING POP GOTH

Goth/ic has often challenged conventional gender performance by resisting normative masculinity and rupturing the foundations of straight masculinity. If the literary Gothic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries opened up new spaces for female readers and writers, then the Goth subcultures of the late twentieth century offered a place for male sensitivity through theatricality, creativity, aestheticism, stylised fashion, queer desire and melancholic affection. The man of feeling was not simply conflated with the effeminate male.

This raises significant questions about the ubiquity of Goth/ic in popular culture from 2000 to 2010: how does Goth/ic’s transgressive sexuality and gender fluidity manifest itself in recent Pop Goth? Or, to pose this slightly differently, does Pop Goth diffuse the androgyny of Goth and adapt Goth/ic aesthetics to popular culture’s demand for gender and sexual difference? Any response to these questions must acknowledge a doubleness: Pop Goth helped to popularise Goth/ic’s stylised androgyny and sexual ambiguity in the mid- to late-1990s popular culture, but by 2000 Pop Goth had also become part of a more general normalising of queer desire in mainstream media. On the one hand, box-office hits like Neil Jordan’s star-studded Interview with a Vampire (1994) have been identified by cultural critics as popularising the queerness and bisexuality of a Goth subculture (Goodlad and Biddy 29). On the other hand, though, the resistance to sexual binaries found in Pop Goth was also fuelled by the appropriation of queerness within popular cultural productions such as the “Lesbian Kiss” episode of the US sitcom Roseanne (1994), the successful worldwide release of the Australian film Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994) and the popular British TV series Queer as Folk (1999).2

Yet we maintain that while Pop Goth is the most lucrative strand of Goth/ic thus far, it also has the potential to retain Goth’s resistance to gender and sexual norms. A compelling example of this arises out of the character of Spike in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), a TV show that for the cultural critic Elena Levine includes a feminist agenda in which Buffy—“a truly New Woman”—turns “her power into our power” (185). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Spike—Buffy’s vampire nemesis/ally/sometime lover—offers an alternative form of masculinity: his performance is highly aestheticised while remaining coded as recognisably masculine and, as such, he has been characterised by Buffy scholars as existing at “the nexus of camp and queer” (Masson and Stanley 5). Spike’s canny ability to renegotiate traditional gender definitions is clear from his most infamous assertion: “I may be love’s bitch but at least I’m man enough to admit it!” (“Lover’s Walk,”
season 3, episode 8). The combination of loss of control (being love’s bitch) and courage to take responsibility for that loss, figured in exaggerated gender tropes which destabilise conventional gender codes, is typical of the playful but powerful social revisions performed by the show’s scriptwriters. Furthermore, the subtext of queer desire evoked through Spike in the overt text of queer desire—the relationship between Willow and Tara—in which the “Wiccy” lovers merge “lesbian” identities with Sapphic delight and magical power. The most prevalent critical reading of the Willow/Tara relationship is one wherein their queer desire is conflated with their attraction to a female-gendered form of magic (Winslade). This conflation underscores the show’s commitment to an interpretive space of questioning rather than fixing gender and sexuality, for both characters continue to inhabit various subjectivities that enable a queer construction of same-sex desire by resisting binaries and destabilising normative sexual identities.

**POP GOTH VAMPIRES SUCK**

This reading of *Buffy* is consistent with the fluid conceptions of sexuality and anti-heteronormativity—the acceptance of bisexuality and fetish desires—in recent Goth/ic cultural production. Pop Goth continues to push the limits: “If contemporary popular culture is anything to go by,” writes the literary critic Dale Townsend, “the Gothic is more in need of a straightening out than a queering up” (11). Citing films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *Gods and Monsters* (1998) as two salient examples, Townsend’s assertion might find its Pop Goth culmination in the recent HBO series *True Blood* (2008–present) in which the hyper-sexualised vampires are neither gay- nor straight-identified, and who are threatened by humans who seek to drain vampire blood and sell it as “V”—a black-market drug that increases desire and heightens sexual performance. In the third episode, titled “Mine,” for instance, the vampire Bill Compton takes “possession” of the “mortal” Sookie Stackhouse in front of the “nesting” vampires who threaten her. Directly following this declaration, though, Bill is offered Jerry, a gay-identified human who is possessed by the oldest vampire in the clandestine nest. Bill cannot resist. But just as he is about to penetrate Jerry’s flesh, Sookie yells for Bill to stop, saving him from Hep D (the vampire equivalent of HIV). In this scene, as elsewhere in the programme, the vampire fluidly moves from the enactment of patriarchal possession—“she’s mine!” yells Bill—to an overwhelming homosexual desire that is marked by the threat of infection. This rapid movement undermines the fixed position of heteronormative sexuality and conventional genders, gesturing towards nonbinaristic social relations between the sexes.

In this, Pop Goth sometimes foregrounds “queercore” politics and aesthetics, and in *True Blood*, these are furthered through the human character Lafayette. A short-order cook, road-crew worker, drug dealer, gay
prostitute and occasional pornographer, Lafayette is the “campy vamp” whose hard pecs are often loosely covered in luxurious silks or gold lamé. As a significant representation of Pop Goth queerness, Lafayette is also the linchpin for the show’s complex politics; as a queer-identified African-American man, he embodies the history of the civil rights movement (racial and sexual) in the US and, more specifically, in the American South. His presence—along with the opening credits, which splice together images of the KKK, race riots and the Confederate Flag—reminds us of the history of racial and sexual demonisation and locates the plot within a specific context: the series is, among other things, Pop Goth’s answer to the Southern Gothic. Set in the near future, though, the politics of the day revolve around the VRM (Vampire Rights Movement), debates over the VRA (Vampire Rights Act) and the influential “Vampire Lobby,” which champions “equal citizenship” now that vampires have “come out of the coffin” (series 1; episode 1). Love your vampire; or, at the very least, don’t be a vampist.

On the one hand, this aspect of the show’s premise suggests a progressive political teleology of post-human civil rights whereby the not-human—the undead—demand full citizenship under the law, thus implying that debates over human racial and sexual equality are in the past: we have seen the future, so to speak, and it is post-race, post-sexuality, post-gender. On the other hand, though, the past haunts the future. For the programme’s very title signifies the historical discourses of racial authenticity and white supremacy, a process whereby the fixing of a true bloodline was vital for maintaining racial division (in the institutionalisation of slavery and segregation). Pure blood morphs into true blood, just as the fear of the corrupted bloodline is projected onto the vampire’s appetite for real blood over synthetic reproductions.

The fictional narratives of racial authenticity that haunt True Blood might also be read into the mask of whiteness that characterises the pallor and pale skin of a Pop Goth aesthetic. In the film version of Twilight (2008), for instance, the white skin of the vampire Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson) not only signals his status as undead, but it also stages the translation of a Gothic fashion into a Pop Goth cultural production. Here, the white man who is made up in whiteface is an inscription of Otherness but it is also, as in so many vampire narratives, a source of attraction and desire. The teenage protagonist Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart) is drawn in by the mysterious and pallid Edward, who is the subject of her desire-filled gaze but who also refuses Bella’s request to make her a vampire. He is, in the end, an object of desire that remains a feast for the eyes. In this contemporised minstrel performance, Edward’s whiteness legitimates his authenticity as a popular Gothic icon, while simultaneously calling attention to the artifice of racialism. Still, such a performance also highlights the cultural (and racial) currency of whiteness: white skin is needed as the basis for whiting-up—thus, it is the white performer who can express that
which is authentically Pop Goth. At the heart of this minstrel-like show is a revealing of the markers of whiteness and the performative nature of race, oscillating between authenticity and artifice. In Pop Goth, as in Goth/ic, racial authenticity is produced through counterfeit, for it depends on the movement between an acknowledgement of its performative nature and an acceptance of its unmediated authenticity. By appearing as the real thing, then, a character like Edward Cullen engages in a form of masquerade that reveals race as an illusion that is best exemplified in his mask of whiting-up, while concurrently showing how the mask makes race very real.

The *Twilight* series stages issues of race and ethnic identity in yet another way: Edward’s rival is a Native American character, Jacob Black. His very name signals his nonwhiteness, his Otherness. In stark contrast to Edward’s cold and cadaverous body, Jacob is visibly, even ostentatiously, hot-blooded and his physical features are constantly displayed (in the film versions Jacob

![Poster of *Otto; or, Up with Dead People*](https://example.com/otto-poster.jpg)

*Figure 0.1 Poster of Otto; or, Up with Dead People.*
Justin D. Edwards and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet

does not need to wear a shirt, even in winter). The animalistic vitality of his muscular semi-nakedness combines with his ability to turn into an ultra-powerful wolf (particularly in moments of rage). Gesturing to a long tradition of the “racialised gothic,” Jacob’s Otherness is also a source of exoticised attraction and desire.7

The sexiness of vampires (and even werewolves) has existed throughout the history of the Gothic mode. But the humanisation of the Gothic monster has, over the last ten years, inspired representations of the desirable and sexy zombie. In Otto; or, Up with Dead People (2008) and L.A. Zombie (2010) (both directed by Bruce LaBruce), the zombies titillate the viewer in graphic scenes of queer zombie sex, parodying Romero’s use of the zombie to interrogate the ideologies of consumerism and consumption. Film-maker Bruce LaBruce describes Otto as a film “about the loneliness, emptiness, and alienation that results from rampant consumerism and materialism under advanced capitalism,” making the silent and enigmatic Otto a figure of disaffected youth.8 In both films, the zombie blurs with the homeless psychotic to raise questions about poverty, mental illness and human rights. But the narratives also suggest that the postmodern condition is itself a form of madness that disseminates cultural trauma and erases historical memory; the ironic tone of the films, though, produce a darkly funny and carnivalesque representation of sex and waste under late capitalism (with an appropriately aggressive post-punk soundtrack and virtually no dialogue).

