

The Literary Zombie in Robin Becker's *Brains*: "How Pop Culture Illuminates and Comments on the Current Zombie Crisis"

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Popular attention to the zombie's rise through the twentieth and twenty-first century and scholarly explorations of the zombie as a fantastic figure tend to feature two questions: why zombies and why now? As to the latter, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's study *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* applies: "We live in a time of monsters," he writes in 1996 (vii). Summoning a montage of contemporary culture in the volume's preface, which he sums up as "a commentary upon fin de siècle America," Cohen describes an omnipresent anxiety endemic to postmodern American culture, which creates the impulse behind the late twentieth-century monster zeitgeist (viii). In his 2010 study of the zombie film genre, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, Kyle William Bishop compares the twenty-first-century zombie "renaissance" to the proliferation of zombie cinema in the wake of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Just as Romero reinterpreted the Haitian zombie of the '30s and '40s, "zombie narratives have been reconditioned to satisfy a new aesthetic, but they have returned to prominence because the social and cultural conditions of a post-9/11 world have come to match so closely those experienced by viewers during the civil unrest of the 1960s and '70s" (Bishop 25). In a monstrous era, a time obsessed with monsters, the zombie in particular is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment," in *Monster Theory*'s terms (Cohen 4). "American Monsters are born out of American history," cultural historian Scott W. Poole writes in *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*; "they emerge out of the central anxieties and obsessions that have been part of the US from colonial times to the present" (4). But the figure of the zombie has only mounted the world stage relatively recently, out of the United States' occupation of Haiti early in the twentieth century, so it has been perfectly timed to become a monster emblematic

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of twentieth- and twenty-first-century anxieties. Additionally, a zombie carries within itself a gap, like a slot waiting to be filled. This makes the figure of the zombie uniquely versatile as a symbol—the zombie’s presence is actually symbolic of absence.

The zombie’s core characteristic is absence, an intrinsic lack, which is concretized by death; what had once been a complete subject when alive has suffered a vital loss. The magic of the zombie—whatever the actual zombification mechanism—is that the absence continues to be present, signified in the literal form of the zombie. A zombie is a present absence. Throughout more than a century of every form of American culture—comics, movies, television shows, literature (prose, poetry, and drama), and even, in the early decades, radio programs—the zombie’s inner emptiness has persisted, arguably the figure’s defining characteristic. Discussing the monster’s varied genealogy in American popular culture, Kevin Boon notes, “zombies do all share a common characteristic: the absence of some metaphysical quality of their essential selves. This may be the soul, the mind, the will, or, in some cases, the personality. But every zombie experiences a loss of something essential that previous to zombification defined it as human” (“And the Dead” 7). Boon’s list of elements that zombies may lack in their various incarnations is not exhaustive, particularly as many zombie creators and critics understand some combination of those terms to be synonymous. Depictions of zombies frequently feature missing body parts, a physical signal that zombies are missing something intangible.

Since the beginning of the monster’s history—the original Haitian zombies—the zombie has participated in Cartesian dualism, a philosophical framework that envisions the human subject as a unity of two fundamental and fundamentally different essences: body and mind. The zombie’s outer rot, its visible deadness, signifies an internal disfigurement that is no less real for being less concrete. Characterizing the zombie as “an antisubject” in which “no trace of the individual remains,” Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry identify the double terror of the undead menace as that of being eaten and that of being assimilated. “Both of these fears,” they write, “reflect recognition of one’s own mortality and ultimately reveal the primal fear of losing the ‘self;’ however, in the figure of the zombie, the body and the mind are separated antinomies. The zombie is different from other monsters because the body is resurrected and retained: only consciousness is permanently lost” (Lauro and Embry 89). To use Jane Caputi’s characterization, many critics define the figure of the zombie as “a monstrosity of consciousness”

(103). In his essay “The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety,” for example, Peter Dendle writes, “the essence of the ‘zombie’ at the most abstract level is supplanted, stolen, or effaced consciousness” (47). He explains,

zombification is the logical conclusion of human reductionism: it is to reduce a person to body, to reduce behavior to basic motor functions, and to reduce social utility to raw labour. Whether zombies are created by a vodun master or by a mad scientist, the process represents a psychic imperialism: the displacement of one person’s right to experience life, spirit, passion, autonomy, and creativity for another person’s exploitive gain. (Dendle 48)

Under Dendle’s analysis, ‘consciousness’ unfolds into a cache of qualities, or components: will, life, spirit, passion, autonomy, and creativity. Dendle’s usage demonstrates the ubiquity of ‘consciousness’ as a fuzzy umbrella-term for any number of abstract qualities; moreover, the quality of consciousness can be evoked by the introduction of these associated or subsidiary qualities.

