

# (POST-)APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION: UNCANNY UNDEAD BETWEEN SUBLIME AND CYNICAL

CĂLIN D. LUPIȚU\*

ABSTRACT. Over the last two millennia, the dominant representations of the End Times in the popular conception of the Western World have been chiefly based on the biblical account of St. John's revelations on the Greek island of Patmos. In it, multiple scenes advocate the repenting of mankind before an impending Day of Reckoning, resorting to imagery that has largely kept its power to terrify and inspire throughout the centuries due to its being drawn from profoundly human experiences. One such motif is the relationship between the living and the dead. Treated in the keys of the miraculous and the holy in the Bible, that relationship is reused in the last two centuries in such literature and cinema genres as science-fiction and horror to express cynical truths about modern human incongruence and alienation. Returned, as it were, with a vengeance, the topic of how we deal with our dead forces us to (re)consider how we deal with one another, as the uncanny underlying our own social contracts shines through our projections of the Self into the Undead Other.

KEY WORDS: Apocalypse, pop-culture, uncanny, undead, alterity

Owing to the spread and socio-cultural hold of Christianity over the last two millennia, the dominant representations of the End Times in the popular conception of the Western World have chiefly been based on the biblical account of St. John's revelations on the Greek isle of Patmos, confined to writing as *The Apocalypse* or *The Book of Revelations*. There has been much controversy regarding the concept, with various religious and secular factions disputing the literal-prophetic or allegorical character of this final chapter of the New Testament. However, its potential to inspire as well as frighten, together with its relatability to the human experience at large, appears hardly diminished throughout the ages.

The Christian belief in an End of Days was a *Weltanschauung*-altering philosophy noticeably distinct from those espoused by other cultures, whether contemporaneous or not—a philosophy which perfectly fit in with the other Christian tenets of renouncing (and denouncing) the world and its materialism (*If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the*

\* CĂLIN D. LUPIȚU (PhD) is Assistant Lecturer in German at Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania. He specializes in German language and culture, and also in English literature with a strong interest in creative writing. E-mail: calin.d.lupitu@gmail.com.

*poor [...] and come and follow Me*, Matthew 19:21 KJV). That denouncing of the world, whether actively (ascetically) embraced or merely implied via lifestyle choices, was one of the many spiritual nuances that vigorously opposed the new Christian religion to the politics-spliced cults of the Roman Empire, wherein freedom of religion was largely observed, provided the (private) worshippers of the cults imported or adapted by the Romans were centralised by their (public) act of bringing homage to the deified Emperor. Likely as an extension of his proclaimed divinity, the Emperor's city, the mighty Rome, was believed to be eternal, sacred, and the beacon of civilisation. Even at its most conflicted, Rome was still thought indestructible, lest its fall should bring about the fall of civilisation as the ancients knew it. This is precisely why its infamous fall in the fifth century AD created an unparalleled moment of sheer terror by disturbingly connecting the scriptural with the historical, as the citizens of the Empire, many of whom had become Christians by that point, cowered in fear at the possibility of witnessing the prophesied End Times.

We may argue that, at that point at the end of the fifth century, as well as nowadays, the cognitive and spiritual reception of the Apocalypse concept would vary along two distinct lines: joy and fear. For the faithful, having internalised the socio-ethical precepts of the Christian doctrine based on neighbourly love and communion with the divine, the End of Days did not stir despair and panic, but it was eagerly awaited and celebrated as the would-be fulfillment of a divine covenant, the return to their Paradise home, their homecoming and blissful reunion with the Heavenly Father. Included in the New Testament as the ultimate *memento mori* (in its Christian sense of *watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is*, Mark 13:33 KJV), the Apocalypse vision is thus a profoundly sublime experience connecting the natural, if repressed, sense of utter fright at the crumbling of the material world, and the bliss of eternal salvation. The Second Coming would thus mark the end of all personal and earthly tribulations, the end of evil and the rewarding of the faithful, and most notably the resuming of a pre-Fall eternal existence of unbroken communion with God, as presumably intended for all sentient life. On the other hand, for the less spiritually immersed, i.e. the more materially-minded, as typical of the Roman citizens in the above comparison, such Christian eschatology may have appeared naive; they struggled with the concept of the destruction of their world, central to their very personal and public identity, being for the best.

