

ZOMBIE AS PARODY: THE MISUSES OF SCIENCE  
AND THE NONHUMAN CONDITION  
IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY

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## VITA

Elizabeth MacLean Kent, daughter of Sandra Ann Kent and Thomas Patrick Kent, Jr., was born October 12, 1983, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She has one brother, Thomas Patrick Kent, III. She graduated from Pelham High School in 2002. She enrolled in Auburn University in the fall of 2002, and graduated Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts in English degree with a minor in Psychology on May 10, 2007. In the fall of 2007, she entered the Graduate School, and, after working as an English Center tutor, a Project Assistant in Auburn University's English Department, and a Graduate Teaching Assistant for two years, she graduated with a Master's degree in English in the Spring of 2009.

THESIS ABSTRACT  
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For this project, I will focus on those zombie films/texts that locate scientific and medical advances (or “advances”) as the source of cultural critique. Like Frankenstein in his laboratory, these particular zombie texts focus on the misuse of science and medicine. The main questions to answer for this project are: what is this virus that infects humanity? Where does it come from? How, if at all, are we to survive? What statement is being made about our society based on the portrayal of culture in these texts? Is this part of an emergent structure of feeling or residual structure of feeling? My argument is that these texts are part of a conservative movement away from scientific progress to the skeptical notion of “progress” or so-called progress. It seems to be that by playing with nature, we destroy nature. We corrupt ourselves by altering science in ways never meant to be done.

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**1. Introduction**

Contemporary zombies are not simply re-animated corpses; they are decaying remnants of modern society. The zombie “has been one of the most prevalent monsters in films of the second half of the twentieth century, and as many have noted, it has experienced a further resurgence (or should we say, *resurrection*) in British and American film in the last five years” and is more often than not about the forces that threaten human existence and “life as we know it” (Lauro and Embry 85). And, while it might be easy for viewers to identify zombies as “the” evil of the text, evil as it appears in representations of humans can (and often does) negate the violent and atrocious actions of their creations. The scientists in *Flight of the Living Dead*, for example, are at least equally as “evil” as the zombies themselves because it is their science that has brought such disease and chaos. Ultimately, the good/evil dichotomy is not useful because:

humans are attacked, killed and eaten by the re-animated dead, which usually results in the humans also becoming part of the living dead. There are evil humans, insane scientists, and power mad military leaders. There are humans who do nothing to protect themselves or others, or who shriek and run away. Other humans ignore the



danger until it is too late. There is violence and blood, and other things that typically make a viewer feel disgusted. Many times society as a whole is wiped out or at least its survival is seriously threatened (Gregson 21).

All of this – the violence, the blood, the chase for flesh – is part of an overarching goal to critique culture. The good/evil dichotomy is collapsed and the structure of the zombie film is utilized in order to parody the horror genre and provide a postmodernist critique of science<sup>1</sup>.

In the texts that I have chosen to analyze – *Death Becomes Her*, *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later*, and *Flight of the Living Dead* – the zombies are recently deceased humans who have been re-animated.<sup>2</sup> While the majority of these zombies attack the living without prejudice or any discernable thought process, there are exceptions to the rule.<sup>3</sup> In the 1930s, the zombie “was considered a second-rate monster when compared with more-established spooky characters; it would appear in only a few titles before the decade’s end” (Kay 5). In the next decade, interest in horror had deteriorated in general, leaving only independent studios to pick up for the lack of major studio support (Kay 13). With the introduction of the atomic bomb, the 1950s was a time of resurgence for the horror genre; movie studios and producers saw the modern anxieties as a means of terrifying and entertaining the new adolescent movie crowd that brought in most of the

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<sup>1</sup> Science, as it functions here is a type of umbrella term. All of the films critique science to varying degrees. However, the specific science or scientific process is radically different. Still, the overarching goal and process is the same and connects all of these texts.

<sup>2</sup> Zombie beginnings come from voodoo from Haiti. These zombies were under the control of a voodoo priest. The zombies I am concerned with are not controlled slaves, but the infected or living dead.

<sup>3</sup> *Death Becomes Her* is my exception here. While Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn are not typical zombies, they do fit the criteria as mentioned in Glenn Kay’s *Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide*. Also, the two main zombies in this film do have thought processes, and they attack each other, not to feed but to one-up each other.

film industry's revenue. The studios, major and independent, "began to incorporate exaggerated atomic scares and alien menaces into zombie movies and other horror flicks" (Kay 24). Although "what constitutes a zombie has changed over the years and continues to evolve," these zombies derive from George A. Romero's zombie trilogy,<sup>4</sup> starting with *Night of the Living Dead*. According to Glenn Kay, the 1968 release of *Night of the Living Dead* "forever change[d] the rules of the zombie picture, not only cementing zombies' primary identity as the dead returned to life but also introducing ghoul-like characteristics into their personalities, including the consumption of human flesh as their meal of choice" (36). And while the zombie movies of the 1970s became more audacious, the following decades were periods of primarily slasher<sup>5</sup> not zombie films (Kay 102). Zombie movies were consistently produced during these periods but generally took a backseat to the more popular horror films of the day. Still, *Death Becomes Her* was released in 1992 and this is the earliest film under interrogation here.<sup>6</sup> The new millennium was the real resurgence of zombie films. And, not only did zombie movies come back into the film limelight; these new zombie movies became blockbusters, and with that success came bigger budgets and more gruesome gory special effects. In this contemporary period, films like *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later*, and *Flight of the Living*

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<sup>4</sup> Romero's trilogy of zombie films is: *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead*. The most recent installment is *Land of the Dead* that is, in many respects, the final installment of this series. Most often, however, analysts still consider the first three the most important.

<sup>5</sup> The slasher subgenre of horror is typically about a psychotic stalker who brutally murders his victims, although I have heard the term also applied to any horror film depicting acts of gruesome and brutal violence.

<sup>6</sup> I chose this film, which debuted much earlier than the rest of the pack, because its parody is deeply involved with science and the idea of obsession with youth. This film exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon calls parody or "ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality" that she sees as "central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 93).

*Dead* make their appearance and “popularized the zombie film like never before” (Kay 218).

Not all zombie movies explain the presence of the re-animated corpses. *Dawn of the Dead* never tackles this issue in the plot/filming but hints towards a possible religious/mythic reason for the infestation of zombie bodies. The epigraph to the film is “when Hell is full, the dead will walk the Earth,” implying that society in general is corrupt. Therefore, the living “survivors” must deal with the world left after zombie epidemics. More often than not, however, a more straightforward cause is established: science causes zombie epidemics, and the plot lines for these films follow two similar paths. From those that I have viewed, two major plotlines stick out: the gradual build-up plot and the survivalist plot. The gradual build-up plotline involves a small town in the middle-of-nowhere that has a zombie outbreak (or sometimes begins with a single zombie) and the infection spreads to more and more people, towns, cities, and countries. Hence, the gradual build-up. Usually, the news of the spread comes from the media; the cast encounters more serious problems as the epidemic increases and the “humans” end up barricading themselves – which leads into the second type of plot structure: survivalist. By this point in the movie (or from the beginning in some cases) the “humans” are secluded from the zombie-infested world (culture) and must contemplate the meaning of their existence.

Zombie movies borrow from drama here because politics, personalities, and sometimes gender conflicts lead to quarreling, division, and the introduction of zombies into their once well-defended location. From the texts I have analyzed, there is also usually a rogue survivor in the film who attempts an escape from the hideout, only to

allow zombies access to the barrier. The two similar plot lines are the source of much entertainment (part of horror's appeal) and the source of the postmodern parody.