Selfhood, one’s personal identity, has been closely bound to consciousness in the zombie’s formula since its origin in Haitian folklore. In its folkloric form, the zombie is bereft of its *ti bon ange*, or “little good angel,” which encompasses all that had made the former human an individual (Davis 219). This renders the zombie vulnerable to another’s coercion, since it has been left with no identity of its own, though it still retains the *gros bon ange*, the “big good angel,” which is one’s personal share of the greater life force (Davis 219). Certainly the literary zombie retains the link to anxieties about identity. “Ultimately, modern zombie stories reflect our fear of loss of identity,” Margo Collins and Elson Bond propose in ““Off the page and into your brains!’: New Millennium Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypses” (204). ‘Identity’ is a concept that belongs to the self-consciousness, as Kevin Boon notes in “The Zombie as Other: Mortality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age.” He summarizes, “the transformation that the mythological zombie came to represent” is “an absence of conscious self, a person for whom identity, self, personhood, and so on are absent from the body. In lacking consciousness, the zombie is incapable of examining self” (54). Like Dendle’s, Boon’s explanation of the zombie as a formulation of the human skirts the complexity of the immaterial human attributes that the consciousness exemplifies. Boon argues, “the zombie came to represent a loss of internal

reliability, a loss of being, which results in a human shell occupied by nothingness” (55). But the zombie’s internal loss doesn’t necessarily have to be total—the Haitian zombie, for instance, presents a division in one’s immaterial being: the *gros bon ange* that is retained and the *ti bon ange* that is lost. The zombie participates in Cartesian dualism only to disrupt its neat division. A “category crisis,” in the terms laid out in Cohen’s third “Monster Culture” thesis, the zombie “resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a ‘system’ allowing polyphony” (Cohen 6-7). Both alive and dead, the zombie invites a renewed investigation of ontological paradigms. All monsters, Richard Kearney reminds us in *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, “subvert our established categories and challenge us to think again” and “threaten the known with the unknown” (3). In this way, the zombie is not just monstrous because it is incomplete, but also because its incompleteness challenges and discomforts our understanding of the human subject.

What if we have a zombie that retains self-consciousness, who could additionally process its experience and discuss it with us? Chera Kee thinks about such zombies in her study *Not Your Average Zombie*: “Is it still a zombie if it can articulate its feelings, if it isn’t powerless? My answer is yes.” Kee acknowledges the versatility of the zombie as a fantastic figure, one for which “there is no single canonical definition” and so can be repurposed symbolically. She defines a zombie broadly as “a body that appears functionally alive but that has lost those qualities that would otherwise make it human,” which is in “a state of liminality associated with—but not entirely dictated by—a loss of free will” (Kee 15). In a zombie such as Jack Barnes, the intelligent but definitely undead protagonist of Robin Becker’s novel *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*, the absence usually marking the loss of consciousness or personal will shifts, or is displaced. Since the nature of zombiehood is to be robbed of something intrinsic to one’s humanity—the essential quality that in Kee’s definition has been extinguished with life—if conscious identity is present, then something else (besides life, symbolized by life) is missing. The figure of the zombie is something of an unfinished formula, wherein the presence of an essential human element is indicated only by its absence in the performance of the subject, the performing zombie. This is why the figure of the zombie is so versatile as a fictional trope with which to explore the definition of humanity and the human consciousness. Indeed, the latter has been a familiar practice in cognitive philosophy for decades. In his introduction to ‘the

philosophical zombie,' Robert Kirk attests, "the idea of Zombies, fantastic as it is, has useful work to do" ("Sentience" 60).

Studies of consciousness adopted the zombie in the 1970s as a thought experiment intended to explore the possibility of the intangible half of the Cartesian duality. As Kirk explains in *Zombies and Consciousness*,

if zombies are so much as a bare possibility, the world is a very paradoxical place. That possibility doesn't just imply that there is more to us than the behavioural or other physical facts can provide for. It implies that our part of the world involves something non-physical, on top of the molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles that compose our bodies and those of other sentient creatures. If on the other hand zombies are not possible, then if we can make clear why that is so, we shall have solved the hardest part of the mind-body problem. (4)

The philosophical zombie first emerged as such in Kirk's 1974 article, "Sentience and Behaviour," in the form of Dan, whose excruciatingly slow zombification allows him to describe the process in terms of 'qualia,' cognitive science's term for the subjective essence of human experience (43-4). The salient point of the philosophical zombie is that it lacks qualia, although it is in every other way indistinguishable from humans. In "Sniffing the Camembert: On the Conceivability of Zombies," Allin Cottrell summarizes human philosophers' stake in the philosophical zombie as a thought experiment:

The 'real' issue concerns the status of qualia, that is, the subjective sensory states into which we are thrown when (say) looking at a yellow leaf, hearing a musical chord, sniffing a camembert, or running our fingers over a piece of sandpaper. Is it possible to provide a satisfactory account of such states using only the resources of a materialist functionalism? Or is it the case . . . that once we have said all there is to say about the physical basis of, and the functional role of, such states, there remains an uneliminable residue: the brute qualitative matter of 'what it is like' to sniff the camembert? (4-5)

Reviewed in this context, the use of the term 'consciousness' in Zombie Studies has been synonymous with 'qualia'; therein lies the overlap between the philosophical zombie and the monstrous zombie. Philosophical zombies embody

‘absent qualia,’ a feature Kirk first characterized as a mental state within which “all is silent and dark” (*Zombies* 3). The monstrous zombie in fiction likewise embodies absent qualia. In her discussion of zombies in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*, Marina Warner notes the overlap, commenting, “‘absent qualia’ seems to me a good way of describing what used to be called spirit possession or soul theft, when the bundle of faculties that make a person recognizable—mind, volition, expressiveness, feelings—have been reduced, if not extinguished” (124). Borrowing Warner’s usage to apply to the phenomenon of the literary zombie, the singular form might be useful to describe the quality that Robin Becker’s *Brains* implies to be essential for the successful human formula: the ‘absent quale.’

As an empty subject, a subject that is no longer human because it has been emptied of some fundamentally human essence, or absent quale, the zombie’s presence paradoxically performs absence. Becker captures this quality in *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*, as two (living) witnesses to an apocalyptic plague of zombies discuss why death is so relatively normal, in the regular course of human affairs, despite its tragic and disruptive emotional consequences for those who survive:

“Death is not anything. Death is not . . .” Ros said.

“Life?”

“Death is the absence of a presence. But living death is . . .”

“The presence of absence?” (71)

Ros alludes to the traditional conception of death (pre-zombie), in which even the subject’s absence from the mortal coil continues his presence in the world—e. g. as a corpse, as an occupant of a grave-site, as a memory—continuing as an absent presence. In contrast, the zombie is literally present but figuratively absent, the putrefying-but-persistent presence of an essential absence (of life, at the very least). The zombie’s monstrosity is its present absence, the “third term” that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes as disrupting established categories (6).

In a 2010 interview, Robin Becker explains that her novel *Brains* developed out of this seminal idea: “Most zombie movies aren’t about zombies. They’re about humans.” Specifically, Becker’s realization concerns the humans who survive the zombie hoards, at least for the duration of the plotline, and whose

struggles drive the narrative. But Becker's own contribution to the zombie genre develops human interest in a more metaphysical direction. "What makes a person?" Becker writes, listing the questions that led her to write *Brains*. "Who deserves to 'live'? Is consciousness what makes us human?" (Scalzi). To ponder these questions, the novel's narrator is former English professor and postmodern pop culture scholar Jack Barnes, a kind of zombie sport who retains consciousness—and self-consciousness. "I am not your trained monkey," Jack wants to shout at his personal mad scientist, who created the zombie pandemic in an attempt to engineer super soldiers, "I am a PhD!" (Becker 174).

The novel is the record of Jack's posthumous experience. For instance, he transcribes a monologue by a radio DJ broadcasting music and philosophical musing to accompany the apocalypse: "Like it or not, those zombies are us, our true selves. The veil has been stripped away and underneath we are all cannibals" (104). He compares his recent experience to the classic '60s song "She's Not There" (sung by a group named The Zombies!): "I guess Meagan's not there either. And neither is her mother. I mean, they are in that they exist, sorta, but they're not really there. Like their minds aren't there. Just like the girl in the song" (75). The radio jockey's opinion echoes Jack's own in looking for consciousness to indicate authentic being. A human's unique personhood seems implicitly included in the always complex term 'consciousness,' as also in individuality, spiritual essence, or even reality. Both Jack and the DJ understand a zombie to be a human shell housing an essential absence of one or some combination of these qualities. Jack believes himself to be special because his consciousness has been spared in an apparent freak of genetics. But in terms of Jack's monstrosity, he is undeniably undead, so what absent *quale* does he perform?