VOCALISING POP GOTH

Over the last decade, the expression “pop goth” has sometimes been associated with “goth pop,” a mainstream form of Goth/ic music fashioned by bands like The Gothic Archies, The 69 Eyes, Eisblume, Yousei Teikoku and even the German winner of the 2010 Eurovision Song Contest, Lena. Goth pop popularises Goth/ic music, which generally includes, but is not limited to, lyrics about pain, suffering, death, drugs, despair, darkness, rebellion, existential angst, social isolation, gender blurring and irony. Songs by goth pop bands are often self-consciously morose (sometimes to comic effect) and vocalise the subjects of hopelessness, loss and depression (sometimes parodically), as well as Goth/ic figures (as in “Vampires” by The Love-Crave) and tropes (as in “Haunted” by Stream of Passion).

In “This Abyss,” a song by The Gothic Archies (a self-described goth-bubblegum band), the haunting voice of Stephin Merritt drones the lyrics, “This abyss, this lightless void / This abyss, of world destroyed . . . This abyss, of night unbound / This abyss, without a sound.” Drawing on a fashionable Goth/ic aesthetic, this song attempts to convey a symbolic and psychological state of darkness through the spatial terms of an abyss, an endless chasm. “This abyss, of black increased / This abyss, without
surcease,” the song continues, gesturing towards the literary definition of the term: a bottomless or unfathomed depth or gulf, a bottomless pit. Here, Merritt draws on the Gothic trope of the abyss to convey the figurative meaning of a catastrophic situation seen as likely to occur whereby the individual will sink to immeasurable intellectual, ethical or moral depths. “This Abyss,” then, illustrates how Pop Goth music is part of a Gothic genealogy. For the image of the abyss has been diffused throughout the Gothic novel and is central to, among many others, Ann Radcliffe’s 1797 novel *The Italian* (where the abyss conveys a Gothic setting and reflects the psychological distress of the characters) and Charles Brockden Brown’s 1798 text *Wieland* (where anxieties about incest arise in Clara’s “dark dream” about her brother tempting her to the edge of an abyss, enticing her towards her own destruction).

The Gothic trope of the abyss inspires, as Merritt’s song suggests, anxiety, terror and awe. After all, the song’s lyrics focus on an overwhelming darkness that engulfs the individual, driving him into a void of utter silence. There is, in other words, an ominous and irresistible force associated with the immense power and inexpressibility of this physical presence or psychological state. And the song expresses a sense of danger and even apocalypse—a “world destroyed”—that is repulsive, but it also includes an attraction to destruction that gestures towards an ambiguity that is central to Gothic. For the abyss compels to destruction—it is a reminder of death—and yet it also draws one towards it, attracting one to peer down into the darkness.

It is this tension that puts the “pop” in Pop Goth: its popularity is based on the frisson of selling a simultaneous aversion from and attraction to self-destruction and cultural taboo. In this, Pop Goth packages a hint of transgression—the cannibalism of the vampire, the savagery of the werewolf—for a mass audience by gesturing towards a void of life or the symbolic fall into an indulgent passion or ruthless acts (physical or sexual violence) whereby an unethical world lays waste to potential victims. In Pop Goth, though, we might not take this too seriously; after all, its representations of “perversion” are not secretly hidden behind a threatening veil of darkness, but are broadcast to millions of fans through the bright lights of the celluloid screen, the electric hearth or the digital monitor. In fact, the ubiquity of Gothic in popular culture has led to a series of ironic songs about the staging of Gothic teen stylings. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in “The Goth Pop Song” by The Rocket Summer’s singer-songwriter Bryce Avary (written when he was still in high school), which became a YouTube hit in 2008. The second and forth stanzas of the song go like this:

Did you see his shirt today?
It said “I’m a vampire”
Hey, Why don’t you come to my house?
We’ll play cards and watch a good movie [. . .]
Justin D. Edwards and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet

When you see them all inside,
You’ll find their lives are fine
Vampires and gothic rings are nothing more than looks
So just ignore

The upbeat folk-rock acoustics of this song complement the sarcastic tone of the lyrics, offering a straight-up and down-to-earth parody of Pop Goth performance. As in the mock Goth/ics of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) or the *Scream* film series (1996, 1997, 2000, 2011), Bryce Avary’s tune caricatures the superficial façade and conventions of Goth/ic cultural production. In particular, his reference to the “I’m a Vampire” t-shirt is a send-up of the teen fashion for black-and-white t-shirts with logos like “KISS ME, I’m a Vampire” or “I’m in love with a Vampire” or even “I’m so Goth,” labels that broadcast an affiliation with Pop Goth and attempt to project a Goth/ic identificatory position. Avary, then, pokes fun at a Pop Goth branding that appeals to middle-class, suburban teens (“I bet his parents bought him that black hair dye / those 32-eye black boots”); kids who are, in language that echoes the *The Urban Dictionary*‘s pop goth definition, all normal on the inside.

“The Goth Pop Song” is not without humour. Indeed, there is a spectre of parody here, not because the song parodies a particular text but because it more generally pokes fun at Goth/ic tropes and style. Thus, our reading of “The Goth Pop Song” is consistent with Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s assertion that “parody can function as a key aspect of comic Gothic, not in the traditional sense of being parasitic upon an ‘original’ text, but because, through ‘repetition with critical difference,’ it foregrounds the production of the modern subject through discourse.” And, they conclude, this “frequently allows a fresh perspective on a changing world, one of accommodation rather than terrified apprehension” (12).

**EVERYDAY HAUNTINGS**

Perhaps a bit more serious—though nonetheless entertaining—is the massive increase in local histories and guidebooks documenting haunted sites and ghostly sightings. Paralleling the popular reality TV series *Ghost Hunters* (2004–present) and *Ghost Adventures* (2008–present) in the US and *Most Haunted* (2002–2010) in the UK, the demand for texts about haunted urban locations and haunted walking tours has been a key driver of profit in the twenty-first-century publishing industry. In the UK, for instance, The History Press (based in Gloucestershire) has developed a lucrative *Haunted* book series that includes titles like *Haunted Bristol* (2004), *Haunted Leeds* (2006), *Haunted Oxford* (2006) and *Haunted Birmingham* (2006)—thus far, the press has published over eighty of these ghostly histories. Committed to revealing accounts of apparitions and spectral presences in towns and
cities throughout the UK, the texts offer information for local historians, tourists and “ghost hunters” who seek out “encounters with ghosts, ghouls and spirits.” In *Haunted Guildford* (2006), for example, the author, Phillip Hutchinson, draws on historical and contemporary accounts of the piano-playing spirit of the Guildford Museum and the poltergeist who haunts The Three Pigeons public house by swinging from the hanging lights, pushing glasses along the bar and picking up barstools. Somewhat more unique is *Haunted Whitby* (2009), in which the author, Alan Brooke, relates the area’s haunted lighthouses and ghost animals to the setting of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and the site for the weekend Goth festival that started in 1994. “Whitby has a particularly unique atmosphere and it is no coincidence that Bram Stoker chose it as the location for Dracula’s arrival in England,” writes Brooke. “It is largely for this reason that Whitby became the choice for the Goth weekend festival . . . [which] has grown to be one of the most popular Goth events in the world” (6). In addition, the penultimate
and final chapters offer the Goth visitor (or anyone else) a “Ghost Walk Itinerary” that is complete with maps and photographs, as well as an “A–Z of Haunted Sites Around Whitby” which chronicles some of the “most entertaining ghost walks in England” (61).

Haunted sites and local (ghoulish) histories, then, provide a basis for haunting tourism. But such texts also signal the appearance of the spectre in mainstream popular culture not just in works of fantasy or self-identified fiction but also in sources that attempt to provide documentary and historical evidence of ghostly presences. In this, we witness the increasing commercialisation of the “real” ghost as a commodity, something that has mass appeal and commercial viability. Haunting is big business. And this aspect of Pop Goth is hinted at in the Introduction to *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (2010) in which Blanco and Peeren observe that the twenty-first-century re-envisions the conjuring, chasing, and contacting of ghosts, and the living’s communication with them . . . [to question] how ghosts lead us to interrogate various categories that govern our everyday lives, such as reality, authenticity and knowledge. In the spectral contemporary these questions aspire to a self-consciously sensationalist exploration of our enjoyment of the terror and uncertainty provoked by ghostly appearances or their simulacra (xx).