The concept of an "end of days" certainly exists in other cultures as well, from the Egyptians to the Norse to the Mayans, most often in conjunction with, and as a mythological explanation for, the natural and agricultural ebb and flow. However, the cyclical nature (the eternal recurrence) of such cosmologies presumes, or is accompanied by, fundamentally, a sense of an

eternal status quo, where time is either meaningless in a cosmic sense, or has little to do with human history (as per Eliade's concept of sacred time, see Eliade, 1967: 174). Multiple mythologies describe primordial struggles between various avatars of the forces of chaos and order, settled by the universe-shaping victory of the latter, which establishes the known order of the natural world, including timekeeping or even the flow of time (or of our time) itself. Yet in the same mythologies, various "dead" or "eternally imprisoned" deities are recurrent in what is perceived as an age contemporary to, or immediately preceding, that of man, associating with other members of the pantheon, including their symbolic and narrative enemies, or being featured before and after they are born or otherwise conceived, existing on multiple planes or in multiple temporal lines, etc. Naturally, such narrative inconsistencies are easily explained by the historical circumstances of their myths' compiling, viz. ethno-political shifts, religious reforms and reinterpretations. In turn, the ancient worshippers were also arguably hardly concerned with such inconsistencies, as the default omnipotence of such deities was reason enough for them to get away with conflicting or illogical details (not unlike their modern counterparts, comic-book characters), even in the face of notable personal flaws making them all too human, as in the famous case of the Greco-Roman pantheon.

On the other hand, the Christian cosmology is rife with a sense of purpose. The world is said to have been created for mankind, and even in its fallen, highly material form it remains the ultimate testing site of the soul and the battleground between good and evil, never left to its own devices but part of a divine plan including its redemption along with that of man. This sense of divine teleology is in fact the key ingredient behind the sublime presumably experienced by the devout Christians at the time of the fall of Rome, the reason for the Apocalypse being a terrifying, but equally hopeful moment. Yet it is interesting to note that, while frightful indeed, the events in St. John's vision are not singular in their quality of world-changing catastrophes described in the Bible, though they are perhaps the most massive. A similar global purging event is featured in the Old Testament, pertaining to the worldwide-mentioned Flood, with its extinction of most life on earth and of most humans, save for righteous Noah, his kin and the living samples they were able to cram aboard the Ark. Furthermore, Sodom and Gomorrah are later obliterated, with only one surviving family, warned by the angels for the sake of pious Lot, just as Egypt is devastated in the days of Moses, with only the Jewish minority leaving the country of the Nile largely unharmed.

There is a pattern perpetuated across such moments, throughout the Judaic-Christian biblical tradition, a red line of faith intertwined with hope and love. Each catastrophe, from Adam to Christ through Noah, Lot, Mo-

ses, Job and others, whether personal or cosmic, brings about the faith that the disaster was meaningful, not haphazard, and that its meaning is that of fatherly all-knowing and all-managing love, whereby God and the world are to be reconciled in hope of a fresh new start, with better prospects. Ever since Adam's Fall, disaster is coupled with the promise of salvation, therefore the Apocalypse—as part of theodicy—is sublime by its inspirational virtue of teleology.