Forever an academic, zombie Jack reflects, "in life, I would've written an article about the fool and his broadcast. Postapocalyptic stoned DJ waxes postmodern with songs that spit cynically in the face of his life-or-death situation. The title would be: 'The Living Death of Irony: How Pop Culture Illuminates and Comments on the Current Zombie Crisis'" (Becker 75). Jack's title could serve handily as the novel's own. In fact, *Brains* argues that pop culture has become the stuff of humanity. When Jack and his band of zombie followers encounter a roving detachment of soldiers for the first time, Jack tries to communicate with the humans. "Fighting for control" of his newly embraced desire to eat human brains, Jack believes, "this was my opportunity to show the real me, the man

beneath the animal” (46). He is unsuccessful. While there may be a man inside Jack’s human/animal body—Jack’s hierarchical privileging here of animal instinct above human consciousness is revealing—there is nonetheless no ‘real’ beneath Jack’s ‘me.’ There is only pop culture.

In Umberto Eco’s critique of American culture, “Travels in Hyperreality”—one of the academic sources that Jack explicitly cites (Becker 151)—Eco describes the process by which

the “completely real” becomes identified with the “completely fake.” Absolute unreality is offered as real presence. The aim . . . is to supply a “sign” that will then be forgotten as such: The sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement. Not the image of the thing, but its plaster cast. Its double, in other words.

Is this the taste of America? (7)

Yes, replies Robin Becker’s zombie novel. Jack demonstrates the blurred lines marking the real from the hyperreal, noting how fake some elements of the real world are in his sensory perception. In one anecdote, a female zombie presses herself against his car window, and Jack comments, “She didn’t look real; she looked like someone dressed up for Halloween” (Becker 132). In a pop culture world, rife with mechanically reproduced zombie replicas and cosplay zombies, the real comes to resemble the fake instead of the other way around. In the next scene, one of Jack’s zombie companions grabs a victim’s heart from his chest, “which looked fake, like an anatomical gummi heart—gelatinous, chewy, and chock-full of high-fructose corn syrup” (141). At one point, Jack witnesses a sunset, but sees only an advertisement trope. Describing his group’s journey by boat, Jack oscillates between reporting the group’s actions and referencing their role models in pop culture:

Ros and I hauled anchor and the boat headed west with the wind, chasing the sun and the Joads and the stars in Hollywood. Our own Manifest Destiny. . . . The sun was setting, turning the shifting clouds orange. It looked unreal, like an orange juice commercial or a glossy ad for a subdivision built around golf. . . . Ros spread his arms apart. ‘I’m the king of the world!’ he yelled. We all got the reference. Titanic. Gigantic. The

future's so bright, we gotta eat brains. Over half-decayed and Ros was still a clever boy. Iceberg of America, here we come. (162-3)

The most natural detail of the scene Jack paints here, the sunset, is the least believable element to him. He even inadvertently denies his own authenticity by explicitly acknowledging two pop culture predecessors: the Joads, John Steinbeck's migrant American family in *Grapes of Wrath*, and the fictional hero of the 1997 film *Titanic* (also named Jack). The allusions reinforce each other: Though both book and film are set in moments of authentic American history, each feature the entirely invented subjects referenced in Jack's mention of the Joads and Ros's reenactment of the scene from *Titanic*.

Jack constantly refers to pop culture artifacts to explain and anticipate his zombie existence. "Shambling," he snorts,

that's what the deplorable Max Brooks calls our gait. His book *The Zombie Survival Guide* was once shelved in the humor section of your local bookstore. Now every redneck and zombie hunter from here to California has a copy in his glove compartment and uses it as an actual survival guide. Every word turned out to be true. How's that for postmodern irony.

We exist in a season born of pulp fiction and video games, B movies and comic books. The word made flesh wound. (Becker 38)

Later, Jack notes that there's a copy of Brooks's *Guide* on the dashboard of a vehicle he commandeers (131). Published in 2003, it was not widely popular until the 2006 debut of its sequel and then Hollywood movie *World War Z*. Zombies, remarks Poole, "perhaps more than any other monster . . . are 'made in America' as commodities for sale and distribution" (196). As Jack's constant allusions to the zombie's proliferation in pop culture reminds the reader, he has been a consumer of the zombie long before he becomes a distributor, in a sense, as he spreads the zombie virus.

Unavoidably, George Romero's seminal zombie film trilogy influences Jack's rendition of zombiehood. Cut loose from the social constraints of life, reveling in the liberty afforded him in death, Jack seeks human prey. About his prospective hunting ground, he speculates, "Wal-Mart or the mall?" explaining,

that's the brilliance of *Dawn of the Dead*, the second movie in Romero's trilogy ... the accumulation of material goods is a panacea, a substitute—it can never fill the void at our spiritual center. *It can never acquire the depth of real meaning.* It keeps us tethered to the material world, with zombies clawing at the double doors, greedy for more. And zombies are never satisfied. (my emphasis, Becker 83)

Jack switches in this reflection from the human condition (seeking fulfillment in consumerism) to describing the zombie condition (“never satisfied”), making an implicit comparison between the living and the dead. Describing living humanity while enacting a hollow simulacrum of humanity as a zombie, Jack diagnoses the postmodern human condition as one fettered to a phenomenologically tangible existence. He acknowledges that the circulation of pop culture inevitably and inextricably influences all. Although in Jack's metaphor from *Dawn of the Dead* one is merely trapped with the zombies, the total novel suggests that to be human in the postmodern era is to be saturated and even determined by popular culture, which is to be zombie. Saturation in pop culture results in a kind of monstrous group consciousness in which all humans participate. In other words, pop culture is the human version of the Romero zombies' hive consciousness.