In fact, horror's "popular appeal, in itself, does not differentiate horror from other film genres. Genres, by definition, hold great attraction for viewers," and "while horror's popular appeal has proven especially durable, it is not a distinctive factor that sets horror apart" (Prince 2). Part of what distinguishes horror is the fright. Audiences know they will be frightened; that much is expected. But because audiences never tire of being frightened "they never stop feeling frightened about their fellow human beings and the world they collectively inhabit. What must be done to remain human? This is the great question that horror films pose, and it is a question that gets asked again and again because it can never be answered" (Prince 3). The boundaries of these kinds of experiences get more and more complex with time. In this postmodern world, "the boundaries of any genre are slippery, but those of the postmodern horror film are particularly treacherous to negotiate since one of the defining features of postmodernism is the aggressive blurring of boundaries" (Pinedo 85). Isabel Pinedo is certainly correct when she argues that the contemporary horror film, "those horror films produced since about 1968, can be characterized as postmodern" (85). What makes these more contemporary zombie texts so interesting is their parody of the discourse conventions and the treatment of science in a world that seems obsessed with eternal life, youth and beauty. In order to get this point across, however, bodily difference is completely necessary. The body becomes a site of struggle where cultural (re)evaluations take place; in these films, the boundary between human and monstrous or diseased bodies is blurred. The zombie is clearly a monstrous body but only becomes so from the so-called mad

science of their human counterparts. These humans are monstrous too and these films showcase the zombie as the effect of rogue science, just as *Night of the Living Dead* showcased racial and gender struggles. Horror, in essence, changes and adapts to the culture and reflects that period's anxieties that are "informed by popular attitudes towards modern medicine and related areas" (Boss 14). In order to assist with the connection to science, Susan Sontag's ideas about illness as a metaphor will be featured because, as she writes, "illness has always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust" (Sontag 72).

Disease is also likely to be a cause of zombification. Susan Sontag is angry; her book, *Illness as Metaphor*, is not about illness itself but the manifestations of illness as seen in books and operas. She writes that the symptoms for diseases are not merely about the disease itself; instead, it is a state of being. Certain personality traits become linked to diseased people. And while she believes that being truthful about illness is to rid it of the metaphor, the metaphor in these texts is the kind of metaphor that should produce corrective measures because the critique is aimed at a specific target and not just used naively. While Susan Sontag's subject is not illness itself, she discusses "the uses of illness as a figure or metaphor. My [Sontag's] point is that illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (Sontag 3). For Sontag, "A disease in the lungs is, metaphorically, a disease of the soul. Cancer, a disease that can strike anywhere, is a disease of the body" (Sontag 18). Where then, you might ask, is the zombie virus located? It is all encompassing; it takes no prisoners. The zombie virus is soul, body, and, most importantly, mind. Sontag's discussion of cancer likens it to a

“disease not understood – in an era in which medicine’s central premise is that all diseases can be cured” (5). The zombie virus is the same kind of disease that Sontag discusses in this section of her book. Like any other deadly infection, this zombie virus spreads by bodily fluids (including but not limited to small bites and partial dismemberment) and causes flu-like symptoms, death, and re-animation, but there is no cure for it.

*Night of the Living Dead* attributes zombification to radiation, but *28 Days Later*’s zombies come from a scientifically engineered virus out of control and *Return of the Living Dead*’s zombies appear due to a poison of some kind. The zombie virus – no film has discovered a cure or vaccination and no one is immune. The film *I Am Legend* may actually be the first step in this direction, and it may be an outlier in that science is both an anxiety and a savior. However, science is most definitely the cause of the monsters in the film,<sup>7</sup> and science the most common root of infection throughout zombie films. The tone here is different from earlier texts, but

the sensational acts of Frankenstein’s ‘workshop of filthy creation’ – the twisted bodily transfigurations of Promethean guilt – and the gothic legacy have given way to a matter-of-fact and routine instances of physical helplessness, frequently at the hands, or rather the tools, of some brightly-lit and hygienic publicly-funded institution (Boss 15)

These postmodern horror texts change and adapt to the contemporary culture by using parody of cause and structure to address contemporary concerns about scientific progress.

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<sup>7</sup> The monsters in *I Am Legend* are not traditional zombies. Actually, some argue that they aren’t zombies at all. In some ways, they exhibit the characteristics of vampires (the sun burns them so they can only come out at night.) However, there is room to argue that they are zombie-esque.

These so-called “monsters” say more about culture than some might expect.

From a postmodern perspective, “what we call ‘culture’ is seen as the *effect* of representations, not their source. Yet...western capitalist culture has also shown an amazing power to normalize (or ‘doxify’) signs and images, however disparate (or contesting) they may be” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 7). Postmodernism best explains the tendency of zombie texts to be both fearful and playful. Interestingly, postmodernism as seen in these texts is often more conservative than we tend to see the world today<sup>8</sup>, and, thusly, these texts are antagonistic toward the progressive dimensions of scientific progress and yet playful with the images and discourse conventions used to represent it. In this thesis I want to explore the links between postmodern (as both a theory and a practice) parody and the contemporary zombie text as it deals with science, because “what postmodern theory and practice together suggest is that everything always was ‘cultural’ in the sense, that is, always mediated by representations” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 34). To be clear, I see postmodernism as implicitly political and ideological; postmodernism is also a point of view from which I may view cultural texts as culture itself. In other words, a postmodern text questions representation by parodying (and thus exposing) the world that is made up of representations of representations.

The past is always available for reinterpretation and parody, and the refusal of a single, unified meaning does not exist. History and culture are self-referential and indeterminate, and postmodernism allows for the questioning of culture within culture itself. One such avenue to do this is parody, which forces us to question artistic

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<sup>8</sup> By this I mean a general tendency to see the world as always progressing, as if on a linear path. The idea of cultural regression, in general, has negative connotations and is, therefore, avoided.

originality, the natural and the neutral. Linda Hutcheon defines parody as “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” which is appropriate, “for postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 185, 1). The interest in traditional zombie film structure and the obsession with science are not sarcastic attacks of popular culture. Instead, they are focused parodies that have political/ideological significance, and, in their postmodernist nature, take “the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 1). Linda Hutcheon believes these political strategies are essential to an understanding of parody, and I agree with her because “postmodern theory and practice are positioned within the system and yet work to allow its premises to be seen as fictions, or as ideological structures” (*Poetics* 19). These zombie movies have this kind of position and the use of the fictional status allows for a system of parody.

These texts are parodies in two ways – they parody a world obsessed with science and show the aftermath of this obsession and they, in some ways, parody early zombie movies in that they attempt to address social problems under the guise of horror. However, in both of these circumstances, these texts achieve parody by either making the subject ridiculous or altering the structure of such texts. While the word “mock” may seem appropriate on the surface, there is a deeper and more analytical questioning behind the parody. This questioning stems from a postmodern consciousness of the world as inherently questionable and not fixed. Coming from a critical standpoint, parody



reprises past art that is always critical. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing; it does not wrest past art from its original historical context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference (Hutcheon, Politics 93).

Parody and comedy combine in these texts in order to provide a liminal space where questioning becomes less transgressive and more authorized. They hold up a mirror to the world, but that mirror is a fun house mirror that allows for easy-to-swallow critique. As Linda Hutcheon says, “postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past representations it cites, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from that past today – by time and by the subsequent history of those representations” (Hutcheon, Politics 94). Because the parodies are located in zombie texts, the body will figure predominantly. Death and other bodily destructions will occur onscreen because it is part of the point of critique for the viewers to see it all take place right in front of them. While not all viewers have medical or anatomical knowledge required to judge these bodily distortions as completely accurate,

what seems to be more important is that they are recognizable signifiers of the subject’s demonstrable physical limitations, being indicative not of a widespread interest in human physiology but of a closing-off or reduction of identity to its corporal horizons. A concern with the self as body. (Boss 15-16)

Again, Sontag's book about illness is important to consider because she is writing about the self as body in many ways. She argues that illness is not a metaphor; it is real. But these films parody real illness to prove a point. AIDS is a real illness but it is also a huge cultural moment; it is a particularly postmodern illness and it is social in ways cancer is not. Although these films do not suggest that the virus is like AIDS, zombies are manifestations of the same social/alienated double bind that AIDS is. Cosmetic surgery, too, is a kind of social illness in that many get cosmetic surgery to fit in to socially constructed concepts of beauty and, in the process, those individuals lose more and more of themselves and thusly become alienated from themselves. Cosmetic surgery is an addiction about which these parodies target.

