

# Awakening the Civic Dead: Political Mobilization of the Zombie in Real Time

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“We are zombies, but we are very much alive, actually.”  
– Slovenian “Zombie Church” Activist

“We want to motivate people to take part. To free themselves from their crusted shells, to take part in the political process.”  
– Hamburg 1000Gestalten Organizer

The field of monster studies has left little doubt that the modern zombie functions as a kind of floating signifier for a wide range of cultural fantasies and fears, which shift with changing circumstances (Lauro “Zombie Theory” xix). As in the United States, where zombies have come and gone since the 1930s, so across an increasingly interconnected world, the zombie tends to mirror “the current state of...society or its eventual direction” (Poole 217). A liminal creature, the zombie slips the binaries of life and death, the individual and the multitude, impotence and agency, often managing to be neither/nor and both/and (Bishop How *Zombies Conquered* 6). Like most monsters, the zombie’s “cultural body” carries the irresolvable paradoxes plaguing the human condition (Cohen 4). But the zombie narrative—zombie’s life in story—is particularly useful for teasing out the fraught relationships between the individual, the crowd (or mob, or swarm), and the larger power constellations circumscribing social behavior.

Given the living dead’s social orientation, zombie narratives often deliver customized political metaphors. Scholars have traced how the political referent has morphed across context. In the twentieth century, zombies stood in for everything from communism to the Vietnam War, urbanization to AIDS, racial anxieties and mass consumerism.<sup>1</sup> Today “millennial zombies” channel anxieties

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<sup>1</sup> For brief recaps of different manifestations over time and across culture, see Sarah Juliet Lauro’s Introduction to her *Zombie Theory: A Reader* ix-xii, and Platts 549-553. For a collection of historical treatments of the zombie in popular culture see Christie and Lauro’s *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*.

about our dependence on technology, globalization and migration, ecological destruction, fears for the place of the individual in an increasingly demanding society, and vulnerabilities that, like viruses, spring from our porous social condition in a global world.<sup>2</sup> Yet across context, the powerful multivalence of zombie narratives enables many points of identification for audiences. We may identify with the survivors fighting off menacing forces chomping at our heels (an effort always hindered by our evident weakness and corruptibility), where zombies stand in for the unassimilable other that the imagined social body resists (Canavan 414). At the same time, we may sense how much in common we have with these gluttonous creatures seemingly doomed to destroy the very ecologies on which their existence depends. Like them, we live in a state of degeneration, dying a bit more the longer we survive, but also causing damage to much of the life around us. As Kyle William Bishop has suggested, we might even envy the zombie a bit, seeing potential in the idea of joining the zombie horde, rather than suffering as human (“I Always Wanted” 26-7). In its multivalence, zombie is perhaps the most flexible monster for interrogating political power on many levels simultaneously, serving as a symbol for both the perceived *us* and the imagined *them*; both the external forces stacked against humans and the internal ones complicating our best efforts. Even in the dark visions they cast, zombie narratives offer occasional glimpses of how a lost species might rise against overwhelming odds to birth a future that looks different, maybe even better.

We have seen some exploration of the zombie’s relevance for thinking about contemporary global politics in the field of political theory.<sup>3</sup> But until recently,

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Dendle uses the term “millennial zombie” in his section introduction to Christie and Lauro’s *Better Off Dead*, 159-162, and explores “Zombie Movies and the Millennial Generation” in the same volume, 175-186. For a fascinating discussion of the (re)emergence of zombie mythos in South Africa during massive labor dislocations at the turn of the millennium, see Jean and John Camaroff, “Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism” in Sarah Juliet Lauro’s *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, 137-156. For a summary of the massive academic literature that has grown just in the past decade, see Lauro’s introduction to *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, xix.

<sup>3</sup> In political science, Dan Drezner’s *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* marked one of political science’s early forays into zombie studies. Henry Giroux continued it in *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*. Wadsworth considers Herbert Marcuse’s possible read of zombie popularity in “Are We The Walking Dead? Zombie Apocalypse as Liberatory Art.”

mobilization of the zombie metaphor in political real-time—that is, employed in public space for specific political purposes beyond the occasional fundraiser—has been quite rare. Starting in the mid-aughts, scholars began investigating whether public zombie gatherings, such as urban “zombie walks,” wherein participants dress up as zombies or their potential victims and take over a public space for a period of time for fun, might serve as prototypes or vehicles for some sort of political critique or revolutionary identity. While such gatherings have displayed provocative uses of zombie imagery in public space, scholars have suggested that, for the most part, zombie walks and the like contain more *potential* for the expression of collective power than any meaningful *activation* of it. As Sarah Juliet Lauro mused in 2011, “Maybe when the zombie walk phenomenon has slouched toward its final resting place, we will begin knowing and speaking that which the zombie mob only played at: community, action, (r)evolution” (“Playing Dead” 230). As it happened, just shortly after her reflections on zombie walks were published, zombies began to surface in public political space, particularly in relation to protests against the forces of advanced capitalism.

Below, I examine two recent developments on the global stage in which the zombie mob was not playing at power; two instances in which, politically, the political zombie was dead serious, moving well beyond the civic spectacle of the zombie walk and into the field of public protest. These phenomena demonstrate potent instances of the zombie figure being intentionally transferred from the realm of political metaphor in popular culture (via filmic, literary, and commercial representations), to the more agonal space of political action. In 2012-13, citizens of the small central European nation of Slovenia broke two decades of relative quiescence with a political uprising that employed the zombie as a dynamic icon to target corruption and other grievances and simultaneously signify resistance against larger political and economic forces. A few years later, during the G20 summit in 2017 in Hamburg, Germany, a performance collective called The 1000Gestalten leveraged the zombie metaphor in a large-scale performance art piece in a public square. Both of these cases exceeded the parameters of the conventional zombie walk. In these examples we see the emergence of zombie in real time and real space—that is, as a metaphor visibly mobilized in physical public arenas as a mode of critical interrogation, ironic inversion, political invitation, and collective envisioning of alternatives to the status quo. In both cases, activists leveraged the multivalence of zombie to significant political effect, expressing exuberant resistance to the forces arrayed under the term neoliberalism (which I define further on).