Even the most elite (or pretentious) of social strata is not excluded from the masses; the academic canon is the Ivory Tower's popular culture. As Jack prepares to take his family underwater to preserve them for the duration of winter, he plagiarizes T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock," wondering, "when frozen, would we be comatose or conscious? A patient etherized upon a table" (135). Jack also frequently appropriates the words of his favorite author, Walt Whitman, before and after death ("I wonder what Walt would've thought of the living dead," Jack's wife asks him after he's been bitten and infected with the zombie virus. He replies, "He'd drink the tasteless water of their souls") (8). Jack plans to write an undead manifesto to present to the leaders of the human free world, reasoning that "with my background and knowledge, I would write an argument as persuasive and historic as 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' or the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man'" (78), which he would boldly title "A Vindication of the Rights of the Post-Living" (172). He delusionally projects that his posthumous writings will be "as revolutionary as the Magna Carta, the Treaty of Versailles, and *The Feminine Mystique*. The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights" (167), demanding "life, liberty, and the pursuit of brains" (178). What Jack fails to

anticipate is that his document would evidently be a pastiche of all these sources. As his constant allusions suggest, Jack remains aware of the original sources for the items he appropriates. For example, he lectures fellow zombies on “‘bird’ as a symbol of freedom . . . a preverbal Jungian archetype; it’s ingrained in human consciousness,” he says (61). Jack is unable to generate truly authentic output because he is so stuffed full of allusions. At a later point in his narrative Jack forlornly notes, “only the birds remained, flying out of reach” (113); since Jack certainly has a firm handle on symbolism, perhaps the birds in the latter instance represent the zombies’ and the humans’ inability to reach an authenticity that has eluded both.

Despite his stereotypical pretensions, Jack has always been deeply invested in pop culture. In life, Jack recalls, “I believed that anything with mass appeal was inherently bad, not only [Stephen] King, but Michael Jackson, Harry Potter, and the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. In my view, popularity proved inferiority, not worth.” Jack claims that in his zombie state he “had become mainstream, a plebian, the lowest common denominator, and I didn’t care. In fact, it was liberating” (131). Despite his protestations, Jack’s lifetime saturation in popular culture totally frames his experience, in life and in death. Before hungry hoards of zombies breach Jack’s home, his wife reminds him to aim for the monsters’ brainstems, and Jack snaps, “you think I don’t know that? It’s a trope of the genre” (4). In her interview, Becker explains, “I decided that the characters would be aware of zombie mythology. They’ve all seen the movies, and most have read the *Zombie Survival Guide*. In fact, the characters in *Brains* comment on the amazing fact that everything in the movies turns out to be true” (Scalzi). Another way to say this is that cultural archetypes, rather than his authentic experience, generate what Jack experiences as ‘truth.’ Certainly, cultural symbolism persists in both Jack’s conscious reflection and, the text suggests, in his unconscious. Relating his hallucinatory near-death experience, Jack recalls,

the guy from Munch’s *The Scream* was there with his hands on the sides of his face. A child tattooed with the mark of the beast morphed into a stampede of wild horses running away from a gothic mansion that morphed into a laughing fat lady in pearls. The typical horror-movie shtick. Cliché, but true.

And then I was reborn. . . .

Not just zombie but archetype. (Becker 36)

As Becker points out in her interview, her characters remark that what they've seen in pop culture turns out to be archetypally representative of reality—something reinforced by Jack's habit of citing his sources throughout his narrative as “bad movies with cheesy voice-overs,” and “any cliché you can think of . . . every disaster movie or thriller, every horror and slasher flick” (62; 148).