Zombies are interesting subjects for analysis because they really break down culture well. They create nice dichotomies for filmmakers to then complicate. In zombie movies and texts, airplanes become overrun by zombies, bodies mutate into personified abjection, and science is what kills life not what sustains it. In contemporary horror and in these zombie texts in particular, fear is generated by an abject parody of the everyday world. Society's main institutions – the media, science, and, of course, the body – become gruesome mirrors with which to view society. In this sense, horror is not something that happens elsewhere; instead, it is located locally and, sometimes, within our own bodies. This local threat that contemporary horror creates is usually immediate and all encompassing; the once significant world we inhabit breaks down completely and totally, leaving few survivors to battle through the gore and waste. While the horror may be unrelenting, there is also a playfulness to be seen, although that humor is, as Brophy suggests, “mostly perverse and/or tasteless” (12). Contemporary zombie films certainly

engage in a parody of horror conventions and the world that embraces (and created) them.

## 2. The Postmodern Zombie

### Death Becomes Her

*Death Becomes Her* is a Robert Zemeckis film starring Goldie Hawn as Helen Sharp, Meryl Streep as Madeline Ashton, and Bruce Willis as Dr. Ernest Menville. This 1992 dark comedy is an unconventional zombie film in that the zombies (primarily Helen and Madeline) do not transform into monstrous bodies that exist only to feed; instead, these zombies retain (or seem to retain) their human qualities with the added bonus of eternal life and beauty. The other element in this film, however, has nothing to do with science, but it is a major component to the film – competition. Because Helen Sharp and Madeline Ashton are so competitive, they push each other to new extremes. Their in-fighting also pushes the plot along, causing new tragedies along the way. In the beginning, Helen is engaged to Dr. Ernest Menville; they attend a play that Madeline is the star of and Menville is obviously enamored by Madeline. Helen tells Ernest:

“She wants you. She wants you because you’re mine. I’ve lost men to her before. She just turns on that flash and that glitter and they’re gone. That’s why I wanted you to meet her before we got married. I just had to see if you could pass the Madeline Ashton test. Please. Please don’t fail...I don’t...I don’t know what I would do.”

As it turns out, Helen would turn to food and a slovenly lifestyle, ending in her being committed to a mental hospital. It’s only after Helen thinks of revenge that she can get

life in order. Although no one is aware of it, Helen turns to science to become skinny and beautiful. She writes a fake book<sup>9</sup> about it: *Forever Young*. Madeline says, “Forever Young? Right! And eternally fat!” because she does not yet know about the unnaturalness that Helen has sought out. Science, as it functions in this film, is a metaphor about sickness but not a sickness that people usually see. The sickness here is an obsession with being skinny and youthful, and its images are like the images of love and passion that Sontag mentions. TB and cancer were “understood as diseases of passion,” and, in much the same way, the characters in *Death Becomes Her*, have diseases of passion. It is fitting that both Madeline and Helen are celebrities because the media provides the evidence and creates the pressure for women in Hollywood to look girlish forever. “Forever Young” is the Hollywood sickness that permeates throughout culture and has become a cultural illness that is parodied.

The parody here is multilayered. At first (and most obviously) there is a parody of the Hollywood-based obsession with youth. The plot and science in *Death Becomes Her* revolves around Helen and Madeline’s attempts to hold onto their youth and beauty. Meryl Streep’s character, Madeline, is an actress who feels the pressure of staying “young” when it is impossible to do so. Looking in the mirror, Madeline whines “wrinkled, wrinkled little star. Hope they never see the scars.” Cosmetic surgery is clearly a fixture in her life, although the effects are merely prolonging the inevitable. Susan Sontag discusses diseases as causing isolation, but in this movie, aging seems to be causing Madeline’s isolation and she turns to science to avoid that. However, Sontag also

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<sup>9</sup> The book is fake because it is, presumably (audiences never get to read it), a how-to guide of sorts; the book appears to tell people how to look great. However, Helen did not go to the “natural” route here – she turned to unnatural means to transform herself. And that transformation made her into an unnatural body so that she is forever young, yes, but forever monstrous as well.

writes that, in the mythology of illness, that character influences disease so that certain personality traits become hints as to what disease you might end up with, and this holds true for Madeline. Because the cosmetic surgery is not working any more, she endures an extreme othering and becomes a monstrous body (46). True, she is beautiful, but her disease (that of unending youth) is symptomatic of character. She becomes a zombie, and, in doing so, exemplifies the collapse of the boundary between a normal and a monstrous body.

The convention of science or scientific experiments as the cause of the zombie epidemic is another parody present in these texts. Hutcheon's formulation about parody is crucial here. She writes that "what is interesting is that unlike what is more traditionally regarded as parody, the modern form does not always permit one of the texts to fare any better or worse than the other. It is the fact that they *differ* that this parody emphasizes and, indeed, dramatizes" (Hutcheon, *Theory* 31). This is especially true for *Death Becomes Her* because this film is not the typical zombie film and the zombies in it are not typical in either their target or their look. While most zombie movies cast zombies as flesh-eating, decaying, gory ghouls, this movie casts two Hollywood beauties as the flawless perfect female bodies. This Hollywood comedy does not mark itself as different in order to cast itself as better than other zombie texts; instead, the difference itself becomes a line of distinction itself. Here, the parody is not simply "a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 7). This parody is different in its look which draws more attention to why these zombies look the way that they do: science.

In *Death Becomes Her*, when Madeline Ashton finally goes to see the mysterious Lisle Von Rhuman (as suggested by her cosmetic consultant), it is because her reflection in the mirror horrifies her. The science she has been utilizing is no longer working; leaving (rejected) from a lover's house, the rainstorm she finds herself caught in acts as a force of nature, revealing the truth behind the cosmetic lies. Lisle Von Rhuman offers Madeline a solution: "A touch of magic in this world obsessed with science. A tonic. A potion...it stops the aging process dead in its tracks. And forces it into retreat. Drink that potion and you'll never grow even one day older. Don't drink it, and continue to watch yourself rot." Susan Sontag writes about popular notions that emotions can cause or prevent illnesses; she writes that "the fantasy that a happy state of mind would fend off disease probably flourished for all infectious diseases" (55). This is the kind of power that Lisle Von Rhuman offers; her potion is powerful but she also allows her clients to see the emotional effects of said unnatural science. Von Rhuman demonstrates the awful power of her potion by pricking Madeline's finger and allowing a droplet of potion to infuse with her blood; the effects are immediate, as Madeline's hand and skin regain a youthful glow. Von Rhuman warns Madeline after she's taken the full bottle of potion into her system: "You and your body are going to be together a long time. Be good to it...Siempre viva. Live forever." It is here that we begin to really make the connection between the representation of science and notions of postmodern parody. The live forever anthem is a parody of the long-standing fountain of youth or elixir of life metaphor in fiction. Here, however, Madeline (and Helen although we never see it happen) go to Von Rhuman for a "miracle cure" to the aging process. This is not a serious treatment of the misuses of science although this is an extreme example of the lengths people (primarily

women, of course) will go to in order to stay young, this scene and this film are representative of the larger cultural concern with youth and beauty that are targets of parody.

And though the science as shown in the movie is vague and mysterious, the look and effects of the potion provide enough evidence to prove that this is a type of “rogue” or unnatural science. Von Rhuman is not mixing clay and natural organic fruit to make this age-reversing potion. And there must be some kind of scientific control because the people who take the potion do not revert back to infancy. What happens when the potion is imbibed is that the body transforms, not unlike the typical zombie. However, this transformation is more superficial. Madeline’s transformation is representative of how the system works. Before Madeline leaves Von Rhuman’s mansion she looks in the mirror and watches her body transform. Unlike the death/re-animation that we see in the more traditional zombie movie, Madeline’s body regresses in age. Her breasts become firmer, as does her butt and she exclaims “I’m a girl!.” This is an especially important moment in the movie because it exemplifies the obsession with science and the maintenance of youth. This movie’s parody is responding “to interpretation as at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audiences” (Wood 174). The effect of the potion is, for Madeline, a reward not a punishment. She is a girl, meaning that she is now what she has been desperately trying to achieve – girlish youth and vibrant beauty. But is this desperation and obsession upon which the parody is being targeted. Parody can be many things; for one, parody can “be a playful, genial mockery of codifiable forms. Its range of intent is from respectful admiration to biting ridicule” (Hutcheon, Theory 15-16). Here, the parody is more lighthearted than biting, but the

effect is the same. The obsession with youth and beauty as brought to people by science is clearly the target of critique.