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Recognition of these phenomena can advance monster scholarship in several ways. As I detail, the zombie metaphor proves mobilizable as a mechanism for translating the complex political, economic, and cultural dynamics characterized by neoliberalism into a vocabulary of collective grievance, resistance, and resilience. The recent ubiquity of zombie in popular culture has made the connotations of concepts like the “living dead” widely accessible, and upon this foundation activists draw attention to concrete frustrations with the global neoliberal order. The Slovene and German cases demonstrate how political zombies employed in public spaces can, on one hand, signal despair about the suffering of the human spirit under conditions of hyper-capitalism, but, on the other, envision—literally enact public visions of—a collective awakening and rebellion against oppressive forces. Brought into the agon, the space of public contestations over power and justice, politicized zombies draw on the carnivalesque tradition to perform politically fruitful inversions and subversions. But beyond being sites of dark play, they interrogate the status quo and demonstrate paths to action. Perhaps most importantly, zombie-themed political events themselves become modes of community building and cultural expression against global forces that foster isolation and political apathy. Despite the inherent paradoxes that we know can constrain the zombie figure politically, mobilizations of zombie in real time can and do activate a liberatory visual imaginary in a world in which alternatives to the status quo can be hard to conceive.

Below, I first review scholarship on the political potentiality and limitations of earlier versions of zombie gatherings, and suggest why the conditions of neoliberalism set the stage for fresh uses of “dead flesh” in public space, starting with Occupy Wall Street protests in London and New York. Part 2 turns to the Slovenian case, in which protests that coordinated under the umbrella of the Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing became a catalytic vehicle for a two-year protest movement that enjoyed some tangible victories, including the forced resignation of several prominent officials. This section draws on English-language reporting, contemporary participant accounts, and interviews I conducted with Slovenians in March 2017. In Part 3, I engage a close reading of 1000Gestalten’s embrace of the zombie in its Hamburg performance, highlighting the politically salient inversions it enacted in the context of the 2017 G20 summit. Keeping the differences between these two political employments of zombie in view, I believe these cases illuminate how zombie is proving its potential as a figure of real-time critique and liberation in the era of neoliberalism.

## Zombie: Entertainer, Prophet, or Revolutionary?

A perpetual interest in zombie studies has been whether the reanimated corpse can serve as a politically inspiring archetype, and, correspondingly, whether popular interest in zombies suggests a possible awakening to current political predicaments, or merely reflects the half-deadness of modern subjects. If the latest wave of zombie popularity has been fixated on global apocalypse, does this mirror a kind of mass political apathy in the face of catastrophe? Or could it provide images of rebellion against zombification, or on behalf of new kinds of community, new forms of humanness?

In *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture*, Kyle William Bishop notes that there are many ways contemporary viewers may relate to the zombie and even see positive potential in it. The metaphorical slave figure of the Haitian tradition, for instance, often takes symbolic form under conditions of modern capitalism as the soul-deadened “working stiff” (8). Millennial audiences instantly recognize this figure in the opening scenes of *Shaun of the Dead*, which is part of why viewers root for Shaun and his crew even when his best friend becomes a zombie (and integrated into society as such). Bishop also identifies the emergence in the twenty-first century of “hero zombies,” sympathetic zombie protagonists who seem to bend the defining features of zombie by acquiring (recovering) communication skills or the ability to feel (as in films like *Day of the Dead*, *Fido*, and *Warm Bodies*) (13-14). But absent from Bishop’s four major zombie types is the collective zombie as a politicized redeemer—the zombie-horde-as-slave-uprising.

Indeed, in “I Always Wanted to See How the Other Half Lives,” Bishop suggests that the zombie renaissance in the post-9/11 era is mostly an escape valve for audiences overwhelmed with economic pressures, terrorism and war. “[T]he zombie provides the anxious and overwhelmed with a therapeutic outlet, a brief moment of respite and full-body escapism,” he writes, which may be amplified when people dress up as zombies in public space (36). Others see hope tucked into the warnings carried in millennial zombie narratives—a hope that if we play our cards right, we might avert total disaster. As Collins and Bond write:

Zombies, and apocalyptic fiction generally, can function as jeremiad, a warning to its audience to repent and reform. In this sense, the new millennium zombies share a similar role with their shambling predecessors as social critiques. But rather than ending with a nearly extinct humanity, these newer zombie apocalypses depict a regeneration following the plague’s scourging. (188)

In contemporary zombie productions such as *World War Z*, hopeful signs include the way technology is reclaimed for humane purposes, old social divides are transcended by the common threat, and humanity prevails through mutual aid (192-3). Even the emergence of the new hybrid human-zombie (Bishop's "zombie protagonist"), can be read, according to Collins and Bond, as a sort of savior figure who rises in the interstitial space between zombie and human to assist in rebuilding the world (200).

Caution and catharsis are not mutually exclusive options, given the zombie's symbolic multivalence. But researchers have regarded expressions of collective zombie-ness performed in public spaces more as venues for irreverent communal play than as modes of political intervention. Thea Faulds organized the first recorded zombie walk in 2003, when she and a group of friends wandered through Toronto dressed as zombies. The event is now the sanctioned Toronto Zombie Walk, which attracts thousands annually and has inspired zombie walks around the world and even a World Zombie Day in late October (Orpana 294). Such gatherings contribute to what Glennis Byron has called the "globalgothic" aesthetic (Bishop 33).