Jack is emblematic of the late stages of an American condition. In a 1943 editorial section of the *Saturday Review*, entitled “The American Folly,” Norman Cousins observed, “there is something curiously paradoxical today in the changed relationship between the book and film world and the everyday world in which Americans live. Once—and not many years ago at that—many of us picked up a book or went to the movies for an hour or two of escape.” But America's folly, according to Cousins, is an obsession with representations of reality that have come to seem to American audiences more vivid and desirable than everyday life. On one hand, Cousins's comments can be construed as a back-handed compliment to American fiction, which lifts the reader “out of the fantastic and unreal world that is America today” and then elevates him or her into a fictional “world of substance and reality” (Cousins 91). The other hand points to what postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard describes as “a world completely catalogued and analyzed, then *artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real*, in a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth, of the blackmail of the real” (original emphasis, 8). Baudrillard's term “catalogued” recalls Walt Whitman's famous catalogues in *Leaves of Grass*, which Jack Barnes emulates. Cousins creates his own pop culture catalogue in his prescient critique of what theorists now call the globalization of American mass culture in postwar Japan: “Young girls wore tight sweaters, short skirts, and American-style shoes. They chewed gum, went dancing, liked hot music, preferred American movies and Japanese vaudeville to the traditional Kabuki theater. . . . Gum, jive, jazz, tight sweaters, padded bras, yo-yos, comic books, neon lights, dance halls, and chromium trim . . .” (170-1). Cousins goes on to note that freedom to embrace cultural diversity is a fundamental national tenet, but his editorial as a whole emphasizes the troubling aspects of the mass-produced cultural conformity America exports on an international scale. In Baudrillardian terminology, Cousins documents the dawn of the current “world of simulation” (Baudrillard 19). Examining zombie narratives from the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the

twenty-first in his chapter “Torturers, Terrorists, and Zombies: The Products of Monstrous Societies,” Stephen T. Asma discusses an Islamic-fundamentalist conception of America’s cultural tyranny, the idea of Americans as “consumerist zombies” spreading the contamination of soulless consumerism. Asma remarks, “Some fundamentalist Muslims conceive of average Americans as docile cogs in a monstrous secular machine that seems to be grinding forward to subdue every corner of the globe” (241). By the turn of the twenty-first century, America is mired in what Baudrillard describes as “the vicious circle of its irresponsibility and of its fundamental nonexistence, of its already seen and of its already dead” (Baudrillard 19). The world of substance and reality that Norman Cousins describes (or imagines) in American literature no longer exists, in Baudrillard’s estimation, by the end of the twentieth century. Nor does it exist in Becker’s *Zombie Memoir*. Before dying, Jack was already zombified, mired in an unending and unavoidable circulation of zombified culture.

The undead figure of the zombie embodies absent qualia so well because death traditionally robs its victim of a (literally) vital component. Jack assumes that that component is consciousness, looking for signs of mental processes in the decaying eyeballs of his prospective companions: “Some of the more aware zombies appeared to understand that our gestures meant liberty and escape. A dim light shone in their eyes. Others were so far gone, it was useless. Probably dullards as humans as well, they were now catatonic brain-eating machines with no semblance of their former selves” (Becker 61). With his cognitive function somehow spared by death and the zombie virus, Jack initially resists being subsumed in the brute instinct that is all that remains of his fellow zombies. “Trying to ignore the call of the wild” (149), as Jack once refers to his new desire for consuming flesh, Jack reminds himself: “Self-control. Mindful restraint. Denying my instincts, displaying the discipline of an ascetic monk” (26). It is “triumph-of-the-will time,” Jack cheers himself. “Mind over matter. Brain over brains” (125). Death’s enforced disconnection between the body and the soul, and the zombie’s physical awkwardness, suggests that the soul drives the body like a human pilots a vehicle. When there is interference between the control and the engine, side effects such as shambling necessarily ensue.

Jack makes clear his frustration with his deteriorating condition. While seeking her zombie-version replacement, Jack reflects on his wife, “I’m glad I ate Lucy. I’d hate to see her dulled, reduced to an object, a thing. A rabid automaton” (52). If death can be understood to reduce a person to an object, then Jack is

simultaneously object and subject, since he's retained his consciousness. Jack complains, "I was stuck in a body that would not obey me. A stroke victim, I was locked in. A rotting portable prison. A walking putrefying metaphor. I, Robot. I, Zombie" (24). These lines suggest that zombies and humans both navigate an inherent divide between their bodies and their minds/spirits/souls, so that zombiehood as a literary trope is an exaggeration and exacerbation of the human condition. In his own words, Jack is "a walking putrefying metaphor" for humanity. And he is an incarnation of the terms Cohen lays out in his first thesis of monstrosity: "Like a letter on a page, the monster signifies something other than itself"; "the monstrous body is pure culture" (4).