The fall of the Roman Empire was, as previously argued, a secular, historically verifiable Apocalypse, perhaps one of the very first *proper* ones in recorded history, profoundly affecting most of the known world—from a European perspective—and truly forging a new earth, if not a new heaven, by means of the ensuing cultural and sociopolitical struggles. After the initial shock and awe, the former empire's populace saw this had not been the dreaded or welcomed Apocalypse and that life went on, with its share of changes and respective adaptations, the horror show postponed until further notice, to render it in modern lingo. Many former Roman settlers would have witnessed a steady drop in living standards, technology and literacy, aggravated by the lack of civil order and the steep increase in lawlessness over the following decades, but Rome's former slaves, together with the former provinces of the west, were now free to rule themselves, while the surviving eastern half of the Empire enjoyed relative prosperity, free from political strife and directly benefiting from the Asian trade routes. This mixed appreciation of the Roman postapocalypse, and its underlying meaning of averted and thus avertable doom, undermined the dread of a realised Apocalypse, laying the cognitive foundations of a subsequent tradition (see below) of increasingly secular Apocalypses, with the original relegated to the world of philosophical and religious symbolism (and cf. Jonah's initial annoyance at the canceled destruction of Niniveh).

Over time, as the desolate toil of living in the so-called Dark Ages gave way once more to sophistication and comfort (and marked social stratification), and ultimately to the mass-consumed impression of self-sustainability and technological nigh-omnipotence, humanity gradually came to approach the concept of the Apocalypse somewhat differently. Idealist and materialist skeptics began doubting that the world would end at all—or anytime soon—suggesting instead that St. John's revelations were rather an ethical allegory, or a short-term vision whose atrocities had already been fulfilled by the Romans or other repressive reigns in history. Pessimists of various conviction but united in their mistrust of man handling power, with or without any divine supervision, feared that the horrors hinted at in the original text, though perhaps symbolic, may well yet come to pass in increasingly terrifying forms attuned to each generation's collective fears and imaginative abilities—themselves based on the ideas and technologies available in the age. In

either case, the original teleology that the Apocalypse was approached with by the early Christians was undergoing erosion, while the individually and globally transforming faith established by the sacrificial example of the Nazarene followed in the footsteps of the official Roman cults, generators and warrants of sociopolitical identity.

Proportionate to mankind's development accelerating over the last few centuries, a proliferation of would-be apocalyptic moments could be noted, featuring such staples as war, famine, plagues and death, cataclysms and increasingly destructive technology, even certain historical figures likened to the Antichrist. The fall of Rome, the Black Death, the fall of Constantinople, the New World Conquistador massacres, the Thirty Years' War, the post-1789 Terror in France, the Napoleonic Wars, the First World War, the Second World War and the Cold War could all variably well fit the apocalyptic scenario (in most aspects except the raising of the dead) in the eyes of their contemporaries, only to become historical false positives: averted Apocalypses. While alarming in a *homo homini lupus* meditational direction, the sheer number of such moments is liable to induce a certain desensitisation effect; averted Apocalypses, though ideally cautionary, are much less frightening and even confidence-building. In a fascinating twist on the tale of the little boy who cried wolf, such scares may build up to become a generational acquired taste, replacing the sublime initially achieved by the promise of divine salvation with the flattering thrill of having seemingly fended off disaster ourselves. Ironically enough, the sheer number of potential and averted apocalypses thus weakens the very concept of the Apocalypse, simultaneously reifying it and mass-marketing it for audiences growing addicted to the Russian-roulette-like thrill of its "misfires".

In brief, this research paper argues that the original God-inextricable sense of teleology underpinning the concept of the End of Days has, throughout history, been eroded in the collective imagination of the Western world by the repetition of false-positive apocalyptic moments in conjunction with the increasingly secular nature of culture and civilisation. By removing God from the equation of pop-culture aesthetics, the psychosocial and cognitive "safety net" with which to theorise and depict the Cosmos is also lost. The orderly chains of being held together by Providence have been replaced with the brutal law of the jungle, appended, particularly in recent fiction, with a Murphy-esque principle along the lines of "whatever can go horribly wrong, it monstrously will." Thus, the original sense of the Apocalyptic sublime, initially hinging on fear and faith, has been transformed into cynicism by the steady loss of teleology (and the faith therein) and the conditioning to enjoy and crave fear (in a somewhat sublime key induced by the fourth wall of cinematic media). Within this research paper, itself part of a larger effort of pursuing the uncanny in pop-culture as a

mirror and vehicle of global imagination and consciousness, we shall investigate how the Apocalypse-derived imagery, drawing on some of the most basic and primeval fears of mankind, has been reconceptualised in modern and contemporary times and what insight such persistent fears provide us with regarding our culture and civilisation.