Scholars have been keen to note that zombie walks display contemporary variations on what Mikhail Bakhtin vividly detailed as the uncanny carnivalesque in the medieval folk festival tradition (Bakhtin). Emma Austin observes how public zombies embrace the carnival setting as a "space of inversion" where meanings are contested and the people bawdily (and bodily) speak back against the expectations of power elites (181). Simon Orpana describes how Bakhtin's understanding of the "grotesque realism, physical degradation, and folk laughter—as inoculation against the 'cosmic terror' of hegemonic social control—are particularly relevant for characterizing zombie walks as modern manifestations of the carnivalesque" (295). Through a cathartic fixation on the morbid, on corporeal degeneration and gore, public zombies in walks and festivals may challenge bourgeois social norms (after all, status professionals like Wall Street bankers, doctors, and lawyers are all reduced to shambling corpses) and demonstrate what Bakhtin describes as a kind of cosmic laughter (302). Orpana argues that zombie culture "exhibits dark humor that laughs in the face of overwhelming power" (302) and, through symbol, performance, and pleasure resists the kind of disciplinary control that Foucault described as biopower (306). While Orpana does not read zombie walks as political sites in and of themselves, he notes that they demonstrate a potential kind of politics, in that the "zombie mob collects new participants as it goes," turns casual observers into potential victims of the horde, and transforms the physical infrastructure of a city (300). The zombie mass, in art and in real-time zombie gatherings, is "a mass with its own rudimentary sense of agency"—the agency of a voracious, excessive

challenge to the social order (308). I will return to these carnivalesque forms of agency in zombie gatherings in the case studies.

Sarah Juliet Lauro (whose “Zombie Manifesto” co-written with Karen Embry has been an influential case for the zombie’s political salience in the twenty-first century) studied zombie walks around 2009, sometimes as a participant-observer. She was curious whether coordinated zombie events could “afford the kind of revolutionary shift in consciousness that earlier avant-gardes hoped would come out of collective or Situationist art” (220). Was there potential in the zombie “swarm identity” to create a new kind of image of “common being” like that which she and Embry theorize in their manifesto, and could this foster consciousness of the collective as an insurrectionary force (214)? She emerged pessimistic. Although zombie gatherings pushed the boundaries between art and experience, and sometimes implicitly offered social critique, she found that their potential for inciting revolutionary consciousness was stifled by the “frustrating dialectic” at the heart of the zombie metaphor:

In playing zombie, one becomes aware of the subject/object duality of our everyday existence, that which specifically inhibits the success of revolution...[I]n general, the zombie is a reminder of the inherent duality of the human condition: as thinking subjects, and as future corpses [i.e., objects]. In playing zombie, we make visible the thingness of our body as that recalcitrant object from which we do not hurry to separate, and which real revolution endangers...A figuration of slave and slave rebellion, the zombie always connotes the annihilation of revolution at the same time that it embodies revolutionary drive; likewise, these zombie mobs are antirevolutionary even as they illustrate the concept’s latent potential. (225)

Lauro assessed zombie walks and other gatherings as “too thin” to find traction for a meaningful shift in consciousness, an enactment of collective power (228). Curating a communal moment that ultimately just disperses and in which the players parade as objects rendered only temporarily into public subjects, she argued that zombie walks amount more to a “veiled threat,” “dry run,” or “dress rehearsal” than a transformative process (228-9).

Lauro’s pessimism about the power of the zombie walk to transform is reasonable, especially in the context of gatherings where acting the zombie is the sole objective, and neither organizers nor participants approach them with political intent. But something I find striking in Lauro’s depiction of zombie walks as gatherings of individuals who manage to overcome disconnection to coordinate in public space for a pleasurable spectacle, *only to have the potential power of that swarm-assembly inevitably diffused* is that this dynamic is also a defining feature of the neoliberal order. For that reason, it is interesting that

zombie performances became part of the global anti-neoliberal resistance movement known as Occupy Wall Street in 2011.

## Neoliberal Zombies Resist

To briefly define it, neoliberalism connotes a set of political and economic forces that ascended in the mid-twentieth century through the advocacy of libertarian procapitalist economists like Milton Friedman and F.A. Hayek.<sup>4</sup> Promoted by capitalist superpowers under Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s and normalized after Soviet Communism collapsed, neoliberalism eventually became a hegemonic global paradigm, which today defies even the power of nation-states to restrain it. Its key characteristics are its prioritization of market forces over human capital; defense of deregulation and corporate dominance as extensions of individual liberty; weakening of the public arena as it privatizes formerly public goods and shrinks social safety nets; legal restriction of organized labor, and normalization of a social Darwinist, hyper-capitalist view of human competitiveness in which people are expected to act like “little human capitals” solely responsible for their survival and success (Brown 2015). As the conditions of neoliberalism produce greater economic inequality alongside flat wage growth and expensive access to once-public provisions like higher education, people live in an increasing state of precarity, amplified for groups already marginalized or struggling, such as young adults, people of color, immigrants, and the elderly and disabled (Camaroff and Camaroff 138).

Neoliberalism’s power derives partly from the fact that neither its proponents nor the citizens at its mercy recognize it as ideological; rather, we are told that the “free market” has created improved opportunities for everyone, and that those who are losing have simply failed to exert proper effort. Neoliberal economic pressures keep most people stretched too thin juggling the demands of work and family life with so little support from government that most would rather stay

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<sup>4</sup> There is now a massive literature on neoliberalism, a fraction of which I will signal here. For early analyses of the rise of neoliberalism, see Carl Friedrich’s “The Political Thought of Neo-Liberalism” and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-9*. For influential contemporary analyses, see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, and Simon Springer, *The Discourse of Neoliberalism: An Anatomy of a Powerful Idea*. For a useful short but accurate overview, see George Monbiot, “Neoliberalism—The Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems.”



home and watch the zombie uprising in HD than spend Saturday at the zombie walk, much less at the capitol to protest. But if they are to gather, neoliberalism incentivizes gathering for entertainment rather than expressions of collective agency. When citizens do organize resistance, as they did in the turn of the millennium in events like the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests, the neoliberal system responds with displays of overwhelming state force, condemnation from establishment centers of power, and accusations of socialist or communist “radicalism.”