“Real” ghosts have, in other words, materialised as part of the mainstream and, by extension, they reveal the “ineluctable link between the popular and consumerism” (xii). The popularity of the real ghost stories arises, in part, out of a recognition that the modern city—the haunted spaces are the urban places where many of us live—is always marked by the spectre of its past. Thus, the wide-selling *Walking Haunted London* (2009) by Richard Jones offers the walker “25 original walks exploring London’s ghostly past” and covers a wealth of detail on ghostly people and presences (both past and present) alongside detailed maps, transport information as well as dates and times when ghosts are most likely to appear.

**NO FUTURE, INC.**

If the Gothic is haunted by the past, then Pop Goth makes the future its particular obsession. Or, to be more precise, it is consumed by a lack of future. Possibly in response to the real terror of everyday life (twenty-first-century terrorism, torture and violence on our news screens), popular culture rehearses apocalyptic scenarios. In *Buffy*, for instance, the teenage heroine saves the world in many episodes, often through dramatic acts of self-sacrifice. (In fact, saving the world “again!” became a running joke on the series.) Indeed, Pop Goth offers many examples of an apocalypse that is not averted—a world that is lost, beyond saving. Scientific hubris, corrupt
businesses practices, environmental disasters, covert military operations and medical experimentation all figure in Pop Goth, from Resident Evil and 28 Days Later to The Zombie Diaries and Survival of the Dead. Joss Whedon—creator of the Buffy series—also weaves apocalyptical narratives into two of his other projects: the film Serenity and the series Dollhouse. The former is set in the future and depicts the destruction of an entire planet (with millions of people) by a chemical agent developed by a corrupt interplanetary Alliance in order to pacify a population and suppress dissent. The few survivors on the affected planet become maniacal cannibals as the planet transforms into a “ghost-town” and the Alliance covers up its crimes by erasing information—“disappearing” it.

Dollhouse revisits the Gothic tropes of corrupt power, mind-control, terror/ism and violence, but does so in the context of a realistic setting: Los Angeles. Within this contemporary context, an elite business has brainwashed employees and programmes them to enact fantasies, carrying out every request of their wealthy clients. In the last episode of season 1, we see the dire consequences of Dollhouse’s technology: anarchy and brutal violence has spread through the city as memories are “wiped out” and people are “imprinted” with the mind of another person. As in Serenity, some characters become violent killers, while others become helpless prey. Los Angeles smoulders in ruins and, the narrative suggests, the rest of the world is in a similar condition. The heroine of the series, Caroline (normally played by Eliza Dushku), is “imprinted” into a child’s body and surveys the devastation: “Children playing with matches,” she observes, “and they burned the house down.” A grim vision of an all too near future.

Apocalyptic narratives on film and television are just two examples of Gothic modes of destruction and death being invoked for mass-market entertainment. From skulls on babywear to Gothic cuisine, Pop Goth images of death and the macabre are everywhere. The following chapters delve into the complexities of Gothic popularity in a variety of texts, products and cultural practices. Fred Botting’s chapter on the zombie in popular Gothic texts addresses tropes that are present in many of the other contributions, particularly the anxiety about what it means to live in a late-capitalist economy. Botting examines the currency and power of the zombie as sign of postmodern amnesia and mindless consumerism: “Love Your Zombie” decorticates the power of this rhetorical figure and highlights its profound shift—in line with other monsters in the Pop Goth marketplace—towards sympathy, even love. If we’ve loved our vampires for a long time now, even zombies have become more lovable in recent manifestations of Pop Goth culture. Continuing debates about ethical responsibility in a socio-political-economic context of popular Gothic texts, Linnie Blake situates the current trend of supernatural television series within the political fallout of post 9/11 America. In “Vampires, Mad Scientists and the Unquiet Dead: Gothic Ubiquity in Post-9/11 US Television,” Blake sets her reading against the backdrop of anxieties about national identity, political power, military
campaigns and new forms of US imperialism. Blake demonstrates how these television series about the threats posed by Gothic monsters interrogate the terms and implications of US foreign policies and “preemptive wars.” More broadly, Gothic television invokes the meaning and status of foundational American myths, tacitly critiquing the militarism and insularity that underpin recent US uses of national mythologies.

Similarly, Monica Germanà’s chapter on the British television programme *Being Human* examines the blurred territory between humanity and monstrosity, provoking vital questions about the ethical relations of self and other in the twenty-first century. Germanà’s contribution focuses on the anxieties surrounding medical technologies and “scientific” experimentation as it is staged in *Being Human*—themes that resonate with the discussion of technology and war instigated by Linnie Blake. The marketing of popular Gothic television has had a profound impact on the publishing industry, and Glennis Byron discusses the cachet of the Gothic as product placement and how Gothic discourses have been used in the promotion of Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s bestselling novel *The Shadow of the Wind* (2004). Byron points to the fact that Zafón’s text was initially sold (and reviewed) as a thriller, a love story or a historical novel; later, though, it was re-branded as “Gothic”—a term that has come to dominate the publicity surrounding the book. Among other things, Byron’s insights show how the word “Gothic” (self-conscious, stylised, artificial and highly desirable) is woven into the publisher’s marketing strategy and how Pop Goth works to position products in the marketplace. Perhaps the most financially successful manifestation of the Pop Goth publishing industry is explored by Rachael McLennan, who discusses Stephenie Meyer’s bestselling young-adult fiction series, the *Twilight* saga, with reference to the work of the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall (widely credited for formulating adolescence as we understand it today). Building on Steven Bruhm’s work on the contemporary Gothic, McLennan draws on ideas about recapitulation, growth and the adolescent (relating to characters and audiences) in order to analyse *Twilight* through the prism of personal formation—*bildung*—and recapitulation. The ideologies of evolution and development are, then, central to the literary tropes invoked in the saga, and the acts of beginning or narrating “again” are foregrounded throughout the Gothic trajectories of these popular novels and films.

Batman as a contemporary Pop Goth icon is the subject of Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet’s chapter. Examining the particularities of the product placement, intertextuality and continuity of comic book characters, Monnet argues that Batman oscillates between Gothic and comic modes to engender a source of politics and pleasure in the Pop Goth text; after all, Batman morphs into various identities in order to reflect contemporary political agendas and appeal to mass audiences. If the Gothic mode provides a set of perimeters and codes, then the pleasures of Pop Goth pushes those perimeters to their limits and experiments with a range of creative
repetitions, parodies and unruly combinations to support and subvert the
codes. The iconicity and intertextual dimensions to Pop Goth are high-
lighted in Karen E. Macfarlane’s chapter on Lady Gaga. Here, Macfarlane
deconstructs the Fame Monster’s unique style of popular cultural allusions
and intertextuality in the dissemination of a Pop Goth style that playfully
gestures to a new level of hyper-mediation and meta-reflexivity. Lady Gaga,
then, mixes the familiar and unfamiliar—creating uncanny ripples and
unsettling effects—to generate massive profits from her fans.

Gothic technology is present in Gail Ashurst and Anna Powell’s chap-
ter on Steampunk, which offers a unique response to the condition of late
modernity. Here, Steampunk’s answer to the problem of obsolescence, alien-
ation and consumerism is to fetishise the Victorian machine, to challenge
the soullessness of technology, and to investigate the borders separating
science and magic. If the zombie’s body is the corpse of rotting and reani-
mated flesh, then Steampunk dreams of bodies that incorporate machin-
ery, gadgetry and prostheses. Covering texts, festivals and interviews with
participants, Ashurst and Powell reveal how Steampunk replaces vampires,
demons and ghosts with pistons, cogs and gears as a way of responding to
the deadening influence of capital and consumerism on communities and
interpersonal relationships. Steampunk, they suggest, includes the tradi-
tional Goth/ic modes of alienation, technologised humanity and monstros-
ity, as well as a neo-Victorian aesthetic that recycles notions of hybridity
for the twenty-first century. Inspired in part by the commercial success
of popular fiction and film, Steampunk relies on elaborate costumes and
performances that combine retro notions of technology and science with
fantastic images of magic and the supernatural.

Isabella van Elferen’s chapter addresses a phenomenon that exists in a
productive tension with Pop Goth: the relatively exclusive gatherings in
Goth clubs and parties. In “Spectral Liturgy: Transgression, Ritual and
Music in Gothic,” she analyses the ceremonies and embodied experiences
offered in Goth nightclubs, where guests are invited and appear (in often
handmade costumes) to partake in a highly sensual experience. Sparing no
expense, Goth nightclubbing is a rarefied nucleus of self-dissolution and
immersion into a Goth/ic experience, community and altered/enhanced
consciousness. Music, dance, absinthe, clove cigarettes, elaborate costumes,
special lighting and decoration all serve to create a subjective experience of
complete dislocation from the commodified and banal routines of everyday
life. Van Elferen argues that Goth music plays a significant role here, for
it offers an intensity that echoes the religious or spiritual rituals and cer-
emonies. The Goth club is, then, a complex locus of consumption, secular
ritual, and subcultural community thatrevolves around the contemporary
Goth/ic aesthetics of visual culture, fashion, dance and music.