*Death Becomes Her* is the comedy that makes light of this very serious cultural condition. When Madeline goes to her spa, she talks to Mr. Chagall, who empathizes. “I am very sensitive to your torment” he tells Miss Ashton, “But unfortunately we are mere mortals here. We are restricted by the...laws of nature.” Because money is no obstacle for Madeline, Mr. Chagall broaches the subject of Lisle Von Rhuman, whom Madeline has never heard of, but Lisle is the only who “may be able to help you,” according to Mr. Chagall. Lisle Von Rhuman does help Madeline, as well as Helen and countless others, but Madeline and Helen ruin themselves. They use the science to keep them alive forever, but they fall apart (by the end, literally<sup>10</sup>). This falling apart is a visual representation of what is happening in society, for “postmodern art cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations – its images and stories – are anything but neutral, however ‘aestheticized’ they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity” (Hutcheon, Politics 3). The critique is that, as a culture, we are falling apart at the hands of science.

Lisle Von Rhuman tells Ernest: “I would like to give you a present. The gift of life and youth forever. I saw your wife and friend. You did brilliant work.” She stabs his finger and puts a sample of the potion on the wound so he can see and feel the effects. She thinks he’s appreciative but he’s repelled. She tells him “This is what you do. What you have always done. Stopped time in people’s faces and in their hands. You are like

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<sup>10</sup> In the final scene of the movie, Madeline and Helen are leaving Ernest’s funeral. Helen slips on a can of spraypaint and pulls Madeline with her as she falls. They both crack open and into several pieces upon hitting the sidewalk.



Don Quixote, tilting at nature's windmill. Drink it. It is the completion of your life's work. You gave people youth and wasted your own. Drink!...Live forever!" Ernest Menville, repulsed, says "I don't wanna live forever....I don't think this is right. This is not a dream. This is a nightmare. You people all have to be stopped." The idea that science is positive has been destroyed here and Dr. Ernest Menville, the brilliant plastic surgeon turned mortician, is the hero for the cause. Scientific advancements that go too far away from nature are completely rejected; the notion that this potion is grand is rejected. This parody can be "playful as well as belittling...the pleasure of parody's irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing' (to use E. M. Forster's famous term) between complicity and distance" (Hutcheon, Theory 32). The representation of science here is of a nightmare, not a dream. Science becomes the horror. But Dr. Menville is the only survivor here. While he lives to see another day, as the saying goes, he doesn't bring about change in anyone else. In some ways, then, he is the film's casualty as well.

At Menville's funeral, many decades later, we learn that Menville went on to get married, adopt children, start foundations, and lead a healthy life in to his old age. But Madeline and Helen are also in attendance, to reinforce the idea that unnatural science breeds nothing positive. Menville has died, but he has also lived in ways that Madeline and Helen cannot do. The clergyman presiding over Menville's service announces that Ernest had discovered the secret of eternal life. This, naturally, sparks the interest of the ladies. The clergyman says "it is here," among his friends and family that his memory lives on. He also mentions that Ernest was a jokester and that everyone had heard "his tall tales about the living dead in Beverly Hills." Madeline and Helen laugh at this funeral

service, laughing loudly and saying “blah, blah, blah, blah.” They have not learned anything from their experience, despite the number of years they have spent as zombies. Together, Madeline and Helen show how obsessed with youth and beauty society is, “but the zombie also shows us what we are not; man, as we know him, as a cognizant, living creature, does not outlive the death of his body” (Lauro and Embry 90). Madeline and Helen should consider themselves lucky; few zombies get to live so long. While parody “offers a much more limited and controlled version of this activation of the past by giving it a new and often ironic context, it makes similar demands upon the reader, but these are demands on his or her knowledge and recollection than on his or her openness to play” (Hutcheon, Theory 5). This kind of film openly plays with the conventions of zombie movies but does so in a comic manner. To get the critique, audiences must be more aware of the knowledge and recollection than on their willingness to accept and enjoy this playfulness with genre. The critique presented in *Death Becomes Her* is more light-hearted and commercialized than in other, more deeply rooted, zombie films.

#### 28 Days/Weeks Later

In *Death Becomes Her*, the elixir of life is the primary focus of parody and critique while in the more traditional zombie movies like *28 Days Later*, the parodied science is less mythical and more biological. *28 Days Later* is a Danny Boyle film that was released in 2003 that focuses on Jim and Selena as they fight plague-ridden zombies in London, twenty-eight days after the infections first spreads. Like *Death Becomes Her*, this film adds science to the list of things we experience as natural; scientific progress has been naturalized as an experience. The science of this movie involves animal testing in order to improve human existence, which is where the movie begins. Audiences are

introduced to this movie with disorienting media scenes from around the world. First, the entire screen is engulfed by these confusing and violent images. Then, as the screen pans back, it becomes clear that these images are playing on several small televisions; a monkey is tied to a table and is being forced to watch these clips in the Cambridge Primate Research Center. A small group of people clad in black have broken into the center in order to save the primates, but they have no idea what the end result will be because they have no real idea what the scientists have done. Tension is already high; the group, like the audience, is clearly disoriented by what they are experiencing. One of them gives advice to everyone: “Keep your shit together if you want to get them out of here.” In our world, animal testing is a common, yet debated, practice. In this film, the science involved in that process leads to the ultimate destruction of humanity. But those groups that fight on behalf of the animals are also implicated. The critique here is complex because there is no “good guy.”

One of the scientists enters the room and is held as a hostage. The scientist, in an almost pleading voice says to the group “The chimps are infected! They’re highly contagious. They’ve been given an inhibitor.” In answer to the question “Infected with what?,” the scientist responds, “In order to cure, you must first understand.” The scientists at the Cambridge Primate Research Center have been infecting the chimps with “Rage....the infection is in their blood and saliva.” This kind of rage virus can be explained using Sontag’s view on popular views of disease that “emotions cause diseases...specific emotions can produce specific diseases” (54). Here, Sontag is attempting to locate the source of metaphors for illness, but this moment is helpful because the rage virus does seem to be produced by specific emotions. The chimps are

watching TV; there do not seem to be any specific influences outside of that. Once the chimps are released, they attack the people and the virus spreads. Then the screen fades to black and the screen reads “28 days later...” The conversation occurs in the laboratory because the laboratory is where the epidemic starts. This positioning is perfect because “postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse...there is no outside. All it can do is question from within” (Hutcheon, Poetics xiii). According to Hutcheon “it is not a matter of nostalgic imitation of past models; it is a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity. No integration into a new context can avoid altering meaning, and perhaps even value” (Hutcheon, Theory 8). This is true for *28 Days Later* in that this film confronts the zombie movies that have come before it. The virus remains similar but the effects it has on people are quite different and visually arresting. The infecteds are faster than the earlier counterparts. I believe this kind of parody is intentionally altering the meaning of the text; the speed of the infecteds can reflect a number of contemporary qualities: we want everything fast today – medicine, the Internet, coffee. Life comes at us fast and the virus brings this to the forefront. According to Hutcheon, “parody can obviously be a whole range of things. It can be a serious criticism, not necessarily of the parodied text” (Hutcheon, Theory 15). This is the case in *28 Days Later*, and it carries over to the sequel *28 Weeks Later*.