Jack and the rest of Becker's zombies reflect postmodern humanity's own absent quale; they are a judgment of a lack in postmodern American culture. In his cultural critique of American monsters, Scott Poole notes, "undead revenants from popular culture rather than monsters of folk belief, the zombie symbolizes for many Americans the current state of their own society or its eventual destruction" (216). In *Brains*, the state of postmodern American society is the aftermath of its destruction, an illustration of its fatal loss of authentic reality as it is subsumed in an unending swirl of self-referential popular culture. At times Jack seems to suspect that there is a crucial lack in himself ("bear in mind, this is a zombie talking—a supernatural being. What do I know? I might not even be real. Oh, ontology"), but he is unable to recognize it because the absence is of a quality that he lacked also in life (Becker 36). Metaphorically speaking, neither Jack nor his zombie compatriots are at all real, alienated as they are from authentically experienced reality not just by death but by the countless layers of simulacra and simulations that comprise contemporary mass culture (Baudrillard 1). Jack's disingenuousness points to his lack of genuineness, as in his spurious lament: "We were in uncharted territory, and without certainties, without a map . . ." (Becker 100). In truth, he inhabits a kind of full-scale pop culture representation of the American landscape. Robin Becker, and/or Jack Barnes's subconscious, may be thinking of Umberto Eco's satirical essay, "On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1." In that context, we might say that mankind has indulged in creating a popular culture map of America on a 1:1 scale. This metaphor has the added serendipity of embodying the reason the map has become, in Baudrillard's phrase, "the desert of the real itself": There is simply no more room for more reality to take the place of the existing hyperreality (1).

“The real” has long since devolved into recirculated simulations, Jean Baudrillard postulates in “The Precession of Simulacra,” resulting in “the characteristic hysteria of our times: that of the production and reproduction of the real. What every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to over-produce, is to restore the real that escapes it” (23). Former English professor Jack Barnes is doubtless aware of Baudrillard’s work. He alludes to it when he imagines a moment with his zombie family as a potential beginning of the “birth of the real.” “We could have been a group of actors pretending to be a normal American family on vacation,” he comments. Significantly, Jack’s first thought is for the simulation, imagining a tableau of a postmodern family the type of which populates the landscape of Eco’s “Travels in Hyperreality.” Jack continues, “. . . or we could have actually been that family, no more simulations or acting, no layers of meaning and artifice sprinkled with postmodern allusion. The birth of the real” (Becker 151). It is unlikely, considering that Jack continues even through the final chapter of his memoir to filter humans, zombies, and his surroundings through a densely layered pop-culture lens. “Oh, gotta love those allusions,” he quips (72). And he does, indulging in a kind of conspicuous consumption of cultural symbols. The child-zombie that Jack affectionately names Guts effectively catfishes victims for the group because “his layers of reality were believable and complex—he ‘acted’ more zombielike than he actually was” (63). How Jack can fathom the true nature of Guts, despite the entirely fictional persona Jack has invented for the miniature zombie, is a puzzle. Crucially, Jack does not perceive these and other obvious inconsistencies. His inability to be real, in Baudrillard’s sense of the term, blinds him to his own condition of simulation-laden unreality; part of the condition is to not notice the condition. Although the professor of postmodern irony himself remains unaware, his audience is invited to see Jack more clearly through his self-reflective narrative.

Jack amply demonstrates his reliance on the “precession of simulacra” (Baudrillard 1). He interprets himself and others through pop-culture-tinted glasses, perceiving Guts as “every black street urchin in every TV show, from Buckwheat to Arnold.” In a brief moment of perspicacity, Jack notes, “of course, for all I knew he was more middle-class *Cosby* than ghetto *Good Times* in ‘real’ life, but he can’t contradict me. And I’m the one writing history” (Becker 59). Note that Jack qualifies the term “‘real’ life” with quotation marks, a subtle acknowledgment of the simulation of life inherent to his undead state. In another situation, a couple of elderly human prey “were poster children for the old and

fearful. A commercial for Celebrex” (85). Annalee Newitz, in her 2006 study *Pretend We’re Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*, devotes a chapter to analysis of late-twentieth-century films that illustrate “monsters in the culture machine” (153). Featuring bad guys using mass media as a tool of mass control, like *The Matrix*’s Agent Smith or *The Terminator*’s Skynet, in these narratives “the media is both a monstrosity and a manufacturer of monsters,” having “the potential to drain individuals of their subjectivity and replace it with fabricated desires, hopes, and fears” (Newitz 152; 163). The American culture in *Brains* continues the legacy of these narratives, but focuses on the aftermath of mass-reproduced culture and its victims.