Emma McEvoy’s chapter explores less exclusive sites of Pop Goth:
family-oriented arts fairs, public events and music festivals. Here she
documents how Goth/ic performance influences a wide range of cultural
phenomena, from high cultural/historical heritage to accessibility/fun to council-funded events. Addressing some of the reasons for the rise of Goth/ic in circus-related performances, this chapter points to Glastonbury acts (and others) that transform old-time spectacles—freak shows, museums of curiosity, burlesques—into Pop Goth productions of the twenty-first century. Drawing on several case studies, McEvoy’s contribution speaks to the cultural and economic underpinnings of a new Goth/ic that puts the “fun” back into “funeral” and says “Boo!” to taboo. Sartorial recycling, recoding and resignification are also addressed in Catherine Spooner’s piece on Goth/ic in popular high-street fashions. From the Goth/ic collection of Marks and Spencers’ “Per Una” label to the Gothic chic styles found in mainstream British clothing stores such as Miss Selfridge and Topshop, the market for “Pretty Goth” and “Glam Gothic” has proliferated throughout Pop Goth cultural production. Spooner places this phenomenon in the context of the 2007 murder of self-identified Goth Sophie Lancaster in the UK and the defence of Goth in the mainstream media and the subcultural community in response to this horrific crime. This defence, Spooner suggests, minimised Goth/ic otherness and paved the way for its appropriation by the mainstream on an unprecedented scale; the chapter then analyses the language and iconography that has been disseminated in mainstream Gothic fashion, suggesting that in its evocation of fantasy and romance, it permits the mediation of other, more troubling qualities.

Pop Goth is a mainstream consumerist spin-off of Goth/ic, which is both a consumerist and commodity-oriented culture as well as a subculture that resists gender and sexual norms. If Goth/ic is perceived to deviate from the normative standards and roles of mainstream communities, then Pop Goth is a popular manifestation of elements of that perceived deviance. Pop Goth diffuses Goth/ic style and aesthetics into mainstream popular cultural production: this is tantamount to a recuperation. But it is not the death of Goth—it is only one strand of it—because Goth/ic has always been at home in the world of consumerism, commodification and consumption. So Pop Goth is a branch of Goth/ic; not its killing off.

NOTES

1. Jerrold Hogle argues that Gothic has always been haunted by the ghost of the counterfeit: in texts like Otranto and buildings such as Strawberry Hill, Hogle suggests, “the remnant of ‘obligatory’ or ‘natural’ meaning is replaced as the sign’s point of reference by counterfeits of that remnant” (298). Building on Hogle is Catherine Spooner’s chapter “Mock Gothic” in Contemporary Gothic in which she argues that contemporary Gothic manifestations are “in keeping with Gothic as fake, as revival, as décor” (35).
2. Best known as the “Lesbian Kiss” episode, the title of the broadcast in which Rosanne Connor (Rosanne Barr) goes to a gay bar and is kissed by Sharon (Mariel Hemingway) is “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (season 6, episode 18).
Similar episodes featuring “lesbian kisses” (in which a straight-identifying character is kissed by a lesbian character) appeared on the US television series *LA Law* in 1991, *Picket Fences* in 1993, *Ally McBeal* in 1998 and *Party of Five* in 1999. In some of these series, the queer kiss was a ploy to improve ratings, but by 2002 Marti Noxon, the writer of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) had spoken about the television executives who objected to developing a long-term sexual relationship between the characters Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan) and Tara Maclay (Amber Benson). “You can show girls kissing once,” he said in an interview, “but you can’t show them kissing twice . . . because the second time, it means that they liked it” (“Analysis”).

3. The TV series of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is arguably the Pop Goth phenomenon that has attracted the most scholarly attention. With its own academic conference and peer-reviewed journal, *Buffy* is also the subject of several academic books, including *Why Buffy Matters, Buffy Goes Dark: Essays on the Final Two Seasons* and *Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Rigorous chapters on *Buffy* also appear in the books *Televising Queer Women: A Reader* and *Postfeminist Gothic*.

4. *True Blood* is based on *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series of novels (2001–present) by Charlaine Harris, and details the co-existence of vampires and humans in Bon Temps, a fictional small town in Louisiana.

5. For an insightful analysis of the complex meanings (and transformations) of the “Southern Gothic” and how setting “gothic texts set in the South” relates to the marketing of Gothic writing in popular culture, see Jason K. Friedman’s “Ah am witness to its authenticity”: Goth Style in Postmodern Southern Writing” (191).

6. A significant corollary to this is the popular Japanese fashion phenomenon, Gothic Lolita, which was popularised by the Hiroshima-based musician and fashion designer Mana, whose clothing label Moi-même-Moitié featured two extremely popular lines, Elegant Gothic Lolita and Elegant Gothic Aristocrat. In Gothic Lolita style, the Japanese participant accentuates her pale-skinned, dark-haired Asian phenotype by applying black eyeliner and dark clothing to capture the “authentic” look of the mode. Interestingly, though, the Goth/ic make-up of the white powdered face is usually considered bad taste in Gothic Lolita fashion.


9. Influential literary and cultural critics such as Steven Bruhm have theorised the profilation of Gothic in popular culture; Bruhm convincingly argues that contemporary audiences are drawn to the Gothic as a response to the postmodern destabilisation of stable conceptions of identity: we are “caught in what Freud called a repetition-compulsion”; we use the Gothic to reaffirm life in the midst of death (“Contemporary Gothic” 272, 274). Alexandra Warwick suggests we crave Gothic because we have not been annihilated enough, and that Gothic popularity speaks to a desire for trauma, for the cachet and wholeness that the traumatised victim signifies within a trauma-oriented culture.


“This Abyss.” The Gothic Archies

“The Goth Pop Song.” The Rocket Summer (Bryce Avary)
1 Love Your Zombie
Horror, Ethics, Excess
Fred Botting

PARADISE IN ZOMBIE EYES

Love your zombie is not an injunction to find some good-looking walking corpse and form a deep emotional and physical attachment. Love, though rare in popular zombie fictions and films, is found in the mindless intoxications of romance, mixed with Vodun potion and ritual, in White Zombie (Victor Halperin, 1932) and I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur, 1943). More recently, in Breathers, intense feelings and physical passions are evoked—and vigorously enjoyed—by a couple of zombies; in Way of the Barefoot Zombie, love is sealed, in sickening sentimental and visual terms, through reference to Zombie Flesh Eaters: “yours are the hands that pulled my eye onto the splinter of love and embedded it in my brain. Yours are the teeth that gnaw on my guts every time I think about life without you” (40). Elsewhere, love’s tragic dimensions have been explored in unusual uses of the zombie trope as figure for the persistence of love after death, embodied returns manifesting spiritual loss (Keene 171; Lindqvist 90–5). Erotic attachments are rare too: zombies are not the most prepossessing objects of desire, passion and sexual gratification: the film Zombie Diaries offers a strong and disturbing hint of sex slavery; zombie prostitution shows the sexual service industry as literally draining bodies of sentience and feeling, numbed to repeated use, devoid of consciousness or emotion (Martin 282). Zombie eroticism is given a more perverse and pathetic twist in Joyce Carol Oates’s Zombie. It remains hard to love your zombie: “eating brains, my friend, is not sexy” (Golden vii).

Love your vampire, however, is impossible to avoid. For several decades, vampires have promoted safely appealing erotic, aesthetic and emotional characteristics; they have evoked desire, love and admiration for their decadent rebellion and finely tuned sensibilities. Thoroughly romanticised—even to the point of being able to charm a Southern Grandma—they offer general identificatory fulfilment (especially adolescent) across classes, races, and object-choices, in acceptable defiance of norms and limits and homogenising any residual frisson of otherness. Posthuman becomings deploy the vampire as a metaphor for new social, species and sexual affinities (Haraway 56–70); for new, networked and machinic connections dissolving human identity in fluid and liminal interrelations (Stone 46–51;
Deleuze and Guattari 249). Vampiric characteristics coordinate well with the imperatives of the new economic order: consuming, self-transforming, supernaturally skilled, physically and mortally free, they incarnate the flexibility, performance optimisation and impermanence of new modes of labour, corporate employment and creative industry (Latham 15–19). In this (fantasy) framework of new times and global economic restructurings, zombies—occluded, outcast, overlooked—constitute the other side of the new global economy. For they are the dead weight of industrial society made redundant by outsourcing, consumer services and financial speculation, the dejecta and leftovers of a productive system turned into a useless, unserviceable lumpenproletariat (Beard 30; Shaviro 285). One loves one’s vampire at the expense of one’s zombie.

Love your zombie is a paradoxical injunction, lumbering against the pace of the times. Yet it questions simple, even facile, forms of identification, eschewing recognition or imitation and refusing easy outlets for narcissism, fantasy or self-discovery. Closer to the love that evokes (self-)hatred, shatters mirrors and mutilates, through excess, any basis of imagined plenitude, zombie identification still draws out some kind of recognition: “they’re us.” Suppurating with signs of vile humanity, their proximity is hard to disavow. Yet—almost as an incantation in every fiction or film—disavowal is repeatedly called for in every encounter: “forget that the walking corpse before you was once a brother, husband, friend,” the warnings declaim, because to remember or sympathise, even for a second, is to be vulnerable to the same bloody reduction. The very proximity of the zombie to the humanity that it simultaneously is and is not remains a most disarming feature, an intimacy founded and foundering on recognition-repulsion, on abject inevitability, visibly human yet palpably not.