However, in *28 Days Later*, the audience meets Jim exactly 28 days since the rage virus spread through England. He must unhook himself from the IVs and get himself out of the hospital because no one is around. He survived because he was unconscious. Susan Sontag, in regards to certain diseases, writes that metaphors about disease can express

“fairly complex feelings about strength and weakness, and about energy” (61). It is interesting to note, then, that Jim (although we do not yet know his name) is all alone in the hospital. Seemingly weak, he is the lone survivor there. The phones don’t work. The hospital is a wreck. He finds cans of Pepsi from the busted vending machines. And when he walks outside, it is disturbingly quiet. It’s eerie to watch him walk about with no one around, only the quiet background music and the noises he makes disturb the deafening silence. The metropolis of London is dead...and undead. He picks up newspaper that has headline “EVACUATION” and some of the lines below it are “exodus of British people cause global chaos” and “military ordered ‘shoot to kill.’” At this point, Jim is more disoriented than frightened. That, however, is quick to change.

Jim enters a dark and musty church. A note on the wall reads “repent! The end is extremely fucking nigh” and the pews are covered with bodies. “In the visual arts, parody can manifest itself in relation to either particular works or general iconic conventions” (Hutcheon, Theory 12). Here, the parody is both; the parody plays off of zombie films that have come before it but it also playing off of religious conventions. Typically a zombie movie will contain a horde of bloody bodies or body parts as well as a mass of transformed zombies. In this film, the confrontation of this mass of wasted life is parodied and condensed in order to really focus the critique on the carnage involved when society fails to keep a tight rein on science. Although it is difficult, as one reviewer notes, “to know in the midst of all the immediate terrors of “28 Days Later” what Mr. Boyle meant for us to think about such things. But it is one of the strengths of his accomplishment that it makes us think about them at all” (Varmus par 13). An infected clergyman comes after Jim and several other infecteds chase him through the streets

when the “cavalry” comes out to help while he asks “What the fuck is going on?” and they scream at him to shut up before setting the infecteds on fire. Again, he pleads, “please tell me what the fuck is going on?” Locked inside a convenience store, we are introduced to Jim, from the hospital, Selena and Mark. It is Selena who explains the situation:

“It started as rioting and right from the beginning you knew this was different because it was happening in small villages, market towns. And then it wasn’t on the TV anymore. It was coming from outside, coming from your windows. It was a virus, an infection. You didn’t need a doctor to tell you that. It was the blood. Or something in the blood. By the time they tried to evacuate the cities it was already too late. The infection was everywhere. The army blockades were overrun. And that’s when the evacuation started. The day before the TV and radio stopped broadcasting, there were reports of infection in Paris and New York. You didn’t hear anything more after that.”

Jim learns the awful truth. There is no government. There are no cops and there is no electricity. The TV and radios are gone, and Jim is the “first uninfected person” Mark and Selena have met in “6 days.” Mark and Selena must teach him the rules then. Mark explains: “Lesson one: you never go anywhere alone, unless you’ve got no choice. Lesson two: only travel during the daylight, unless you’ve got no choice.” The virus that caused the epidemic puts everyone in danger. And “what should we make of this fictional virology? As in the tradition of horror movies, in which disbelief must be surrendered to authorial imagination, the science is far from accurate. No virus of a conventional sort can act in this way” (Varmus par 4). But Varmus misses the point – this is not a

conventional virus. It is, instead, a parody of a virus in order to provide critique. Selena's actions are typical for a zombie movie, although it is usually a man who is in control of the situation. This conventional plot, though, has been parodied and again condensed. It is not in a shopping mall that Jim, Mark, and Selena hold up; this film parodies the norm in order to reevaluate culture. This parody also extends to the home.

At Jim's parent's house, the group finds them dead, as expected. They took pills to kill themselves, and left a note for Jim on the back of his baby picture: "Jim – with endless love, we left you sleeping. Now we're sleeping with you. Don't wake up. X." Unfortunately, Jim did wake up and must deal with what the scientists have started. In the middle of a reverie about his past life, the one he did not even know was past, his infected neighbors come to the house to infect them. In the process, Mark is infected and, without hesitation, Selena kills him. This virus is "transmitted by even minute amounts of bodily fluid, it unfailingly produces dramatic effects within 20 seconds, transforming its victims into enraged, wild-eyed, indiscriminate killers, with superhuman athletic abilities, the capacity to survive for at least several days, and a compulsion to bite the uninfected" (Varmus par 3). Selena, aware of how the virus works, tells Jim that "When someone is infected, you've got 10 to 20 seconds to kill them." Selena also asks Jim about his plans. She says, "Do you have plans, Jim? Do you want to find a cure and save the world, or just fall in love and fuck? Plans are pointless. Staying alive is as good as it gets." This idea – kill or be killed – is not new. But here it is parodied and used to point the critique at the world around us. In a world riddled with diseases and (sometimes pointless) war, staying alive does seem to be as good as it gets because staying alive is all we can honestly ask for in a society corrupted by our own (mis)deeds. Because everyone is

implicated in the destruction of society, the boundaries between good and evil are collapsed; the boundary between a normal and a monstrous body is likewise collapsed because the notion of boundary is slippery in postmodernism. What makes a monster is slippery in this zombie film, and it extends to its sequel, *28 Weeks Later*.

*28 Weeks Later* also serves as an example of a zombie narrative in the postmodern world; in this 2007 release, the millions of infecteds in England have starved to death and the American-led U.N. force sets up a “Green Zone” in order to rebuild society. Together with *28 Days Later* it interrogates the problematic nature of scientific advancements in this postmodern world and parodies its own predecessor as well as other zombie movies as far as plot is concerned; this parody of both present and past is compelling. In the beginning of the film, a little boy bangs on the door of a cottage in order to escape the zombies chasing him. Alice and Donald are the ones who answer the door:

Alice: Who were chasing you?

Boy in Cottage: My mum, my dad... They're trying to kill me. There's others too.

Donald Harris: How many?

Boy in Cottage: Loads.

Like *28 Days Later*, these zombies are fast and do not differentiate between types of people; they only live to infect. Parody seems “to offer a prospective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak *to* a discourse from *within* it, but without being totally recuperated by it” (Hutcheon, Poetics 34). Another such instance of this speaking to from within is when a soldier makes a speak about the “Green Zone”:

We are headed for the green-zone, our area of security and reconstruction, designated as District One. District One is located on the Isle of Dogs. Although



the Isle of Dogs is completely safe, the surrounding area of London is not. There are a large number of bodies still left to be cleared from the original outbreak of infection. Rats and wild dogs are prevalent, as is disease. New arrivals are reminded, for their own safety, it is absolutely forbidden to cross the river and leave the security zone. You will be joining 15,000 civilians who are already resident in District One. As we approach your new home, you will notice a dramatically increased military presence. The U.S. Army is responsible for your safety. We will do everything we can do to make your repatriation as easy as possible. Inside District One, however, we believe you'll be pleasantly surprised. We have hot and cold running water, 24-hour electricity, a medical center, a supermarket, and even a pub.

This security area is for reconstruction but it is also a place where the effects of the unnatural science first presented in *28 Days Later* is truly felt because each new member is restricted to the camp and must be fully examined before being allowed to rejoin the community. When Scarlet is examining the child named Andy, she tells him “I think that makes you the youngest person in the entire country. Well, your blood pressure is A-OK and you're negative on any serious disease or afflictions. I think you're okay to come in. Welcome back to Britain.” These people have to cope with what the film shows as the result of unnatural science – a less free society. With strict discipline, the green zone is supposed to keep the new Britain clear from the infecteds. Being a good zombie movie, however, the virus spreads again and it becomes painfully (and grotesquely) obvious that the attempts to safeguard humans from zombification are going to fail. This is, perhaps, part of the statement for the movie – control cannot be had in the postmodern world. In

Hutcheon's estimation, "the works of the past become aesthetic models whose recasting in a modern work is frequently aimed at a satirical ridicule of contemporary customs or practices" (Hutcheon, *Theory* 11). From the story of *28 Weeks Later*, we create monsters from nature and then we try to save ourselves from it but, by this point, it is out of our control. These movies, then, speak to the futility of modern systems to contain infection (of any kind) in the postmodern culture, and zombies "like all things that are feared, are the products of the culture that shapes them and bear within their myths the imprint of existing social conditions" (Lauro and Embry 100).