For instance, some of the most recognisable imagery of the Apocalypse relates to the Four Horsemen. It is quite understandable that war, plague, famine and death would register as continuous bogeys of collective imagination, developed from and further enhancing some of the greatest real-life terrors of mankind, on both public and personal levels. This is equally true about the cataclysms also mentioned in the Apocalypse, such as earthquakes and the impacting “great star” (Apocalypse 8:10, KJV). There is nothing particularly insidious about the quality of the fear they conjure within us, just the “classical” fear of personal harm and its associated socio-emotional traumas. We know what they are, we know what they may do to us and we know we’d better avoid them, and their shock value is largely the same whether taken literally or used as symbols.

Yet there is another kind of fear-spectrum emotions evoked by the Apocalypse vision or its subsequent adaptations, pertaining to the aesthetic category of the uncanny. Namely, the last chapter of the New Testament depicts certain fantastical creatures as likely metaphors of historical events or societal aspects, most of which are composite and of unnatural size and / or abilities, some emerging from the sea in scenes reminiscent of classical *Kaiju* cinema. The uncanny also includes the character of the Antichrist, through the latter’s hidden and manipulative human nature, an unsettling reminder of the “banality of evil” (cf. Arendt) as witnessed too many times in human history. Lastly, while the Universal Judgment is deeply unnerving on its own because of its stern finality correlated with all-applicable human fallibility (*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*, John 1:8 KJV), it is believed to also consist of the universal resurrection of the dead. That is to say, in view of the upcoming universal judgment, the living would be sharing close quarters with (all) the dead.

The above scene may be one of the earliest and most impactful depictions of the uncanny in one of its fundamental and universal forms. According to Sigmund Freud (2003: 17), the uncanny is both the *heimisch* and the *unheimlich*, namely featuring aspects which on some level are deeply familiar to us and yet they appear in a context or position entirely distinct to what we have come to know or expect of them. That is indeed the case with the en-masse resurrection prior to the Final Judgment. It is a scene which, though not more openly frightful than those of the devastations brought about by the Four Horsemen or the beasts, bears the mark of subtler psychological terror, instilled by some of the most basic Self-Other dichotomies

of all individuals, as we shall explore further. The biblical thriller is enhanced by the cognitive dissonance produced at the joining of our affectionate recognition of many of the revenants as ancestors or close family and friends with the instinctive repulsion towards dead matter. Lastly, the third component of the uncanny as manifested in the Apocalypse scene is our cognitive inability to properly imagine the specific circumstances and details of how the dead would come back, as well as confidently anticipate and manage our respective emotional responses. In short, the uncanny of the Apocalypse has much to do with the unsettling of uncertainty.