At the height of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) actions that broke out in New York, London and a host of other cities in the fall of 2011, some activists seized on the political possibilities of zombies as the perfect “creatures of the moment” (to use Jean and John Camaroff’s phrase [139]) to symbolize both agents and victims of rapacious capitalism. In “The Scene of Occupation,” Tavia Nyong’o analyzes how Occupy London organizers produced a version of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* video dance in front of St. Paul’s Cathedral, and occupiers in New York leveraged zombie marches and the term itself as political vehicles in actions around Zuccotti Park. Nyong’o focuses less on the logistics of zombie events in these OWS sites than on the ways in which zombie performances in the context of political action help interrupt ordinary experiences of “space, time, and the act of naming” under contemporary capitalism (319).

Nyong’o’s analysis, which draws on Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno’s contemplations of time, as well as work by Agamben, Marx, Foucault and others, is rich in a way I cannot capture in this essay. But several of his observations stand out in relation to the Slovenian and Hamburgian uses of zombie we will shortly review. One is that zombies, in their in-betweenness, their performance of a kind of bodily “openness” as a living-dead form stumbling around in a state of decay, potently convey the precarity of life under late-capitalism (321). “The particular, atypical shamble of the zombie—its asocial sociality, its decomposing ecology—choreographs a relation to the tense, dreadful time of precarity,” as Nyong’o puts it (327). But for that reason, *performing* the zombie in political space can be a liberating “*transfer* of energy” that is also a transformation of time—as those performing the zombie move from dead time (at a dull, underpaid job, or at a long political occupation) to an “intensification” of time dancing or walking through the city in an engaged critique of the current political reality (327). The zombie dance, Nyong’o suggests, “is a survival skill for living with dead time” (326).

Remembering Orpana’s observations on the carnivalesque, we might say that to bring zombies to a political action resisting neoliberal systems is to use the zombified figure of capitalism to laugh at its expectations that we (workers, students, citizens) behave like zombies; it is to both ridicule the norms and rebuke their power sources. When zombies occupy public space in “real time,” they have

the capacity to breach our ordinary experience of time and, in the particular space of a politicized occupation or action, to slow things down or “stretch out” time, which can be quite impactful as observers stop to watch and are potentially drawn in by the spectacle (327).

The OWS movement’s mobilization of public zombies in London and New York certainly were important precursors for the multi-layered zombie symbolism employed by activists in Slovenia and Hamburg. As we will see, these activists leveraged the zombie, the figure so often defined by its unconsciousness, into conscious political critique of neoliberal forces, and performed the zombie horde as a vehicle of political resistance. In so doing, they innovated on the political use of public zombie.

### The All-Slovenian Upheaval and the “Zombie Church”

In retrospect, the six-month wave of protests that started in 2012 may feel to Slovenes like a flash in the pan; many today complain that their political system has not meaningfully changed. But at the time, the uprising (eventually named the All-Slovenian Upheaval) was significant in at least three ways: 1) it brought thousands into the streets, which hadn’t occurred since Slovenia’s break from socialist Yugoslavia in 1991; 2) it led to the ouster of a number of office holders, and disrupted the existing party politics associated with corrupt regimes; and 3) its demonstrations incorporated a diverse cross-section of Slovene society, including groups and identities that had not often coordinated in the past. The zombie figure, at least for a time, became a focal point for all that.

Since the early 1990s, this small ethnic nation tucked between Austria, Italy, Hungary, and Croatia, had been regarded as a model for a stable post-socialist transition, the first to enter the Eurozone, and relatively prosperous, with strong national industries and relative political equilibrium. But by 2012 the country of two million was experiencing the painful effects of the 2009 global recession, including shrinking European exports, rising public debt, and unemployment (KOKS). Much of this was attributed to the right-wing party’s mismanagement of publicly owned industries, which many characterized as an autocratic government pushing neoliberal economic policies.

The Upheaval emerged from a municipal scandal that, were it not for the economic strain brought on by austerity measures and simmering discontent over corruption, might have been far less catalytic. In November 2012, citizens of Maribor became angry upon learning that five million euros of public funds had been used to install high-tech radars to monitor traffic offenses—and 93% of the revenue would land in the pockets of a private corporation (Korsika and Mesec 80). When the press uncovered the scheme, infuriated citizens vandalized eleven

radars and eventually took to the streets, first in small numbers, to brand their mayor, already under corruption charges, a public enemy and to express outrage against other corrupt or distant politicians (Maza). On November 29, more than 10,000 Mariboran protesters gathered in a city of only 95,000, and a few days later the numbers doubled (Korsika and Mesec 80). Within days, demonstrations had erupted in other cities, including the capitol of Ljubljana (pronounced *loo-blee-AH-nah*), and the protests across the country became coordinated (Slovenia Times). The Mariboran mayor was deposed for corruption in December, and the first “All Slovenian Upheaval” occurred on December 21, when simultaneous protests were organized in the six largest cities.

Soon Ljubljana became the nexus of protest. Angry protesters heaped fury upon both the left-wing mayor, Zoran Jankovic, and right-wing prime minister, Janez Janša (pronounced *YAN-sha*), who styled himself after his Hungarian counterpart, Viktor Orban (Korsika and Mesec 80). Janša was regarded as the figurehead for the implementation of harsh austerity measures, public sector cuts, privatization of public resources, establishment of a bad bank, and limiting the usage of public referenda to “matters without fiscal consequences” (Korsika and Mesec 80). Protests in December and January attracted as many as 20,000—10% of the city’s population—with nearly 70% of the national population expressing support for the actions (Novak; KOKS). Protestors galvanized around the deposal of Janša.

