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ZOMBIE TALK

Culture, History, Politics

**David R. Castillo,
David Schmid,
David A. Reilly and
John Edgar Browning**





Zombie Talk

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Zombie Talk: Culture, History, Politics

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ZOMBIE TALK

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Afterword © William Egginton, 2016.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978-1-137-57524-1

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First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500 New York, NY 10004-1562.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN: 978-1-349-88741-5

E-PDF ISBN: 978-1-137-56772-7

DOI: 10.1057/9781137567727

Distribution in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world is by Palgrave Macmillan*, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

A catalogue record for the book is available from the British Library



For
Wes Craven (1939–2015),
whose favorite horror film was Night of the Living Dead

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Acknowledgments

This research was sponsored by the Cultures and Texts Strategic Strength and the Office of the Associate Vice President for Research Advancement and Strategic Initiatives, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, USA.

Chapter 1. “Survival Horrors, Survival Spaces: Tracing the Modern Zombie (Cine)Myth through to the Postmillennium” is an expanded version of “Survival Horrors, Survival Spaces: Tracing the Modern Zombie (Cine)Myth,” which originally appeared in *Horror Studies* 2, no. 1 (May 2011): 41–59.

Chapter 2. “Zombie Masses: Monsters for the Age of Global Capitalism” is an expanded version of the online paper “Monsters for the Age of the Post-human,” which originally appeared in *Writing Monsters: Essays on Iberian and Latin American Cultures*, eds. Adriana Gordillo and Nicholas Spadaccini, a themed issue of *Hispanic Issues On Line* 15 (Spring 2014): 161–78.

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Introduction: Our Zombies, Our Remnants

David R. Castillo and John Edgar Browning



Abstract: Beginning with the claim that the interdisciplinary discussions herein are grounded on three basic observations, this collaborative volume has been, at its core, driven by a sense of timeliness and urgency tied to the shared conviction that media literacy is of the utmost importance today, as our lives are increasingly framed by all manner of screens and indeed ruled by optical codes generated and reified by these screens. The incredible advances seen in Zombie Studies in the last decade are still being measured, and as this introduction outlines, chapter by chapter, we here take advantage of this moment by examining the zombie phenomenon in context while incorporating, simultaneously, a good number of recent studies and popular works of literary and cinematic fiction.

Castillo, David R., David Schmid, David A. Reilly and John Edgar Browning. *Zombie Talk: Culture, History, Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

DOI: 10.1057/9781137567727.0004.

The interdisciplinary discussions included in this volume are grounded on three basic observations: (1) The pervasive presence of the zombie *topos* in the present multi-media culture is virtually unprecedented; (2) scholarly attempts to foster and encourage media literacy today must therefore engage this omnipresent *topos*; and (3) in its modern format the zombie *topos* comes with (post)apocalyptic landscapes and a sustained focus on the group dynamics of the survivors. At its core, this collaborative project has been driven, right from the start, by a sense of timeliness and urgency tied to the shared conviction that *media literacy* is of the utmost importance today, as our lives are increasingly framed by all manner of screens and indeed ruled by optical codes generated and reified by these screens.

We are hardly alone in recognizing the need for media literacy. In fact, the urgency of media literacy training is beginning to be acknowledged outside of the humanistic fields of literature, media, and culture studies; in social science disciplines; and even among legal scholars. Thus, NYU Law professor Richard K. Sherwin, for example, has devoted an entire monographic study to illustrate the pressing need for “visual literacy training” for legal professionals, as well as for the public at large, as our legal system, our individual and collective sense of justice, and even the scope of our imagination are increasingly influenced by and literally framed by screens. As he writes:

How and what people see (and fail to see) varies from place to place and time to time. Social conventions frame the visible and invisible alike—establishing the one by virtue of the other....How visual meaning making occurs, how (and with what aesthetic and ethic consequences) it constructs a world, a self, and a network of relations for us to be in, is not obvious. Critical self-reflexiveness and prudence in judgment presuppose visual literacy, and visual literacy, like its literary counterpart, does not simply happen. It requires conscientious training.¹

In his concluding remarks this law scholar asks a key question: “Who and what do we become when we live on the screen, when we internalize the screen’s optical code as our own?”²

Remarkably, George A. Romero’s landmark films seem to offer a series of nightmarish responses to this question. If in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Romero planted the suggestion that *the zombies are us*, insatiable masses of mindless, soulless, destructive consumers, in *Land of the Dead* (2005), he explicitly links the absolute lack of awareness of the zombie masses to the hypnotic and disarming power of the light shows to which they

are subjected, the “sky flowers” deployed by mercenaries of the shopping mall to keep them distracted, unaware of their surroundings, even of their own destruction.

With these films in mind and other self-reflective products of the zombie genre, the authors of the present volume explore the uneasy and in some ways contradictory relation that the current zombie culture maintains with the global mass-media industry. The idea that the mass-media industry is at the root of modern and now post-modern processes of *dehumanization* can be traced back to the Marxist critique of capitalist modernity, most notoriously to the philosophers and critics associated with the Frankfurt school, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer among them. Yet, what is peculiar and specific about recent iterations of these notions in mainstream cultural commentary, as well as in more specialized circles of ideological criticism, is what we might call “the apocalyptic turn” of the discussion. If New York Times best-selling author Nicholas Carr wonders whether humanity can indeed survive the viral spreading of screens in his aptly titled book *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* (2014), high theorists such as Slavoj Žižek note that it seems much easier today to picture the end of humanity, and indeed the end of all life on Earth, than a relatively modest change in the global economic structures that continue to damage the planet’s environment (possibly beyond repair) while generating an endless stream of human and material debris.

The monstrous nature of global capitalism and its dominant neoliberal ideology and the framing function of its media industry receive sustained attention in our book, especially in chapters 2 and 4, which put the spotlight on familiar forms of economic and cultural traffic. To return to Romero’s filmic vocabulary in *Land of the Dead*, the world is ruled by a monstrous master-class of CEOs and elite consumers who have barricaded themselves inside a high-end shopping mall surrounded by ruthless mercenaries who do their bidding. The third (outer) circle is populated by zombie masses. No wonder we root for the undead hordes led by a black zombie as they begin to acquire both a class consciousness and a sense of who the real enemy is and especially when they invade the exclusive (membership only) shopping mall and immolate the obscene bodies that inhabit it!

In a *New York Times* article entitled, “The Perils of Perfection,” Evgeny Morozov warns the public against the Orwellian nightmare of panoptic digital technologies in the service of capitalist dreams of leveling