Zombies are the most human of fiction’s monsters: without (super)heroic features or capabilities, undeath aside, they are neither individuals nor living beings, possess little conversation, have severely limited table manners or witty repartee, little fashion sense, no personal hygiene or intelligent opinions on matters of culture. Without higher brain functions, speech, self-consciousness or sensitivity, they rot, chew, stink, occasionally groan, and lumber en masse towards their next meal of flesh and innards. Decomposing, often broken bodies, ripped grey skin, a stench of decay and vile-smelling rags, they offer inescapable reminders of the fate of all human flesh, thrusting death’s corruption in the face of a species that, contemporarily, does its best to look away. Most human of monsters, zombies are also least, foregrounding how low self-consuming humanity can—and will—sink. This zombie—repulsive, inhuman, abject—is the thing one is asked to love, provoking negative and nauseating horror beyond any image humanity might hold up to itself, life’s unbearable excess and intolerable deficiency, death-in-life living on. Zombie excess, more and less than life, body, person, forms the obscure object around which questions of ethics can be asked, questions of otherness, expenditure and love, questions of self, destruction and desire.
EAT YOUR NEIGHBOUR

Love your zombie. Parodying the form of a commandment, this injunction looks to ethics and morality. Love your zombie, love yourself: live well, know oneself. To love one’s zombie pushes ethics beyond the bounds of self, materialising an otherness in excess of its goods. If morality entails an adherence to prescribed norms and rules, ethics offers protocols for the necessary adjustments required in specific situations where judgements are difficult, suspended, unavailable or uncertain. With Emmanuel Levinas, however, ethics assumes a more heterological dimension: it subsists prior to moral prescription, knowledge and ontology, and it introduces an obscure and fundamental relationship—determining but traumatic—to the Other who is “otherwise and better than being” (Reader 179). The relation to the other—and the commandments it makes known—has ultimate priority, even if their origin remains unclear. What strikes the subject most forcefully is the face of the Other, not a visible person, but a movement from a realm outside self: face “destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me,” discloses an “obscure light beyond the face” (Otherwise 50–51; Totality 254–5). Beyond the grasp of reason, representation, knowledge or being, this powerful intimation of alterity serves as the obscure foundation of ethical commands, as mysterious as it is enlightening, as binding as it is unlocatable. Face, however, also acknowledges precariousness. In Judith Butler’s reading of the obligations evoked by the Other, ethics itself—and the face in particular—is threatened by images and violence circulating in an age of media forms and global terror. Already vulnerable, already afraid of violence, face falls prey to forces of representation, its humanising capacity curtailed. In giving form to fears, the evil faces of media’s normative powers eclipse any humanising otherness in two ways: they “produces a symbolic identification of the face with the inhuman, foreclosing our apprehension of the human” or they disseminate a “radical effacement, so that there never was a human, there never was a life, and no murder has therefore ever taken place” (147). This obliteration of face through face manifests a tendency to enjoin rather than counteract violence against the Other; there is an excision of the (possibility) of recognising or identifying with humanity in any positive or prospective fashion, and a devastating negation of life that legitimates, in advance, violence and murder.

The situation discussed by Butler is posthumanist to the extent that it dispenses with humanity (extrapolated and dehumanised as the image of face) and abstracts itself onto the plane dominated by new biopolitical and media imperatives where wars are fought on screens and in the interests of statistical and demographic accounts of life. The sense of humanity—produced in the mysterious and exalted gap of proximity and difference announced by the face of the Levinasian Other—is eclipsed in the reduction of other to simple inhumanity. At work, it seems, is the differentiation, noted by Alain Badiou, grounding contemporary ethics in strict delineations
of good and evil (to which Levinasian alterity is eminently prey). To appeal to the “infinite distance of the other” involves either a transcendence of finite experience (the situatedness of ethics in respect of the particularity of the event) or leaves the way open for a legitimisation of contemporary ethics that—in the name of respecting difference and otherness—offers “a pious discourse without piety, a spiritual supplement for incompetent government, and a cultural sociology preached, in line with new-style sermons” (Badiou 21–22). It appeals to differences consistent with “the identity of a wealthy—albeit visibly declining—‘West’” (23–4). Otherness and difference are assimilated or occluded by the cultural forms they ought to disturb and question. Badiou’s excoriating account of contemporary ethics (from discourses of human rights to medical, bio- and media ethics) notes the vicious delimitation and separation of good and evil, the latter derived from the former. Human rights are the “right to non-evil,” rights not to be offended or mistreated in respect of one’s life, or rights to maintain the integrity of body or cultural identity. The overwhelming obviousness of ethical consensus splits the subject into a passive, pathetic being or an active subject of judgement, both dependent on universal recognition of suffering and the definition of the subject “as a victim” (9–10). Living being is reduced to a suffering substrate of life, being “held in contempt” by the liberal gaze of a benefactor on “a haggard animal exposed on TV screens” that duplicates the position of the Western and developing worlds, victims mirrored by good white men, the former kept in their subaltern, subhuman and subordinate place (12). Similar procedures and positions shape ethical committees as they sacrifice singularity to an abstraction called rights; the sick, for example, are measured statistically and normatively as an “indistinct crowd of victims—the ‘human’ totality of subhuman entities” (14). Rather than singular questions of ethical concern, medical ethics work on cases, treatments, prognoses and cost-effectiveness; everything is bottom-lined according to economic models of optimisation and generalisation. Contemporary ethics forms another arm of globalised capitalism, for it is bound to its consensus on the “obviousness” of rights and “the universality of unbridled competition” (10). In mirroring and managing some of the excesses and side-effects of capitalism, contemporary ethics manifests the incorporation and reduction of life, subjectivity and multiplicity; questions are posed, Badiou notes, by psychoanalysis in respect of jouissance, death, and the real.

Love your zombie stretches ethical limits. For Sigmund Freud, the commandment to “love thy neighbour as yourself” was horrifying. Jacques Lacan’s discussion of Freud’s horror in The Ethics of Psychoanalysis is examined in terms of the excessive energies that burst in and beyond circuits of pleasure: intensities are read in relation to a form of subjectivity that finds itself briefly and paradoxically in moments of extreme loss. Pleasure that is equated with equilibrium, entropy and goodness in this energetic model then begins to operate according to a “least-suffering principle”
where the notion of the good (“our” good) “keeps us a long way from our jouissance” (1992: 185). This excess lies at the root of the horror of loving your neighbour; it sparks a burst of explosive-destructive energies that upset comfort, contentment and security. For Freud, the neighbour presents a “fundamental evil” and evokes that evil “within me”: “what is more of a neighbour to me than this heart within which is that of my jouissance and which I don’t go near?” It is “an unfathomable aggressivity from which I flee”; this is, then, a recurrent problem for how one deals with one’s own jouissance. As long as the neighbour stays in the place and form expected of him/her, circuits of pleasure, desire, law and good remain intact: “what I want is the good of others provided it remain in the image of my own” (Lacan, Ethics 186–7). Yet jouissance can neither be reliably contained nor fully excluded. Lacan’s Sado-Kantian ethics equates morality and desire, with the Thing—an interior excess and emptiness—marking the cause and stumbling block of law’s subjective and symbolic frames and thus the locus where ethics—What do I do? What do I want?—comes into play. Beyond the image of the other that is no longer the reflection of the subject, some Other Thing, discloses the underlying imbalance, disequilibrium and asymmetry in the constitution of subjects, structures and systems. Love your zombie: the question of (neighbourly) jouissance (which is of course never particularly “neighbourly”) returns ethics to love in a different, nonnarcissistic dimension, and to death, in the shape of a drive at the limits of organic being. John Rajchman notes that psychoanalytic ethics deal with “a form of love that is not based on those ideal parts of ourselves that would allow us to master our fate or obtain salvation; on the contrary, such an ethical paradigm would necessarily open up even our first love, our love of ourselves, to a traumatic and fateful cause.” Beyond mirror, beyond fantasy, the imbalance manifested in the relation between ethics and love, discloses a strangeness that is never resolved: “our eros is at odds with our ethos; its occurrence in our lives is always unheimlich” (43). Disturbing, it can also be a site of unpalatable relish or a locus of threatening, uncontained intensity: “the other is held to enjoy a certain form of jouissance or superabundant vitality” (Lacan, Ethics 236). This cannot be grasped by the subject who remains jealous of it, fears it, wishes to destroy it. Or even by one who is threatened by it: the other—as in racism—works too hard or too little, sponges on social security, spends too much in “our” shops or on wining and dining “our” women (Miller 125). Not only do “they” enjoy in mysterious or secret ways, “they” also threaten the customs and habits in which an indigenous culture finds and filters out its own jouissance. Withheld and inscrutable, the other’s jouissance is also too close-by and disturbing. It is an “excessive enjoyment” capable of “ruining our way of life,” the very “Thing” that, imaginarily and practically indefinably, holds together a specific sense of culture (Zizek 203).