The state responded to the largely peaceful gatherings with an overwhelming display of force, employing riot police, fences, horses, water cannons and helicopters, and effectively shutting down the center of the city (KOKS 3). Some protestors clashed with police, while others attended large demonstrations in front of the parliamentary building. According to one report, “The police imprisoned large number (sic) of youngsters, mistreating them, holding them hostages (sic), blackmailing their parents to stop protesting, if they want to see their kids liberated” (KOKS 3). But the tactics seemed to backfire, drawing more protesters into the streets.

### “Communist Zombies”

During the large Ljubljana uprising on December 21<sup>st</sup>, where some protesters waved the flags of the former Socialist Republic of Slovenia, Janša was quick to deride the popular assemblies, tweeting that the participants were “left-fascists,” and “communist zombies” (Korsika and Mesec). English-language reports tended not to translate the significance of this rhetorical move, but my Slovene interviewees did. According to one participant:

[I]t was really wild, and he said the zombies are the protesters. [Q: What do you think he meant?] He meant resurrected Communists, you know? What he wanted to say basically was it's a resurrection of the old system. All these people are Communists! Which should be dead and is dead; all of them are just Communists who are haters of our liberal freedoms and stuff. This is what he wanted to say, because this is how basic his discourse is all the time. But it struck against him because then the protesters took this as a badge of honor and said, 'Yeah, we are zombies.' And then these masks started and stuff, and it became huge. – C., March 2, 2017.

B., who attended most of the Ljubljana protests and later helped construct the zombie-themed visuals, said, “[He meant] that we don’t stand a chance anyway, like we are a group of people standing here, but tomorrow we’re dead. Already we’re dead. Like, phew, these few people who will lose the status and will live off nothing [under a neoliberal administration] don’t stand a chance” (Interview March 2, 2017).

The prime minister’s use of zombie as epithet rhetorically framed protest against neoliberal capitalist policies as a relic of the past. Janša figured demonstrators as not only somehow out-of-time—not modern, bearing outdated attachments—but also attached to an older political mindset (Communism) implied to be “dead” but still shuffling around in public space. Protesters, in other words, amounted to an idiotic, backwards horde. Paired with “Communist,” Janša associated this irritating protest zombie with misplaced nostalgia for Yugoslavian socialism, yearning for a leftist ideological utopia long pronounced dead. As New Left M.P. Luka Mesec put it to me in an interview, paraphrasing Janša: “Socialism died 25 years ago. Now we are in power and the remnants of socialism [such as the welfare state] are being removed, and the people that appear on the street are dead people who don’t want to die. So, they are zombies” (March 15, 2017). As several interviewees noted, there was an absurd irony to this, given that Janša himself led the Communist youth organization at the end of the Yugoslav regime and been a prominent young member of the Party. Indeed, most of his administration was comprised of former Communist elites, still leveraging state power to serve their own interests.

### Protestivals and the Undead Awakened

The protesters were not fooled; indeed, they almost instantly subverted Janša’s epithet. Activists were already using the term “protestival” to capture the combination of political resistance and exuberant festival at their demonstrations, and they promptly absorbed the symbol of the zombie into them. *Protestival*

captured the idea of a fusion of art, performance, and political critique, inverting the condemnations of powerful elites, and creating space for the collective envisioning of a new Slovenian society—elements we will recognize as resonant of the carnivalesque tradition. This approach continued a centuries-long history of Slovenes using festivals to celebrate and preserve their distinctive ethnic culture, which had survived many centuries of conquering regimes. But protestival also was intentionally mobilized as a means of visualizing alternative community against the homogenizing pressures of liberal capitalism. “The protestival is a calling for a social renaissance and a return to the human while rejecting the manipulations of capital,” explained two movement leaders. “It is connecting people through their cultural expression, via musical performances, physical theatre, puppets, poetry, as well as giving a voice to the protesters themselves, thus creating a unique people’s forum” (Novak). Almost as soon as Janša tweeted his “zombie” insult, the zombie became a central motif of the power of the movement, inverting Janša’s meaning from a dead tradition to a vibrant—and threatening—political force.



**Image 1**

Organizers drew on the talents of local artists to embrace the figure of the zombie in a variety of modes. A prominent young musician and puppeteer, Matija Solce, took the lead on representing a zombie resistance, building large, visually arresting zombie puppets with moving hands. People from the theater community set up meetings to teach participants to cut and fold paper masks that were paraded in demonstrations from late-2012 through spring of 2013, capturing considerable international media attention. Others painted their faces with white

and black paint. Protesters said the masks “stand for the rottenness of present-day politics, which [they] hope will be replaced by more life-supporting social structures” (Novak). The masks had the additional function of obscuring the identities of protesters in front of police and TV cameras.



**Image 2**

One of the key valences of the zombie symbol on the protesters’ side was the critique, through visual spectacle, of a kind of popular deadness in the face of overwhelming political-economic forces. Zombie quickly became an indictment of both the deadly sins of the state, a drain on the young republic’s lifeblood, and the deadening effect on citizens of political unaccountability and economic exploitation. In public protests, and across Slovenian civic space, different readings of deadly politics and half-dead citizens emerged. In a commentary essay, one activist reversed Janša’s meaning, reading the *real* zombies as the political class. “The political elite, in its complete alienation from the people, is incapable of understanding the message of being politically dead,” he wrote. “They live on, but as political zombies, who merely strive to preserve power with more and more desperate and legally questionable attempts” (Tomšič 4).

Asked to reflect on how the zombie symbol worked to critique neoliberalism (a term activists themselves raised), one participant told me:

Well, zombie is actually living dead by definition, isn’t it? I don’t know, but perhaps you could understand it as, you know: people in this system right now are hardly living, you know? They get up, they work for money,

children are in school all day; otherwise people are on computers or on phones. They do not communicate, they do not go out, they do not have fun. They are kind of zombies, aren't they? So if you feel that community actually is full of people who are, like, empty—they have no fun, no ideas, no imagination—they see things as they are and accept them because they feel that they cannot change anything, I think those people are real zombies.  
—B.