The zombies in these movies are quite different from Romero's zombies in his *Living Dead* series. The zombie rules have been altered to fit the postmodern condition of contemporary culture. But, looking closer at the virus (and how it affects humans) is part of the plot here. In the beginning, a medical officer sees children being allowed into London and comments that scientists are not sure how the virus works yet. This comment bears a lot of weight in the film because it is after this remark that the discovery is made that people can be carriers of the virus without exhibiting symptoms. *28 Days Later* is unusual "among zombie films because it provides a distinct cause for the epidemic: an infection from an animal research laboratory in London escapes, and spreads rapidly among the human population" (Roberts 13).

Especially in *28 Days Later*, it is clear that the line between human and nonhuman has been crossed. And, the end is still uncertain. Audiences will have to wait for the third installment to be released to find out what happens 28 months later. Will we be fully immersed in the postmodern and have given over to ambivalence, or will there still be fight in some of the humans? What will we have done with science by then? What

*28 Weeks Later* hints to us that the virus will continue to consume the world. In the last scene of the movie, a French voice calls out “we need your help.” Clearly the infection has spread to mainland Europe and is continuing to consume the people there. In reference to losing weight, Sontag writes that “in TB, the person is ‘consumed,’ burned up. In cancer, the patient is ‘invaded’ by alien cells, which multiply, causing atrophy or blockage of bodily functions. The cancer patient ‘shrivels’ (Alice James’s word) or ‘shrinks’ (Wilhelm Reich’s word)” (14). The zombie virus borrows from both of these because the virus is a parody. In this zombie movie, the human is also consumed – both emotionally and physically.

#### Flight of the Living Dead

*Flight of the Living Dead* is a 2007 Scott Thomas zombie movie<sup>11</sup>. While this movie certainly parodies previous zombie films in order to provide plot and structure, this film is also a parody of *Snakes on a Plane*. On a Boeing 747, zombies take over the flight to Paris; these zombies are reminiscent of *28 Days Later*’s zombies because they are capable of moving quickly and jumping around. However, this movie also utilizes comedy of the *Death Becomes Her* variety because the dialogue and some of the zombie movements are clearly added for humor as well as critique. In *Flight of the Living Dead*, the science is used to create the ultimate human being – one that won’t die. The scientists aboard the plane have a heated conversation very early in the film that sets the stage for the zombie arrival. Dr. Bennett tells Dr. Thorp: “I told you, we’d bring Kelly out of stasis when we have a controlled environment, not before...Hey, she would have died, and we saved her. If we hadn’t intervened, she’d be dead. You goddamn well know that.” When

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<sup>11</sup> This movie was released direct to DVD in an unrated form and did not gain commercial success.

Dr. Thorp argues and becomes visibly upset, Dr. Bennett reminds him that “There have always been risks, but think of the good we’re doing. We will save loved ones. We will bring them back. It’s why we all have sacrificed. Kelly knew the risks goin’ into this<sup>12</sup>.” Dr. Bennett is the primary scientist in this film. Any disease “that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious” (Sontag 6). Zombie viruses are just this – created to be felt to be contagious because they represent something morally repugnant. While Dr. Thorp and Dr. Sebastian are clearly implicated as conspirators in the scheme to modify nature’s laws over the body, Dr. Bennett is the leader. From a meeting inside the Pentagon, audiences learn more about this mad scientist: “He’s a head research scientist and founder of Medcon, known for his work with retroviruses and synthetic biology...was arrested for illegal cloning research.” The military and government are trying to control these scientists, with little luck. The government thought Dr. Bennett was messing with the malaria virus, but they are wrong.:

“However, we discovered that it’s something new, something different. Bennett obtained a DNA sample from a mosquito native to a remote area in Vietnam which had a 100 percent mortality rate within seconds which then regenerates that same organism for a few seconds or longer depending upon the subject organism.”

What Dr. Bennett and his scientists created was a “synthetic of this same mosquito virus to restart major organs for an indefinite period of time.” But it is not just that the virus kills organs and brings them back to life – it brings the body back to life. The military

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Kelly Thorp, the scientist who is being held in the cargo hold, is freed because the plane is flying through two storm systems. The storm causes turbulence that causes cargo to fall, injuring the guard in the cargo hull, and system failure on the body in the metal frozen casket.

man tells the liaison to the President that Dr. Bennett and his team were “experimenting on regenerating the entire human body after death. From what we’ve uncovered, we believe he’s succeeded.” For most of the film, the government is not a major part, but this scene is important because it is used to demonstrate some of the feelings about this unnatural science and its uses. Sontag writes that “no disease has its own distinctive logic. Disease imagery is used to express concern for social order” and that is apparent here. The government is concerned about what will happen to the social order (and their control) if science like this becomes mainstream.

The scenes in the Pentagon provide important details about the nature of the scientific experiments. It is reported that Dr. Bennett had created a serum transfer virus that “is without a known vaccine or cure...but this type of virus transfer is only through bodily fluid and most effectively blood from an infected victim enters a cut or saliva.” A government scientist reports to the group:

“The Medcon scientists believed they could make this work despite the side effects that bring brought back from the dead. In fact, they looked upon these side effects as a benefit. Let me paraphrase these notes that we found in Dr. Bennett’s desk. ‘They wanted this virus as a bioweapon to keep soldiers fighting after they were mortally wounded, to release a captive enemy infected with the virus and let him infect others until they all kill each other.’ I’m going to recommend to you and to the President that we destroy 2-3-9...we must assume that the virus has spread throughout the passengers.”

But Dr. Bennett does not admit his guilt to the passengers on the plane. The golf pro asks why Dr. Bennett did this and he says “It wasn’t me. I was just following orders. They told

me it was an experiment to extend life. I had no idea there'd be these crazy side effects.” Clearly unaffected by this sob story, the golfer retorts: “Well look around you, asshole. Your side effects have eaten half the passengers.” This film “uses reappropriated forms of the past to speak to a society from within the values and history of that society, while still questioning it. It is in this way that its historical representations, however parodic, get politicized” (Hutcheon, Politics 12). Similarly, Sontag’s assertion that “disease metaphors are used to judge society not as out of balance but as repressive” is also at stake (73). While the issues that Sontag is writing about may not be judging a society as out of balance, this film does lend itself to that kind of assertion. At the end of the flight, one flight attendant, the TSA agent, the cop and the criminal are the only survivors, but there are zombies who survived too. Dr. Bennett and a few zombie passengers follow the survivors into the desert....the fight will continue. The virus will spread. The kind of parody upon which I have been focusing is an “integrated structural modeling process of revision, replaying, inverting, and ‘trans-contextualizing’ previous works of art” (Hutcheon, Theory 11). In *Flight of the Living Dead*, the parody “reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations” and is not only brought about by the use of comedy and playfulness with the genre of the horror film itself, but the gory effects of the zombies themselves have been inverted and become moments of comic relief in the film (Hutcheon, Politics 58).

Staying alive may be as good as it gets, but it certainly isn't as bad as it gets. The transformation into a zombie and the race for survival are both disturbing phenomena. And it is not easy to ignore the zombie's human qualities. In some instances, they are too much like so-called normal people to hate outright. In *Flight of the Living Dead*, Dr.

Kelly Thorp rises from the metal cargo box and looks completely normal for a time but then transforms. As she is transforming, we see shots of what she sees – blood platelets and blood and she is clearly disturbed – she asks what is happening to her because her body hurts as she transforms. The armed guard sees her, shoots at her and she pulls back. When the guard shoots, he disables communication and electrical systems so they cannot communicate with air bases or anyone not in the plane. She asks the guard “what’s wrong with you? I’m sick. I need help.” But he is powerless to help. We find out that she is a scientist with MedCon labs and says don’t shoot but he does. She “dies” in white and comes back in red from the blood. Sontag sees modern illness metaphors as cheap shots, but this film shows that there is real critique behind the metaphor (85). The disease metaphors and the way in which the zombie transformation is parodied is important because it is here that the audience is privy to the collapse of the binary between human and zombie body. The audience, who is still unaware that she is a zombie, sees Dr. Kelly Thorp as a person and it is hard to watch the guard shoot this unarmed civilian.