The imperative to exceed—in work, consumption, life, on screens—becomes dominant, no longer curtailed by a system of limits and prohibitions;
the drive becomes a constant pressure that abjects as much as it upholds, causing dissatisfaction, devaluation, disappointment. Shopping is, for example, impelled by a demand for more and more consumption on commodities that promise fulfilment but never quite succeed in delivering it (Lieberman 247). In the absence or, as Kristeva calls it, the “collapse” of the Other (the loosening of social, sacred and communal bonds), the rise of abjection is calibrated to the decline of prohibition and foregrounds those wastes—often bodily—that disrupt and maintain social and subjective borders (18). The waste of consumer capitalism becomes an overriding principle built into its patterns of useless spending and the exploitation of desire beyond moral or rational restraints (Goux 210). If, as it was for Lacan, the surplus value of industrial capitalism was “an imitation surplus jouissance,” then consumer capitalism is predicated on the endless production of excesses and intensities: contemporary consumer economies, in which the imagined freedom of the market and the self appears as the only imperative, elicit jouissance at the expense of regulation (Other 81). The call for more and more (jouissance, performance, expenditure) is evident in the “bombardments” of advertising, the slogans directed at consumers, in advice columns in magazines and self-help books and lifestyle glossies: “the imperative is to have a bigger, better, more ecstatic orgasm, body, career, sense of motherhood, relationship etc.” This is a pressure for the “excess of jouissance”—a pressure that becomes articulated as choice itself and is taken to excess in the absence of restraint; after all, the “lack of social prohibitions with regard to what kind of jouissance is socially acceptable” (Salecl, Anxiety 146). Yet the excess of choice also produces anxiety: what do I really desire? Is this the right thing? Am I living up to my full potential? Given the absence of any structure, boundaries or limits against which desire can be plotted, it is impossible to distinguish one’s true desire or complete jouissance from all the others on display shelves or on screens. This absence of an external framework, a big Other, makes any decision traumatic (Salecl, “Society” 168). The multiple calls for choice have contradictory effects and feed pathological consumption such as ‘addictions’ to shopping, sex, alcohol—and lead to the consumption of more therapeutic services like counselling, support groups, self-help manuals: “it looks as if free consumers end by consuming themselves” (160).

The implosion of consumption on itself manifests the repetition of jouissance to disturbing extremes (obesity, substance abuse) so that intense pleasure-pain is sought out beyond the measures of good health and longevity, a path toward (self)destruction enjoined by and in excess of the very excesses embedded in consumption. It is as if, along with the impossible freedoms of consumption, the subject internalises the inconsistencies and contradictions of capitalism, manifesting pathologies not of privation but overabundance: stress, eating disorders, self-harming, and a range of anxieties (Anxiety 160). Where psychoanalytic ethics traces the ambivalence and disequilibrium of excess, contemporary forms of ethics are part
of the management strategy of a generalised excess controlling the specificities and unpredictabilities of individuals, situated within the “self-satisfied egoism of the affluent West, with advertising, and with service rendered to the powers that be” (Badiou 7). It manages vainly, either encouraging more (albeit kinder and fairer) trade in the same system of competition or it negates forms of enjoyment perceived as inimical to “life,” “optimisation,” “good(s)”: it cannot deal with differences that are too different and institutes a “resignation in the face of necessity,” a nihilistic, death driven, “purely negative” will entirely compliant with economy (“the modern name for necessity, as everyone knows, is economics”) (30). This will to nothingness is the death drive, the condition of being consumed by (inescapable) economic criteria with no alternative or other possibility for thought, judgement, action (33); it is a will in which will is effaced, in which death equals complete symbolic absorption and paralysis. Death-driven in this way, the subject abandons desire, and cedes to a specific excess. In this, Badiou is right to note the strength of Lacan’s ethical statement (“do not give up on your desire”), for he locates it in relation to that “excess beyond oneself which enables the passing through of truth (and superhumanity)” (47–49). Evil—in the conservatism and materialism of a Western capitalist ethos—is “that which it does not own or enjoy” (14): in seeking out evil and rendering its victims or perpetrators subhuman, the West can enjoy its own mastery and reaffirm its assumed superiority. If this enjoyment parallels consumer jouissance to the point of charting an implosive spiral towards self-destruction, then it is also an excessive affirmation (of rights, life) that is paradoxically an intensification of the hold of a systematic paralysis and resignation to a nihilistic line of capitalism. But that other mode of excess—a death drive evident in Lacan’s Ethics—suggests a more radical negativity that through destruction raises the possibility of recreation. Industrial and postindustrial, the zombie metaphor encompasses capitalism’s inherent and systemic cannibalism and its effects on individual beings, turning them into rabid, mindless consumers, embodiments of its own excess (Jameson 258; Fisher 15). Love your zombie does not only make monstrous the system that dehumanises its worker-consumers, it confronts subjectivity with an excess that is both other and not quite other enough; it opens up the self to something outside its own grasp and simultaneously to an interiority too intimate to be avowed, asking for identification in the face of disgust and repulsion, moving beyond oneself, one’s home, one’s images, and the very system that polices the limits of existence.

WALKING DEAD

Zombie fictions, along with many returns on screens, in games and graphic fictions, are on the rise. Although they have, unsurprisingly, an excessive dimension, usually associated with capitalist consumption, this is not
obviously or necessarily ethical. Two strands of ethics—the contemporary media-managerial form that polarises good and evil, reinforcing the parameters of Western capitalism, and a more troubling ethics of excess and horror—are evident in presentations of infection, consumption, dehumanisation and destruction. In some cases, the excesses of contemporary culture are rendered revolting and obscene, in others pathetic and laughable. But loving one’s zombie, whether it be a monster that disturbs or reinforces differences between life and death, that parodies or critiques monstrous systems of control, or offers an uncomplicated object of destruction, is an injunction that will always remain at issue in terms of excesses of pleasure, violence and consumption. While humans can be zombified, zombies—despite their recent assumption of reflective consciousness, speech and wit—rarely find themselves humanised.

As its title suggests, World War Z imagines excess on a global scale. Written as an addendum to a UN report documenting the economic, social and political consequences of a decades-long struggle with a world-wide zombie epidemic, the book takes the form of fragments: short interview statements from protagonists in different roles and from different countries are offered as a supplement—the “human factor”—to an official report comprised of statistics, facts and tables. Through these interviews, anecdotes and witness statements, the peculiar and particular events and personal experiences are detailed. The context is clearly biopolitical: texts made up of factual accounts, statistics, demographics and strategic policies do not leave enough room for the details of human struggle, heroism and suffering. A supplement, the text completes an official (inhuman) report with emotions and experiences that are inadmissible to an order of facts and figures and, in adding human sentiment, it then begins to exceed official requirements. The “human factor” is supplementary, an afterthought, in the global order which is the setting in and against which the rise of the zombie infection is plotted. Economic migrations, flows of goods and bodies, organ trafficking and viral infection are the dead excesses, while capitalism is the obscenity that is mirrored by zombie masses: its entrepreneurial exploitation of the virus and the fear it evokes (Brooks 54–5); its cultivation of celebrity arrogance; its overreliance on technological gadgets in business and war (94)—all of these things are shown to be callous, useless or ineffective. The roads out of urban centres are littered with “hair dryers, GameCubes, laptops by the dozen” (123). These objects—now utterly useless—are taken not for reasons of consumer stupidity but from fear that these precious Things will be stolen, a clinging to a way of life they cannot imagine relinquishing. Still, ways of life are more radically overturned as survivors redefine the values necessary to survive: white-collar managerial classes are reclassified as useless and are retrained (in carpentry, building, metalwork) by the servants (often immigrants) who they once employed on low wages. If the ethos and material support of comfortable Western life is—rather enjoyably—inverted in the novel’s portrayal of global capitalism’s
excesses, its ethics—though turning on excess—is more suspect. No identification, sympathy, recognition or understanding can be admitted; there is no humanisation of the other that was once human. What is left is just vigilance, discipline and violence, like the wars waged on terror with a total and omnipresent threat that legitimates any extreme force and mobilises an entire population (Hardt and Negri 13; Virilio 160–61). Identification is fatal: the other must remain utterly other—it is an “enemy” who is “actively waging total war”: “every single one of them, every second of every day, was devoted to consuming all life on Earth” (Brooks 273). The tireless inhuman multiplicity of capitalist consumption is agglomerated and expelled, while excess is countered by greater excess, and consumption consumed in global *jouissance*: the ethics it demands is one of evil, of an object to be sacrificed as immense as the value one imagines recovering. The excesses mobilised in the war are extremely pleasurable and distinctly unpalatable—human, even humanising, but far from humane. One survivor describes the crude but highly effective weapon designed for use against zombies; it is a metal spike called a “lobo,” which is cheap, practical and effective, but which is also used more often than necessary because “it just felt good . . . personal, empowering. You could feel the skull split. A real rush, like you were taking back your life, you know?” The intensity of emotional energy—moving the subject beyond practicality or utility—signals a recovery of one’s stolen way of life. It is beyond morality, too: another witness discounts any claim to legitimacy on the grounds that zombies are already dead: “Horseshit; it’s murder, and it’s a rush like nothing else” (Brooks 331). Offering satisfaction in consumption-destruction beyond global commodification, this murderous expenditure enables a recuperation of self and community, but at the expense of huge numbers of humans, if not humanity itself. Towards the end of the novel, for instance, Joe Muhammed, a wheelchair-bound Pakistani-American artist, notes that the war has united humans in a “powerful shared experience.” And his observations have shocking implications that are readily acknowledged in his denial: “I’m not going to say the war was a good thing. I’m not that much of a sick fuck, but you’ve got to admit that it did bring people together” (Brooks 336). Not that much of a sick fuck: not quite, but close. Although he stops short of affirming global devastation worthwhile, the suggestion remains that such an apocalyptic fantasy feeds on the zombie threat. Immense suffering and slaughter become a condition of human renewal: a monstrous, excessive, inhuman idea.