One of the greatest and timeless unsettling mysteries mankind has had to face is that of the relationship between life and death, in particular that between the living and the dead, such that the pervading uncanny exuding from the universal resurrection scene is entirely justified. The ancient-to-medieval world, on one hand, as well as the modern-to-contemporary one, on the other, features world paradigms and thought structures for handling such cosmic uncertainties as death in ways that, while distinct or even contrary, both seek to reduce (cognitive) chaos by explaining it away, by providing systemic certitudes their respective societies can rely upon. The ancients chiefly employed complex systems of rituals and superstition to ensure, based primarily on faith, hope and sacred / taboo authority, the proper communication and balance between the forces and corresponding realms of life and death, and, most importantly in an immediate sense, to reassure and placate the living via knowledge of the apparent fulfillment of that ideologically-underlying promise of cosmic equilibrium. By partaking in such rituals, they sought to partake in the balancing and perhaps the development of their own world—initially by the mimesis of the myths, and later by their own efforts, for “masking is becoming” (cf. Mack, 1994: 4)—a subtle power only a few sparks of genius away from the emancipated self-reliance of modernity. The same cosmic concerns are met with significantly less clarity in modern and contemporary times, where the opposing tugs of material-cum-scientific secularism and, respectively, that of a burgeoning new spirituality cobbled together from traditions of the East and the West threaten to cause the permanent rupture of any coherent philosophy dealing with life and death. It appears the man of the twenty-first century is no longer able to relate to death in the life-integrated natural way his ancestors purportedly used to, nor retain the strength of their faith in any of the more recent types of (urban) rituals, while the growing inter-individual estrangement over the last two centuries leads to a proliferation of cynicism and paranoia.

In the Bible, itself part of the wider more structured philosophy regarding life and death of the early ages as per above, any instance of the dead coming back to life, from miracles to the Final Judgment, is a rare epiphany

of the divine, and is most often assumed true by the faithful, and admissible by other social groups. Nowadays, when publications are usually clearly cleft into fictional and factual, miraculous recoveries, let alone revivals, are met with the greatest of skepticism in most factual media, with the exception of some tabloids and niche magazines. However, fictional literature displays an abundance of characters (depending on the literary genre) whose feigned or diegetically genuine resurrection(s) constitute(s) major plot devices, though the trope is generally frowned upon as being a “cop-out” too similar to the ancient Greek technique of *deus ex machina*, no longer satisfying for modern audiences.

The reanimation of the various characters in contemporary popular fiction is, most often than not, no longer a miracle but a scientific achievement. Typically, it is not the restoration of man as a complete cosmic entity made up of soul, mind and body, but rather—ever since Frankenstein’s creature (Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, quoted on <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/84>)—the return of something else entirely: a barely sentient (or “re-programmed”, including literally), oftentimes aggressive, wretched lump of decayed or technology-hybridised flesh. Nevertheless, the threshold of life and death remains confounding and, to some extent, taboo, hence the circumstances of characters making comebacks after their diegetic death need to be exceptional, particularly in the contemporary secular and scientific context. Yet producing effective suspension of disbelief, as a narrative mechanism, has changed very little, merely by the substitution of agents of holy and sacred power by currently-acceptable sufficiently mysterious or speculation-labile “higher powers”.

Among such, recent pop-culture is awash with superior alien technology (*Stargate*, *The X-Files*), genetic mutations granting particular abilities (*The X-Men*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Highlander*), or Earth technology so advanced and so resource-intensive that only the political, military and / or technological elite have access to it (*Robocop*, *Fringe*). Interestingly enough, in some of the above tropes there is the distinct tendency of reinterpreting sacred imagery by resorting to dazzling technology (cf. Arthur C. Clarke’s maxim of “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”). In *Robocop*, the eponymous part-man part-machine saviour, resurrected by the political-corporate technological elite, is nearly invulnerable and *cleanses* the streets of Delta City, appears to walk on water and is even tortured in a cruciform position complete with hand shot wounds as stigmata, from which his cybernetic parts restore him; the *Stargate* franchise draws on the ancient-astronaut hypotheses of Erich von Däniken and his followers to interpret the gods of multiple ancient mythologies as warring alien species, some of which parasitic and requiring human hosts and slaves, hence their worship on the planets they had visited and ruled, including Earth, and perceived as

immortal due to their regenerative sarcophagus-like devices. On occasion, such advanced technology, the brainchild of “mad”-perceived exotic science, is depicted as able to avert certain apocalypses by means of time travel and / or shifting into alternate dimensions, e.g. in the *Terminator* franchise and the more recent science-fiction television series *Fringe*, respectively.