B. refers to the ways zombies represent the routinized, isolated subjects of neoliberalism, wherein work and productivity constitute value, rendering the complex wholeness of human beings into the living dead—citizens by designation, not by meaningful engagement. These are exactly the terms in which political Wendy Brown describes the “stealth revolution” of neoliberalism, a force that converts individuals from complex entities to “little human capitals,” reduced to the perpetual labor and investment required to survive in a hypercapitalist environment with fewer and fewer public amenities.

In the streets, the recognition of a dead-but-not-deadness via zombie imagery was unavoidable. The white paper masks rendered formerly politically inert citizens into something of a homogeneous horde, an uprising of individuals sharing a common predicament vis a vis the state. Shambling down the cobblestone streets of central Ljubljana, the zombies seemed to transmit that the people have been fodder for the machine—that the civic dead are clearly unhappy.



**Image 3**

Even in its representation of a kind of civic deadness, though, the Slovene zombie protest horde carried a second layer, a conceptual counter-valence. This was the



idea of an unconscious populace reawakening—of the zombie rising. Here the metaphor is the *awakened* collective, an angry horde focused en masse on something it wants, which is to destroy an oppressive system and be reborn. Asked how the zombie imagery pushed back on Janša's characterization of protesters, one participant put it bluntly: "We are zombies, but very, very much alive, actually" (Interview with B, March 2, 2017). Another said, "to me it meant how many thousands we are. We are zombies; deal with us!" I asked these two speakers (interviewed together) what, in political terms, the zombie does. One said, "Burns everything down. Down to the, you know, Ten Commandments, if you want. Burn it all down to some basic fair rules. End the exploitation somehow, I think. Exploitation of people, resources, country ideas—everything. Try to make the future bright again somehow...[Zombie is] a force of destruction of a system that does not work for people" (March 3, 2017).

Drawing on Antonio Negri, Nyong'o notes that the political occupation enacts a sort of *kairos*, a "different time" or "precarious time"—a rupture from ordinary time (322-3). And when brought into the space of occupation (of a city, square, or other public site), Nyong'o argues, the politicized zombie can perform a kind of *dezombification*, a pushback on both the precarity of being human in time and living under capitalism. Indeed the zombie aesthetic can be a potent expression of the affect produced by the feeling of precarity. "Crushed by the everyday weight of reproducing social life under capital...we *feel* zombified, And yet, to *perform* the zombie is to experiment with the pleasures of terror, shock, and surprise" (323). Slovenia's politicized zombies, who literally rose in response to being named as such by a dismissive prime ministers, did exactly what Nyong'o describes "[moved] beyond the scene of occupation and into the pedestrian crush of the corporate city" (323).

In the uprising of the politicized zombie, we see another compelling inversion, which repeats in the Hamburg performance. The "awakened" zombie is potentially destructive, but for the sake of preparing the ground for a new, fairer social contract; it is a figure of regeneration. The arisen zombie has political power as symbol of a deadened polity reviving—a force which, when fixed on a shared goal, can be an agent for clearing away the old and reviving hope. If "the people, united, can never be defeated" is a standard chant of the political demonstration, the zombie chants "the dead are arisen." Zombie brings a monster showdown, a force especially potent for its destructive capacity and the singularity that a swarm-like resistance visually connotes. In this valence, the zombie is politically very much alive, embodying the *living* in the living dead.

The Upheaval galvanized a broad coalition of interests not before seen in Slovenian public space—among them anarchists, intellectuals, feminists, environmentalists, trade-unionists, retirees, and punks. With zombie at the center, the protestivals became what Austin (184) would call a ludic space, permeated



with humor, irreverence, and performative play. In bringing these groups together and calling for not just the removal of a few corrupt leaders but also the assertion of a political holism against the divisive and privatizing influences of neoliberal rule, the movement encouraged visions of a new political community. As one intellectual collective put it, “The demands made by Slovenian citizens on the streets of their country are not merely for improved economic conditions, but for the basic foundations of a just and democratic state: the rule of law, the preservation of social services, and a sustainable economic policy that will serve the interests of the majority of the population rather than the narrow interests of a few” (KOKS, Tomšič 5). Slovenian protesters used the symbol of irreverent, rising zombies to explicitly blast the modus operandi of neoliberalism: banking policies that jeopardized their nation’s relative economic health; party corruption that stacked industries with political insiders; the privatization of public funds; attacks on public education; restrictions on the free press and other political failures. By creating an array of festive but engaging public forums soliciting input from citizens on the changes they wanted to see, they created a more democratic alternative that forced some immediate changes in Slovenia.

By January, 2013, after weeks of continuous mobilization, the Slovenian news daily announced the current government “clinically dead.” Janša was ousted in a no-confidence vote in the parliament on February 27, and eventually jailed on multiple corruption counts (Maza). (In a bizarre quirk of Slovenian political life, he later was reelected to Parliament, where he represents his party during the day and returns to jail in the evenings.) In mid-March, a center-left coalition agreement was signed, and was endorsed by the parliament a week later. A new prime-minister, Alenka Bratusek, was designated and, in line with protesters’ demands, pledged that she would ask for a confidence vote a year after the government was sworn in, to gauge people’s satisfaction (Novak). The following fall, the New Left coalition secured about 10% of the popular election, earning them seats in Parliament.

Nor did the use of zombie as political metaphor disappear with these changes. In March, 2013, one stream of the zombie protesters convened under the name of the Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing, and registered with the Slovene Ministry of Culture for recognition as an official religion of Slovenia. The “Zombie Church” declared Parliament the “sanctuary of corruption,” and began meeting for “Mass” in front of the parliament building every Wednesday to sing their quest to root out graft, accompanied by the clanging of cowbells and pots and pans. This “church” has become a semi-permanent activist collective whose work continues into the present.<sup>5</sup> Slovenian zombies not only created a moment of

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<sup>5</sup> The more particular mission of the Slovenian Zombie Church is the subject of my ongoing research.

significant political reform in 2012-13, but their presence continues as a reminder of their enduring capacity for political mobilization.