Other engagements with capital’s unbearable and intimate excesses offer a closer, if critical, identification between financiers, consumers and zombies. These texts enact an old logic of monstrosity that, through hyperbolic and obscene images, seems to recoil from extremes. *Way of the Barefoot Zombie*, for instance, presents a bifurcated identification with the zombie image of capitalism—both its systemic and subjective forms—that seems ethical in its denunciation of inhuman excesses. Written after the credit crunch, the cold satire of the text foregrounds the obscenity of wealth creation and
the people who enjoy it; in one section, a group of super-rich, self-obsessed, indulgent, greedy, and viciously arrogant characters attend a luxurious and exclusive corporate-consultancy training programme on an isolated islet off the coast of Haiti. Their lack of morality and human empathy is echoed by the fact that they are learning a specialist technique to become even wealthier: this technique involves, in a parody of management training seminars (an idea-gimmick; a guru-guide; successful motivational speakers; expensive facilities), becoming single-minded and focused with the aim of literally shedding their humanity. They want, in line with advertising slogans and corporate mottoes, to “find that extra something,” “success beyond success,” and the “path to wealth beyond reason and power beyond excess” (Bark 19). To exceed humanity—“that enfeebling impediment”—is to jettison it, dispensing with compassion, altruism, sympathy, self-reflection and conscience in order to accumulate more effectively. And zombies have a “single-minded sense of purpose”: they “want it more” and they are driven by a hunger that is “raw and real” (Bark 30). Moving with and acting like zombies, the participants in the training programme are forced to kill and eat the innards of union activists, an act they enthusiastically enjoy. Not only is capital shown to be inhuman and cannibalistic, but its subjects are willing to discard any (human) values that delimit its expansion. Zombies are no longer repulsive (that is, after all, a weak human response), but they are embraced and imitated as their horror transforms into an object of aspiration on the path to inhuman excess.

The novel offers another identification with the zombie through a powerful idealisation: the walking corpses are “noble monsters, death defiers, graveyard rebels,” “magnificent” “awesome creatures.” Passive-aggressive antagonists of consumer culture, zombies are admired and imitated (through dress and zombie walks) by a group of teenage kids from the same class as the voracious entrepreneurs who aspire to consuming single-mindedness. A complicit alternative, an equivalent and antithetical identification, the sacralisation of the zombie as anti-capitalist rebel requires protest and action: the teenagers form the “ZLF” (Zombie Liberation Front) and plan to free captive zombies. This parody of animal rights activism—ZLF being equivalent to the animal liberation front (ALF)—and the social position of the teenagers align their humanism with a sanctification of the outcast and the subhuman status of the traumatised victim: their abjection and self-loathing is magnified in their idealisation of zombies. At the end, there is a discussion of the significance of zombies for Western audiences and this draws out a clear moral (a moral that is updated, in the main, from Romero’s films and supplemented by further animal-eco-sentimental platitudes about consumer culture): zombies are the (not-so) “secret” image of “ourselves and society”; they are figures of the way we go about “mindlessly consuming material things” and “devouring the world’s resources” (Bark 307). Monstrosity is turned to a good and moral purpose—it is a warning
about the fate of a world in crisis. But its recognition of the imminence of global economic and ecological disaster is dampened as the teenagers simply readjust and become better persons, more at ease with themselves, their families and the—unchanged—world. One returns home, determined to patch up his relationship with his mother and foster father, the other remains on the island to continue the healing spiritual journey offered by Vodun, open to that “invisible world” previously lacking in her spoilt, materialistic lifestyle: “having a faith allows me to be the person I really am” (315). Leaving behind disaffection and political-economic critique, the novel, closing with self-discovery and spiritual fulfilment, performs its own (ironic) ethical-managerial programme.

**TALKING DEAD**

Identification with the zombie takes on multiple variations: the abject figure, the sacred creature, the pitiful monster, the victim. All manifestations, though, shadow the contemporary ethics surrounding the maintenance of, albeit inverted, distinctions between master and slave, self and other. “Wound culture,” “traumaculture” or “victim culture” are the names sometimes given to discourses that display the “conformism of abjection” (Foster 166). Otherness is rendered attractive in that it delivers a curious specialness: pain and trauma mark out the individual’s irreducible uniqueness, and authorise its rights to speak against normative social pressures. But this is not an ethics of care or otherness in which difference is respected or acknowledged; rather, it is a cry for recognition and love from a cold and absent Other (institutions, parents, other people, the world) and from a self whose narcissism is without support. When that cry—in fictions where corpses speak—comes from a zombie, the intimate and inextricable entanglements of abjection and otherness pathetically and comically display a world of helpless selves in a monstrous system of prejudice and exclusion.

The pseudo-sacralisation of abjection, of an otherness so other it must be unique, is laid out in fictions of the talking corpse. When the world is presented from the position of the zombie, questions that should not arise—of self-consciousness, speech, subjectivity—become pressing, pathetic and comic. Reversals of perspective engender genre satire (romzomcom), social satire, or, less clearly marked, open a gentle traumatisation correlated to the absence of a governing framework in the outside-less-ness of hypercapital that implodes on the zombified individual. Difference and sameness elide without strangeness: to be undead is neither homely nor unhomely, neither same nor other; it is a kind of “non-state” where the subject is automated through a series of repetitions and habituations. A focus on the oxymoronic “zombie self” enables the implosions of zombie-making capital to be expounded in (comic) detail.
and banal monstrosity; here, the daily mechanisms whereby beings are individuated, alienated and excluded are itemised in terms of a pervasive but barely detectable sense of social monstrosity. Otherness becomes harder to place because the “other”—the zombie—speaks with practically the same voice, reflecting on an existence that is neither living nor dead. And this speaking subject articulates itself from a position of familiar anxiety, a position identified with so many subjects of Western capitalism as they ask poignant questions about identity and seek out resolutions for feelings of loss, inadequacy and alienation.

Curiously, the gamut of emotions and anxieties evinced by zombies in the romzomcom *Breathers* is barely removed from those commonly displayed in adolescence, or by sufferers of addiction, abuse or trauma. The condition of “spontaneous resurrection” is quite common in the novel’s contemporary setting (the US west coast) and this “condition” is the subject of popular talk shows and liberationist political slogans. Written from the perspective of a recently dead man who now lives—due to social stigma—in his parents’ cellar, the plot seems to revolve around the familiar stories of adolescent familial tensions. He drinks a lot, goes to therapy and attends a support group (“Undead Anonymous”) where “survivors” (ironically reversing usual movie distinctions between humans and zombies) utter numerous self-help mantras like “I am not a victim,” “believe in yourself” and “help yourself” (46). Counselling addresses the pressures of undeath and the victimisation suffered at the hands of the living (these include curfews, being caged in the animal pound, vigilante attacks, theft of limbs). They have no civil rights, no vote, no driver’s licences, no credit cards; they cannot run for office, enter shops, eat in restaurants, go to the movies, receive welfare support or employment benefits. Crassly, their social position is compared with African-Americans in pre-Civil Rights America. Yet these zombies have feelings and needs. Offering a refuge from prejudice and hostility, the self-help group allows personal growth and provides companionship; it even enables a very fulfilling and intense romance to develop between the protagonist and another—extremely attractive—walking corpse. The path back to physical and mental well-being does not come through counselling’s management of expectations or the adjustment of self to the demands of a hostile set of norms. Ironically, though, it does fulfil some therapeutic mantras: they learn to accept—even love—who they are. They are zombies. And being zombies means doing what zombies—for all their emotions, passions and sensibilities—do best. At first, they enjoy jars of preserved “venison meat,” preferring the flavour of this homemade and rougher food to the tasteless fare they are offered at home. Their enjoyment of this foodstuff correlates with its nutritional value: it stimulates regeneration. Eating human flesh is delicious; it is so tasty it overrides any residually human moral qualms. Quickly moving to fresh meat, they discover that human flesh is very
much their Thing: “only a higher intelligence could make breathers taste so good” (Browne 191, 194). The intensity is overwhelming: “once you eat part of your mother during a candlelight dinner with your undead girlfriend, you pretty much know you’ve chosen a path most people aren’t going to understand” (Browne 220). Nothing is quite as tasty as freshly cooked mother. The passive-aggressive complaint of the uniquely misunderstood—a parodic refrain of personal attachment to one’s singular suffering running throughout the novel—assumes a less defensive tone as the hero embraces his condition in an ironic endorsement and affirmation of standard counselling advice: he has clearly learned to “help himself”! In a truly and disturbingly ethical manner he does not give up on himself or his desire, but unapologetically recognises who he is: “after all,” he utters, “I am a zombie” (206). This acceptance is made precisely in terms of acknowledging—against all reason, custom, habit—the nature of the jouissance that defines him, horrible and cannibalistic though it is. The novel does not end with a happy zomb-discovery or a fulfilling romance or an end to abuse and discrimination; instead, vigilante attacks and vindictive reprisals reassert social animosities in the public sphere. In the end, differences remain unbridgeable: “we are zombies; we eat breathers” (Browne 305).