When she reemerges as a zombie, her first kill is a righteous one – she bites the guard. But since the communication systems were harmed, the captain tells the co-pilot to take the doctors and check the cargo hull. That is the reason that the zombies multiply. Had they not gone to the cargo hull and brought people down there with open access back to the flight deck, there may have been some room for survival. The co-pilot is the only one of the three to make it out alive from the initial attack. The co-pilot freaks out when he sees the zombie in the cargo hold. He shouts “What have you done? You son of a bitch, what have you brought on board?” The co-pilot, clearly freaked out, has caused a ruckus. To the pilot he says “Ray, bring the plane down now or we’re all gonna fucking

die!” The only MedCon scientist left on board is Dr. Bennett; he hears the commotion from the co-pilots and says “Oh, shit.” He knows what is coming. The pilot demands an explanation. The co-pilot says “The fucking scientists, they let something out of the cargo hold.” In response to the question about the scientist’s whereabouts, the co-pilot shouts “They’re dead! All right, they’re dead! There is something that’s not human down there, man...and it’s gonna kill everyone onboard...unless we land this plane.” While this is a moment of serious concern in the movie, most of the movie is comical and playful. The zombies are comical “because they are ‘simply flesh’, without the animating forces of attraction and empathy that makes humans into subjects worthy of empathy” (Roberts 11). There are awkward zombie movements and intentionally playful scenes where legless zombies attempt to attack the living and zombies are rendered ineffectual because they are held in place by their seatbelts. All of this is for comic effect and the zombies’ apparent loss of humanity is partially negated by this new comic flesh-only zombie state.

### **3. Zombie as Parody**

Stuart Hall suggests that the “double-stake...the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside” must be recognized at the beginning of popular culture analysis (Hall 228). From Hall’s perspective, “the domain of cultural forms and activities” is a “constantly changing field” (Hall 235). Laura Kipnis also writes about popular culture, arguing that “popular culture certainly plays a role in securing capitalist legitimation” and it functions as “access to domination, for hegemony is not given but always in process” (Kipnis 31-32). Because there is no guarantee of domination, only access to it, popular culture is a site of struggle where meanings are in transition and conflict and where “antagonistic social forces attempt to appropriate and



utilize in opposing ways” (Kipnis 29). The postmodern parody seen here is, in some ways, also a site of struggle because the parodies are authorized critique where meanings are negotiated in public.

How does all of this bear on zombie films? For horror films, and zombie films in particular, these, as Lianne McLarty articulates, “popular representations are neither sinister simulacra nor innocent games. They are vehicles through which social reality is figured” (McLarty 249). It is the analyst’s job to sort through the representations, and “sorting out how cultural products make the social world intelligible is a matter of identifying their role in the hegemonic struggle over meanings, of identifying, in Stuart Hall’s words, the ‘double-stake...the double movement of containment and resistance’” (McLarty 249). For Hall, and for myself, the double-stake is an interesting analytic moment for these films both resist the hegemonic ideology of scientific progress and contain their own version of ideology. Horror films “have been seen as nothing less than grand metaphysical morality plays that embody the residual manifestation of ancient religious thinking in the age of science or that bring us to an acceptance of the inevitability of death” (Grant 5). Certainly horror films are about such metanarratives, but some of the films break down these barriers. In both cases, “the experience of horror in the cinema is almost always grounded in the visual representation of bodily difference” (Grant 5-6). What makes these films postmodern parody is that they take conventions of the discourse – content and structure – and they reappropriate them in order to critique not only the genre but the idea of scientific progress as wholly positive. So, while Grant is correct in his articulation about horror and bodily difference, there is another layer to

these postmodern zombie texts in that parody becomes a layer of difference as well; but, being typically postmodern, the difference comes, in part, from the parody itself.

In these zombie texts, the bodily difference is literally the difference between the so-called living body and the living dead one. And while Grant's argument is a valid one, these zombie texts do show a residual manifestation – not of ancient religious thinking – but one that is more cautious and conservative than openly progressive (or liberal). Here, the two combine – the visual representation of bodily difference is the counterpart to the residual conservative notions of science and its uses. While there is a long history of the tensions between religious thinking and science, this thesis is not so concentrated on that line of thinking. Instead, these postmodern texts seem to foreground parody and play of the genre conventions and the historical relations between the ancients and the scientists is used for conventional purposes instead of a foundation for the critique itself. In essence, the religious anxiety over science has, in some ways, been consumed by previous zombie texts so that this issue becomes part of the simulacra. The parody, then, is not of the original because that no longer exists. The parody is on the representation – the copies of copies – which is what I am focusing on here.

It has been argued that in “monster” horror, those films based on physical beings as bogeymen, the “common interpretation has been an orthodox Freudianism. The monster is usually understood as, in [Robin] Wood's terms, the ‘return of the repressed,’ the outward, distorted projection as Other of the protagonist's unacknowledged desire” (Grant 4). While it can certainly be argued that orthodox Freudianism is the most common interpretation, it is not the only viable one. But Grant's use of Wood here is important for a cultural critique of zombie films as well, for these films carve out a

dichotomy between us and them – casting zombies as the ultimate Other of the rational human. However, desire is not the projection here – it is cultural anxiety. The zombies here reflect the ultimate penalty for the misuse of science. The zombies play an important role in this postmodern critique because they are not only the inevitable result of the misuse of science, but they are multipurpose zombies. They have layers of critique because of the way in which they are created and the way in which they behave parody the zombies that have come before them as well as the focus of the text’s critique. In *28 Days Later*, for example, the zombies are fast. In one of the most iconic zombie films, George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, which arguably changed the zombie genre forever, the zombies are slow and can be easily out run. By changing the speed of the zombies, the parody is at once visible and complex; it is not only the genre conventions that are being played upon here, although that is the more visually arresting component. By making the zombies faster, the critique is made contemporary.

These misuses of science cause epidemics. These epidemics create chaos and structured society is destroyed, making survival the only “real” task at hand. “The world of the living dead films is” according to Grant, “a brutally Hawksian one, in which the primary task is survival itself. Being able to survive in this world requires a philosophical detachment and existential determination in order to cope with the zombie physically, psychologically, and spiritually” (Grant 205). Audiences and critics will also have to survive the film. Whether they acknowledge it or not, both have been bathed in a bloody, gory, cultural critique in the form of the living dead. The rhetoric of the films may be subtle, but the lessons to be learned are clear (and they have grave consequences – pun intended). Zombie films have been critiquing society for as long as they have graced the

silver screen. In the 1960s and 1970s, horror films “became steadily more progressive, constantly challenging the legitimacy of capitalist, patriarchal rule, with the monster no longer metaphysical or the product of a lab experiment gone awry, but instead an emblem of the upheaval in bourgeois civilization itself” (Sharrett 254). This kind of progressive current is what spawned George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, thus changing the zombie forever. But what has happened recently is a new kind of current that flows away from this progressive nature. And while zombies may not be the product of a lab experiment “gone awry,” they are still the products of lab experiments. These new experiments have led to the creation of zombies because, as the critique goes, scientists have gone awry.

Because the scientists have escaped control, “Institutions (like the church and the military) that were once successful in containing the monster and restoring order are at best ineffectual (there is often a lack of closure) and at worst responsible for the monstrous” (McLarty 233). Contemporary horror also “tends to collapse the categories of normal bodies and monstrous bodies; it is said to dispense with the binary opposition of us and them, and to resist the portrayal of the monster as a completely alien Other” (McLarty 233). McLarty’s position is that contemporary horror “happens in the everyday and to our very bodies” in David Cronenberg’s films, but it is more significant to see this in zombie films because of the nature of the transformation. When Jeff Goldblum’s character transforms into the fly, he looks more alien than human. But zombies maintain human qualities more so than other monsters. They make us frightened because they make us face our own abjection: they are us and not us. Like McLarty articulates, “postmodern horror does not expunge the Other so much as redirect it” (234).