## Zombies Descend on Hamburg

The Hamburg summit in early July, 2017, marked the twelfth meeting of the Group of 20 (G20), the international forum of heads of state to discuss international financial policy in coordination with international banking institutions and corporations, neoliberalism's key players. This was the first G20 meeting attended by newly elected U.S. president, Donald Trump. In an era of widening inequality and rising populism, the summit would have been a prime target for criticism even without the added uncertainty caused by Trump's withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accords just months earlier. Protesters descended on Hamburg, with more than 30 demonstrations planned before, during, and after the summit. Germany deployed over 20,000 police officers, and hundreds were arrested or detained (Fox).

The 1000Gestalten zombie performance, which was months in the planning, made deft use of the legions of media gathered in Hamburg and hungry for compelling imagery. Months in the planning and staged over weeks, accompanied by press releases and a website explaining its symbolism, the performance was covered by video and print media, drawing headlines around the world. The description below is based on a mix of my own interpretation of the live footage of it and the official description provided by the group's website.<sup>6</sup>

Weeks before the G20 gathering, on June 17<sup>th</sup> a delegation of the undead "marched through Hamburg's inner city, passed the famous Moenckebergstraße and Hamburg's town hall and became the talk of the town" (1000 Gestalten "Presse"). Dressed in business attire caked with grey clay (applied with a spray gun), these figures bore an uncanny resemblance to the ambulant undead of the original Night of the Living Dead, slow-walking the streets with vacant stares. The monochrome effect of the clay crust gave the scenes created by these clearly recognizable zombies the look of black-and-white film characters shuffling aimlessly in a full-color world. As the summit drew near, zombies reappeared around the city, a preview of the final action. When the G20 finally assembled on July 5<sup>th</sup>, the scattered groups grew over the course of several hours, ultimately convening into a horde of 1,000 for the crescendo performance.

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<sup>6</sup> For a 7-minute official video summary and photo gallery, see the <https://1000gestalten.de/en/images-videos/>. Another source is <https://vimeo.com/222486717>.

The finale begins at midday. First meandering in isolation, the clay-caked figures cast an eerie reflection against shop windows, their shambling pace in stark contrast to the bustling business districts they pass. They travel trance-like and in extreme slow motion, individuals gradually clumping into pairs and small groups. Approaching the city center, Burchardplatz, from all directions, twenty-five groups in total, each group gathers more as it goes. Along the way, some figures collapse, languish on the ground, or crawl forward on hands and knees, but after almost ninety minutes they assemble in the central city square. They seem enervated, stiff, bereft of life force—“a uniformed, soulless army” (1000Gestalten “The Performance”). As they move, we hear an odd, consistent clacking, something like tap shoes on a hard surface, but more mechanical. This clatter is generated by “invisible boxes” participants hold in their hands and, as the numbers grow, it periodically “swells like a swarm of bees” (1000Gestalten “The Performance”).



**Image 4**

But this is not a conventional zombie walk that diffuses back into the city once its destination is reached. Rather, the pallid horde descends on the central square, but hovers there, building tension as people stop to watch. Eventually one figure in a business suit seems to struggle painfully, grasping his face as if feeling skin for the first time, then stumbling backward and, with a shout, opening his arms wide, wiping each eye, and slowly gazing around. He struggles out of his suit coat, clay dust rising off him, and soon has stripped off his encrusted vest and shirt to reveal a bright blue tank top underneath. He raises his face toward the sun, as if newly birthed, and others angle toward him, as if beginning to focus. The figure in blue ambles toward a female figure collapsed on the ground, reaches down, and helps her to her feet. She seems barely able to stand, but he guides her hands toward her own face and she slowly comes to life, gasping with awareness. The process

repeats as people peel away their outer clothing, under which they are all wearing vivid colors. A dusty cloud rises over the group as the clay-encrusted outer layers are shed. (“That’s the actual symbol of this performance,” explains the website. “Because suddenly that cloud keeps everything that has made those people’s life this gray.”) Breaking their vacancy, the figures seem newly human, embracing or gripping one another with expressions of relief, as if grateful to be rescued by strangers.



**Image 5**

There is a momentum to this awakening and emergence in full color. Individuals laugh, as if liberated. (Website copy: “They turned colourful and they scream, dance, and laugh. Grab hands and hug each other. The message came across and the audience cheered in. Another existence is possible and one is enough to start this change.”) Throughout, the actors are disciplined, neither breaking composure in their zombie state, nor dropping character once “awakened.” The entire performance is wordless. The celebrants seem to be in some libidinal state of humanness—physically connecting with one another, dancing in circles with arms interlinked, carrying one another, and so forth. The aerial videos reveal a plaza full of people in colorful clothing, applauding, jumping up and down, hollering, and raising their arms in victory, as observers watch from the periphery. Eventually, the awakened humans stroll out of the plaza in lively fashion, their clay-caked castaway clothes in piles on the ground.

It is hard to know objectively how live observers reacted, though the footage, shot from many cameras at once, shows spectators stepping out of performers’ paths, quietly watching, or even interacting from the sidelines. According to the organizers’ descriptions, reactions varied:

For a long time the audience is not quite sure how to behave in the face of this procession. Some sit still on their chairs in the open-air areas of the restaurants around, but nevertheless continuously peep above the edge of their plates. Others stand right by the figures that simulate a break down and remain on the ground, to take pictures as if they were shot animals. Many however leave mobiles and cameras off, maybe because they are too much involved with the decoding of the message behind the performance and the question, what this means for themselves and their life's (sic). This is especially noticeable since the volume at Burchardplatz lowers, the longer the performance continues. (1000Gestalten "The Performance")

What seems obvious from video capture and the media's subsequent coverage is that the size, the obvious coordination, the relative quietness, and the visual distinctiveness of the performance made it difficult to ignore.