The double-edged comedy of Breathers pushes the logic of the romzom-com to its reversible limit. Not only does the use of the zombie first-person narrative play with the standard tropes of the genre (zombies are no longer will-less, speech-less, non-conscious objects) and reflexively debunk popular media and movie myths. But it only undermines generic expectations up to a specific point: for all the therapy, irony, and identifications, zombies are quite happy being flesh-eating walking corpses. They enjoy it. The counter-generic satirical humanisation that is developed throughout the novel eventually inverts itself and, in so doing, reasserts the primary feature of zombie mythology. Once these lines are redrawn and clarified, the society can breathe—and destroy—again. The novel’s reversals are, then, reversed again; the sympathy induced in its satire on social customs and monstrosity—a critique that apparently exposes the hypocrisies, de-humanisations, abuse and exclusion of contemporary “liberal” society—turns again on itself; it ultimately targets the “monsters” themselves, and their pathetic adoption of an otherness supported by ethical and therapeutic paraphernalia sustaining the position of the victim, the wounded, the wretched. Beneath its ironies, Breathers, it seems, is not a particularly tolerant or liberal novel. Affirmations of otherness as sites for self-recognition no longer seem valid or effective positions for securing identity or selfhood, for these sites are eventually attacked in a reassertion of irreconcilable differences and conventional hierarchies. In the conjunction of generic and anti-social satire, the main object of criticism becomes visible: the ongoing process of cultural-critical de-monstering
in which various figures of alterity and repugnance become emblematic of marginal and excluded social positions and sustain a waning critique aimed at displaying a resistant or progressive political posture. Thankfully, zombies—even thinking, feeling, loving ones—are not so compliant when it comes to accepting their designated place as others or victims; they remain destructive and negative, yet ethically, they are true to their flesh-eating nature.

The inevitability of absolute division. This form of otherness is utterly opposed to categories of self that it nonetheless constitutes and dissolves at the same time, and this is, of course, one of the ironic consolations of zombie fictions in a world in which uncertainty in respect to the Other is omnipresent. If the price paid for the return of antithesis and opposition is violence and destruction, then so much the better: zombie excess sustains human excess, for it perpetuates an apocalyptic, satisfying, sacrificial expenditure and sublime enjoyment-unto-death in which self—indeed all selves—escape the paralysis of life-in-death and zombie repetition.

The first-person zombie protagonist of *Warm Bodies* offers ironic reflections on the similarities of life before and after his kind have overrun the planet. Now they are resigned and tired, but capable of wit: perhaps the muteness of the dead signals that “they have nothing left to say,” as if worn out by the pressures, banalities and low-level anxieties besetting contemporary existence (Marion 11). Or perhaps they are just exhausted by the omnipresent crises, threats and disasters that constantly plague them: “when the entire world is built on death and horror, when existence is a constant state of panic, it’s hard to get worked up about any one thing, specific fears have become irrelevant” (36). Little difference is apparent between a zombie speaking in the aftermath of global devastation and consumers at the start of the twenty-first century. Zombie self-consciousness, world-weary and worn-out, maintains the link between ambivalent identification and contemporary cultural commentary: the collapsing near future from which the zombie narrator speaks addresses a present that has already collapsed. Present anomie and excess and future devastation are linked spatially: zombies congregate in a city airport, some enjoying, when the power flickers on, the same old pleasures of riding escalators just for the sake of something to do. Non-people now, they are habituated to the non-places defining the late twentieth-century.

Zombie life still involves old habits. They wander aimlessly around non-places, groaning, fucking, falling in love, marrying, and even practicing religion—in a diminished, hollow fashion. Where love used to be “an exercise in agony,” it has been reduced to wandering hand-in-hand without saying much. And sex too: they are described as “naked [and] awkwardly slamming their bodies together, grunting and groping each other’s pale flesh. He was limp. She was dry” (Marion 58). If the difference
appears minimal, it is felt to be—at least by the protagonist—an immense gulf. Religion is similarly emptied of all but semblance: ‘a gathering in the middle of a circle of mobile airplane steps waves and groans at the behest of a zombie preacher. The narrator laments one particular loss: the forgotten names of self and other, and the subsequent severance from continuity, connection, history and futurity. Still, he recalls “eff ort” and “targets and deadlines, goals and ambitions,” his former life as corporate and managerial as his current zombifi ed surroundings. Death, from this perspective, “is not so bad”; it offers a “distilled” world that is emptied out of all the extraneous, yet once essential, trappings of Western life. Thus, a “chasm” remains between the zombie self and its environment, an experience that is, in an existential way, a fear of open spaces: For it forces one to be in a space without hard lines, roofs or horizons, an experience that is “strangely horrific” as one stares “at the gaping maw of the sky,” at its “emptiness vast and absolute,” an image, it seems, of the vacuum within (Marion 4).

Feeding remains a powerful and fulfi lling imperative. It provides a rush that is intensely anticipated: “electricity in limbs,” “visions of blood,” “mesmerizing red fl owing through bright pink tissues in intricate webs and Pollock fractals pulsating and vibrating with life” (14). Zombie jouissance, death encountering and gorging on life, is intense, full and vibrant, with fl ashes of a victim’s memory and the pain. As a result, the zombie hero fi nds his own feeding unpleasant, appalled by the victims’ screams, agony and suffering (7). Yet human food, rather than humans as food, is relatively unpalatable, for it is devoid of living substance: a “lifeless waste” of “empty calories.” “En . . . joy!” parodies the zombie as he delivers a frozen meal to a human captive (Marion 41). Lifeless human food; lifeless human life: the “warm bodies” of the title play out a similarly diminished existence, in which the body is driven by survival alone. They have retreated to a reinforced city sports stadium, “gaudy monument to an era of excess, a world of waste and want and misguided dreams that is now profoundly over” (Marion 113). The “card house of civilisation” has collapsed, the “big picture is gone,” any vision of the future has vanished (119; 70). In a world dominated by the need to survive, the daily diet is a meagre ration of synthetic carbohydrates supplemented by a few spindly greens. Days are spent scavenging for useful supplies. Militarised—as though the war on terror has become routine—the remaining citizens are marshalled to prepare against imminent attack: it is a “posthuman, posthumous age” stripped of meaning and higher purpose, it is another form of joyless living death after the end of the world. Neither side—humans nor zombies—are inclined to relinquish the life-in-death that defi nes them and to which they are bound by repetition, habit and fear. Both groups are fully conditioned to living out the end of the world in as limited and desperate a fashion
as possible. Paralysis before extinction takes the death drive to a global level: all are living an end that has already happened; every one and thing is exhausted and resigned within a horizon-less land where life-in-death and death-in-life are a sorry encore.

Yet the zombie protagonist and a young human woman are impelled to challenge the implosion of consumption upon itself by refusing stasis and indifference. He leaves the mass of undead and refuses to feed; he also cares for his counterpart, and is stirred by an impulse for some other way of life, neither zombie nor human, that can release them from the confines of oppositional (non)living. Like his female counterpart, he has not given up on desire, the world, or its future: without any particular plan they try to transform existing patterns. By refusing mirrored paralysis and inevitable extinction, they follow the death drive’s ethical excess, seeking some “Other thing,” that might lead to a new idea of existence that goes beyond the prevailing orders (Lacan, *Ethics* 212). Negative and romantic, the transformation is ushered in with a transgressively joyous act: a kiss-bite that shatters the ultimate zombie-human taboo—the sharing of bodily fluids. In ecstasy and agony, life and anti-life struggle in monstrous viral conflict before reaching a crisis point. In the face of individual and global extinction, this act serves to reinvigorate life as something more than survival or feeding; it is unpredictable, risky and unknown. Their act stems from an ethics of excess; in the face of a situation that reduces everything, they refuse to give up on their desire, and they will not give in to a living death that was not their own. Their break with their respective groups moves them beyond themselves. In this, they remain true to an indefinable pressure shaping their actions—to “what’s squirming in our bones when everything else is stripped” (Marion 148). Beyond the end of the world, their drive seeks something other than an exhausted rapacious condition of equivalently consumptive zombie-humanity gone beyond its historical destiny: “I think we crushed ourselves down over centuries. Buried ourselves under greed and hate and whatever other sins we could find until our souls finally hit rock bottom of the universe. And then they scraped a hole through it, into some . . . dark place” (221). Buried in death, beyond death, in a darkness deeper than the bottom of the universe, the image of consumption-destruction is more—and less—than total. Becoming less than death, there is no transcendence, no idealist fantasy. But the strangely ethical romance between human and zombie (ridiculous though the sublimity of the plot may seem) refuses un-death through an act of sovereignty, gesturing to an impossible form of insubordination and resurrection, of un-undeath: “We will exhume ourselves” (239). Already dead, already zombie, already in a dark hole beyond the end of the world, the excess they acknowledge (ethical, other, immortal) is internal to and outside of humanity. Thus, they are beyond the parameters marked out by life and death, a desire sustained rather than ceded. Love your zombie: it may change the world.
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


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