Robin Wood discusses horror as being progressive as a genre. Grant comments on that statement by writing that the films “refuse to depict the monster as simply evil seems cleverly borne out by these films, for even as [George] Romero progressively downplays the Otherness of the zombies, he depicts patriarchy as increasingly monstrous” (Grant 210). When it comes to the reasons behind the zombie epidemic, however, these films are increasingly conservative, not progressive. Patriarchy begins to look ancient, outdated, and oppressive – but so does scientific progress. Although the rhetoric that surrounds progress (specifically scientific progress) is primarily positive, these texts provide evidence to the contrary. These films make scientific progress the cause of all that ails culture; it leads to the end of humanity, as we know it. The apparent contradictory nature of these films is inherent to their postmodern status. The reappropriation of the structure and content of these films is part of their parodic base, but it is within this new frame that the critique is established. According to Lianne McLarty, the contemporary horror film engages “in nightmarish visions of the social world similar to those of the nihilistic strain of postmodern theory” (232). She goes on to write that “what distinguishes contemporary horror films from a more traditional stage within the genre is that the monstrous threat emerges much closer to home. In the post-*Psycho* (1960)/ post-*Exorcist* (1973) / postmodern horror the threat is located in the commonplace, and the body is a site/sight of graphic images of invasion and transformation (no doubt generated in part by advances in special effects)” (232-33). The thought process, then, is that the contemporary horror film articulates postmodern anxieties for audiences in ways that parallel the postmodernist theorists’ intellectual concerns about instability in the world. Essentially, I agree with McLarty’s position that “the delegitimization of social institutions and the

‘instability’ of subjectivity finds expression in the ways in which these films depict both the monstrous threat and its consequences for protagonists” (233). It is clear that the threat is no longer the Other but that the Other is us. In other words, the monsters are part of us (literally human bodies turned into monsters) caused by us. We cannot blame this transformation on someone else – we must now bear witness, not flee in horror, like Frankenstein, at the sight of our own monstrous creations. *Flight of the Living Dead* is a good example of this.

Edward von Sloan delivers the prologue to James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), where he lets “viewers know that they can escape from the theater if his warning proves too terrifying” and he “articulates the promise of horror cinema: ‘It will thrill you. It may shock you. It might even horrify you.’ That Van Sloan expects spectators to subject themselves willingly to thrills, shocks, and horrors is implicit in his stilted phrase – ‘now’s your chance to’ – and in his immediate transition to these chilling words: ‘Well, we warned you’” (Berenstein 118). While these zombie films do not articulate the promise of horror cinema, they definitely embody it. Unlike the audience that Van Sloan is talking to, however, theatergoers have no warning about the world they are about to step into – a world, unfortunately, too much like our own.

Lianne McLarty writes that

much of the work of George Romero – the horror is not only disconnected from the feminine body specifically, but is located in the practices that construct the body, any body, as monstrous in the first place. Progressive horror need not abandon the body as a site of the horrific. It does, however, need to suggest that

they body is monstrous not because of what it is but because of what is done to it (McLarty 248).

While McLarty has a point here, I think she misses the mark a little. It is not that *progressive* horror needs to reevaluate the body in horror films; instead, postmodern horror, whether progressive or conservative, needs to look at the body and what it is and what has been done to it. Still, these parodies “endorse or challenge more than themselves; they play an increasingly central role in both securing and dislodging oppressive ideologies based on such socially experienced positions as class, gender, race, and sexual orientation” (McLarty 250).

The anxiety that is present “at the heart of the genre is, indeed, the nature of human being. Within the terrain of horror, the state of being human is fundamentally uncertain” and perpetually postmodern (Prince 2). Having assumed such nonhuman conditions, these people “return to threaten ordinary characters and upset our sense of how life is to be properly categorized” so that the lines are blurred and boundaries lose definition, making the experience “of horror resides in this confrontation with uncertainty, with the ‘unnatural,’ with a violation of the ontological categories on which being and culture reside” (Prince 2).

The misuses of science are clearly parodied in these texts and there are issues of science for science sake: we do this because we can. Look at these movies – do you think these advances will benefit humankind or do they think they should because they could? I think it is actually a mixture of both. With scientific progress, I see a conservative slant to the movies. These critiques of science are movements away from advancement for

advancement's sake and play into human fears of science as being something potentially unnatural.

Science, on the one hand, seems completely natural and scientific advancements and progresses seem benign. But the critique I see is that scientists have, perhaps, gone too far. These texts seem to argue that we will be the cause of our annihilation and decimation. Our culture does nothing to stop the progress. These films attempt to represent a glimpse into our future (one that leaves few or no survivors) in order for us to reevaluate our identity as a culture. While certain advances, cures/vaccinations for polio, certain diseases, etc has been beneficial, our current and well-established identity as "forward thinkers" will end up doing positive harm. If we continue to play with nature, we will destroy nature. We will turn nature into something wholly unnatural – something monstrous. Lianne McLarty writes that "Cronenberg's films suggest that the oppositional meanings that contemporary horror potentially embodies may not be generated by their postmodernism alone" (248). While postmodernism asserts that there is a breakdown in the boundaries of and "an abandonment of 'them-and-us' thinking does not make it so in our cultural representations, even within the very texts that ostensibly make such an assertion!" (McLarty 248). McLarty argues that even in these texts that assume and assert a breakdown in the barriers the barriers still exist. Even so, this analysis does not take into consideration any horror films outside Cronenberg's repertoire. Even though McLarty references George A. Romero, she does not fully analyze the films, and she does not see that the boundaries in Romero's living dead series do begin to break down some of the so-called neat binaries. And because my analysis covers more recent



additions to the horror genre, it is not fair to critique McLarty for not seeing what is not there.

For, in these more recent zombie narratives there is a more complex notion of the binary between “us-and-them,” in ways with which Cronenberg does not engage. In many ways, these more recent zombie narratives create a more complex notion of what it means to exist in culture. Lianne McLarty makes an interesting point about David Cronenberg’s films: “While they depict invasive scientific practices that monstrously transform the human body, these films sometimes imagine transformation as a function of the body itself, specifically the sexual/feminine body” (McLarty 232-232). While the zombie movies under analysis here do not specifically locate transformation in the sexual feminine body, they do depict the same result from scientific procedures. The body, whether male or female, becomes monstrous in its transformation from living to living dead. It is in these films that “science fails when the body is introduced; the science that produces monsters is, in a sense, ‘embodied,’ as these films project anxiety about medical technologies onto the body” (McLarty 235-36). The tie between science and representation is made clear in that “the viewer often learns about the appearance of the zombies and society’s attempts to deal with the threat through mass media – newspapers, radio, and television” (Gregson 19). One potential explanation of the mass media’s presence in the films is to set up the human survivors as sympathetic characters so as to engender “positive dispositions towards the humans” (Gregson 19). However, the subtext to this may be more subversive. Mass media tends to control the mindsets of a society; the media is in almost every faction of society today and would, therefore, report and

cover the zombie infestation. But, perhaps the media is being implicated here as part of the problem.

These zombie texts use the aesthetics of previous zombie movies in their parody of science. For example, the convenience store that is used as a shelter in *28 Days Later* is a small parody (and a microcosm) of the shopping mall-as-shelter in *Dawn of the Dead*.<sup>13</sup> All of these texts parody and play with the representations they target. The form of parody is important because they act as confirmations of postmodernism; the parody is not of one particular text or even one particular subgenre of film, but, rather, a more general model of representation and these models are not parodied with nostalgia for the past. Instead, these texts rework the past and, therefore, are aligned with Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism which "is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic 'return'" (Hutcheon; Poetics 11). All of these texts are clearly examples of postmodern texts that reveal the cathartic force of postmodernism that prevents us "from accepting discourse naively, and force[s] us to look at the social ideologies of which we are the products and in which we live, perceive, and create" (Hutcheon, Politics 200). Postmodern theory like Hutcheon's allows for an analysis of these zombie texts as questioning the past representations and ideologies; indeed, these texts ultimately reveal that the past is no longer adequate and, in particular, they expose and critique the representation of scientific progress as inherently beneficial by reassembling the metaphor and infusing it with critique.

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<sup>13</sup> The constant images of the media in these movies stem from George A. Romero's use of the mass media in his zombie trilogy.

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