### Coordinating the Zombie Horde

1000Gestalten, also translated as 1000Figures, is a Hamburg-based collective. Merriam-Webster defines *Gestalten* as "something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than or different from the combination of its parts" (merriam-webster.com). While the collective is not a political organization, per se, it articulates itself as concerned with the modern conditions of civic life. "Alarmed by the recent events of our contemporary history," organizers seized on the idea of the G20 performance in February 2017, and collaborated with other organizations to coordinate the volunteer actors, photographers, videographers, and other support players, some who bussed in from outside Hamburg (1000Gestalten "Presse"). Sven Kämmerer, a leader of the group, said volunteers hailed from all age groups, professions, and other social identities (Vomiero). Though this was 1000Gestalten's first performance, organizers anticipated more to come.

According to organizers, zombies were chosen as an image to represent political disengagement, the "crustedness" of political apathy in the face of apparent futility. "The 1000Gestalten shall represent a society that has lost their feeling for the fact that a different way of life is possible," says the event description copy. "It's not the financial news that determine (sic) our happiness, but healthy relationships" (1000 Gestalten "The Performance"). Describing the spectacle, designbloom magazine suggested that "the dusty clay shells evoke a society that has lost its solidarity, ultimately contaminating itself with the taste of selfishness and nonacceptance. Yet at some point during the act the group dramatically sheds its second skin—symbolizing a people that has freed itself

from its rigid ideological structures” (Zeitoun). Here we see the reemergence of Bishop’s “zombie protagonist”—the zombie that has regained elements of its humanity, only here the effort is clearly framed by organizers as heroic. In the action, the zombie was used as catalyst for regeneration through meaningful human contact. After the action, organizers said the performance was a call to human reconnection, initiative, and small-d democracy. As Kämmerer told one news outlet, the performance conveys that, “No change can start from some political elite, it starts with you and me” (Abc.net.au).

The performance was inspired by and part of “new democratic movement” across the world, exemplified by phenomena like the Women’s Marches in early 2017 and the Pulse of Europe Initiative (which is something like the U.S.’s Indivisible movement) (<https://pulseofeurope.eu>; Volmiero). By design, the predominant focus of the action was on ordinary people outside the summit, not the leadership within. Organizer Catalina Lopez noted that the performance used accessible images to inspire people out of disengagement. The goal, she said, “is to move the people in their hearts, to give them the motivation to get politically engaged again. We want to create an image, because we believe in the power of images... We want to motivate people to take part. To free themselves from their crusted shells, to take part in the political process” (Vomiero). As another spokesperson put it, “We cannot wait until change happens from the world’s most powerful, we have to show political and social responsibility—all of us—now!” (Said-Moorhouse).

But 1000Gestalten organizers also articulated a more directly critical message tailored to the site of the G20 summit. “Our campaign is a further symbol for the fact that many people do not want to put up with the destructive impact of capitalism any longer,” said one press release. “What will save us in the end is not our account balance but someone who will offer their helping hand” (Said-Moorhouse). In other words, the seeds of societal transformation lie in human solidarity and care, not in the power of leaders and organizations, like the IMF, claiming to speak on behalf of the people. As one report stated, “this represents a society that has overcome political turmoil and came together (sic) in demand of more tolerance, open-mindedness and constructive discourse” (Zeitoun).

## Conclusion

Slovenia’s “Zombie Church” movement and The 1000Gestalten’s G20 performance differed in important respects. The first was a spontaneous political uprising sparked by long-simmering grievances about neoliberal pressures on a small political economy. The second was an elaborately planned public art performance that used public space under permission from political authorities to

inspire reflection. The 1000 Gestalten recruited volunteers, gave them a script, and built a public interpretive apparatus to translate its objectives, while All-Slovenian Upheaval innovated as it went, using every opportunity that arose to transmit political frustration and desire for concrete structural reforms to the country's elected leaders. Slovenia's protests became coordinated around specific political objectives while the Hamburg performance sought to sponsor reflection on the enervation of political community under neoliberal conditions.

Their differences notwithstanding, though, both cases demonstrate—not only in theory but in public practice—the fertile use of zombie as a kind of political interlocutor in the era of neoliberalism. Volunteers in Hamburg and activists in Slovenia leveraged the public zombie as a metaphor of deadness, against which they juxtaposed a more regenerative vision of human interconnectedness. Slovenia's Zombie Church protesters cleverly reappropriated a symbol thrown at protesters by a powerful figure, inverted its meaning, and exploited its symbolic power. In both cases, activists, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens alike found pleasure and power in zombie symbolism, as they refuted civic deadness and sought to convert it into life-affirming, dezombified resistance.

These examples exemplify the multivalence of the zombie metaphor, the way it can signal multiple things simultaneously, or sequentially: dead, but with some germ of life; depleted, but potentially arising with some kind of agency. Zombie is an accessible analog for the despair and impotence many feel under late-modern capitalism. At the same time, it provides a way of imagining awakening out of the zombie state, or if not that, rising up *as zombies* and instigating an insurrection. Zombies evoke the monstrosity of a life without meaning or consciousness or human connection, but they also provide subversive hero image for concerted global resistance.

It is too soon to tell whether the use of the zombie as a political metaphor in real time will have durable walking legs, as it were, or whether it will prove to have been a brief moment, politically speaking. It has already proven more durable than even its most dedicated scholars had expected (Lauro 2017, xii-xiii). Either way, scholars should continue to study how the zombie is mobilized not just in popular cultural productions—films, comics, novels—but in real-time displays of political critique and agency. For the producers of zombie genre, it is significant that zombies have walked off the stages and pages of their creative worlds and into the *agon*, the public space of political contestation. I know of no other monster that has proven mobilizable in public space in the same way. This sort of coming-to-life of the zombie attests to the now decades-long salience of this particular monster. It is important that we track its permutations into the future.

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