Before he learns to hunt, Jack’s remaining consciousness (and self-consciousness) threatens to be a hindrance in his zombie existence. Absurdly, Jack feels uncertain about how to go about the business of being undead. But because the compulsion to feed draws Jack to his human prey, he mentally invokes a monstrous cultural ancestry for emotional support: “I felt a line of monsters behind me as I advanced on Dr. Welk,” he rejoices. “My ancestors: Count Dracula, the Wolfman, Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, the Red Death in his mask and vestments. Every party has a pooper; that’s why we invited the Boogeyman” (Becker 20). Gaining his stride as a cannibalistic monster, Jack pays homage to his predecessors. He inserts a movie monster into the standard cartoon depiction of an angel on one shoulder and a demon on the other: “Jason on my shoulder was better than an angel. A monster on a monster, the hockey mask confirmed that our historical moment was unprecedented; Legend had become reality, fiction was finally fact.” He observes that zombies, “like Jason Voorhees . . . rise from the dead” (57). The hockey mask that Jack mentions, taped on to protect his shoulder, appears to him as a sign pointing him back to pop culture. Given Jack’s particular background expertise in popular culture as a professor, it might seem strange that he is momentarily at a loss to access its guiding templates when he is remade by the zombie virus into a monster, but the lapse calls attention to the action of referring to simulacra and simulations for behavioral models. “Oh, the signs that delineate our decades!” Jack exclaims. “Our cultural symbols and codes: . . . pop culture and fashion, the British Romantics and deconstruction—it was all I had in life and I clung to it like religion. It used to be enough, but it meant nothing to me now. Dust in the wind. Like Charlie Manson said: Now is the only thing that’s real” (96). Jack is clearly mistaken about his rejection of human culture, as his enumeration of the annals of

monsterhood demonstrates, and he has that last thought turned around—‘the real’ is the *quale* that is fatally absent in ‘the now.’

If zombies can no longer produce or recognize authentic reality, neither can the humans, even before the apocalypse. The presence of the zombies is not the cause but the reification of the loss of the real. As Jack proclaims in his manifesto, which he apparently intends more for a human audience than an undead readership, “we exist in a season born of pulp fiction and video games, B movies and comic books” (38). The ambiguous pronoun “we” implies a universal state encompassing both humans and zombies. While touring his human abode for a last time, Jack describes his wedding photo of “Lucy smearing cake on my face. It’s a scene replayed at a million wedding receptions: The bride shoving frosting at the groom, intentionally missing his mouth, her own mouth opened wide with laughter. The ritual is simultaneously playful and sadistic, combining food and sex, dominance and submission, consumption and power” (14). It is also apparently a persistent and ingrained behavioral meme, a ritual that summons subjects to enact itself over and over again. Jack makes a similar comment about one of his acts of zombie carnage, remarking to his projected audience, “you’ve seen this scene in a million movies” (160). If the Celebex couple is an example of human behavior during the apocalypse, the living too are still relying on media culture to guide them. Their granddaughter reassures her elders, “the guy on the radio said this is the place and this is the way to get in. They’ll help us, you’ll see. It’s all good” (85). As in this example, it seems that the byproducts of such widely disseminated cultural memes, like stereotypes, are still reliable. When one of the commandos who briefly captures the zombies tells his compatriot that he’s been hunting the undead longer than the younger soldier has been alive (another cliché), the latter points out that this is impossible, given the recency of the zombie outbreak. The commando retorts, “if not zombies per se, the gooks, A-rabs. Same difference. Enemies. Insurgents” (67). The human population, post apocalypse, adheres to established patterns. *Brains*’s zombie hero reappropriates the same patterns, and much of the cultural content. All that is left is the layering of popular culture disguising a central absence of authentic reality.

In many ways, Baudrillard’s diagnosis of the postmodern condition in “The Precession of Simulacra” already reads like a zombie narrative: the proliferation of reproductions overwhelms the genuine like a zombie hoard devouring the remaining human population. According to Baudrillard,

the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than meaning . . . never again will the real have the chance to produce itself—such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance. (2)

In *Brains*, Robin Becker might as well have set out to literalize Baudrillard's figures of speech. When Jack Barnes dies, he devolves from a professor of pop culture to become pop culture itself. Possibly the distinction has never existed, since as a professor of popular culture Jack has always perpetuated the culture's system of signs.

As sterile shells of their former human selves, lacking the vital *quale* Baudrillard would term the real, zombies cannot generate new material. Jack explicitly confirms this as he watches a burning building:

“any undead in there are toast,” Ros said.

It was just as well. What would they have done? Build cities? Design furniture? Form governments? Make pottery? Zombies are not creators. . . .

Like a Venus flytrap, just give us meat and more meat.
Feed me, Seymour! (143)

American pop culture will obey, will continue to feed the zombie hoard, continue to replicate monstrous images of itself. But the proliferation of the literary zombie does not have to be sterile; as an embodiment of a present absence, a signification of an absent *quale*, the zombie can accept any number of meanings. It is insatiable.

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