The scenario of a narrowly-avoided death resulting instead in unusual abilities is characteristic of comics and their adaptations in the other media of the superhero genre, currently enjoying a fanbase boom: the original “children of the atom”, *The X-Men*, feature the iconically grouchy die-hard regenerative mutant Wolverine, whose entire body was dismantled and allowed to regrow in the successful attempt of lacing the fictitious indestructible adamantium alloy to his bones in order to obtain a living weapon; the Hulk, deliberately created by Stan Lee in homage of Frankenstein's creature and the duo of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (see <http://soundonsight.org/greatest-comic-book-adaptations-part-4>), should have died as a mere man from exposure to gamma radiation, but mysteriously lived to develop a rage-fueled monstrous alter ego; he is paralleled by Dr. Manhattan from *The Watchmen* franchise, whose similar accidental exposure to radiation during his atomic research for the army transform him into an unabashed dispassionate godlike being that eventually flees Earth; The Fantastic Four are of course another illustrious such example, yet their origin story refers more to the dangers of outer space radiation for astronauts, being also very reminiscent of the unpredictability of mystic energies, as the protagonists are exposed to the same radiation wave, which nevertheless triggers markedly distinct transformations within each one of them; lastly, sarcastic anti-hero Deadpool, of the same Marvel comics universe, is the living result of an experiment to create the ultimate warrior from the gene pool (the corpses) of multiple human mutants with exceptional abilities. Lastly, although they may be somewhat less statistically represented, antiheroes dead and reborn monstrous are noted even in the very *noir* settings of urban sprawls, where they reinterpret the Faustian theme of humans tricked into demonic pacts, splicing it with the folk motif of the cunning humans attempting to trick the devil back into regaining their freedom and the theme of struggling with their lost or dwindling humanity while attempting to put their newly-gained infernal abilities to good use (*Ghost Rider*, *Spawn*).

Beyond the exercise in creativity and science-fiction speculation, such fiction involving individuals who have transcended death primarily by means of experimental technology reads in many ways as contemporary fairy tales. While the origins of comics can be found in a war-torn age in need of models of bravery, virtue and patriotism (cf. Reynolds, 1992: 20), with their Golden Age reaching into the Cold War period of scientific and technological rivalry between the USA and the USSR, there are often cau-

tionary undertones to the adventures depicted therein, expressing certain underlying fears of the postwar generation, indeed a post-apocalyptic generation secretly bracing itself for the dreaded nuclear apocalypse. The diegetic struggles of superheroes appearing in comics were paralleled by the social struggles of the symbols they embodied. The isolation and public hostility encountered by the human mutants closely followed the racial and sexual tensions of the second half of the twentieth century; similarly, the monsters (whether as antiheroes or heroes proper) created by radiation exposure stood for merely a glamorous take on the real-world horrors of radiation poisoning and the permanently looming atomic threat. Finally, the various versions of humans struggling with retaining their (full) humanity when amalgamated or otherwise associated with machines were merely voicing, for a new generation, the same identity complex and the dread of seeing the creator-creature relationship overturned experienced by mankind since the earliest automaton horror stories.

Despite the overall message of hope through continuous effort towards world progress and self-improvement conveyed by the superhero comics, the above undertones reflect the levels of cynicism and paranoia found in global pop-culture: governments are secretive and manipulative cliques, corporations have enslaved mankind for the profit of wicked corrupt oligarchs, war and violence is ever-present, there are untold numbers of dangers mankind never even suspects, etc. In such a context, technology is truly an awe-inspiring force, and its misuse appears to be only a matter of time (a “Chekov’s gun”), as is the case with spiritual phenomena and beings, part of a truly alien world as far as contemporary laity is concerned, inaccessible for most but the eeriest of humans, with wondrous but intimidating details, a world of abstract beauty and cold rigour or (especially since Lovecraft) of misshapen life forms in whose image mankind is clearly not made.

However, the truest resemblance to the mass-scale uncanny of the resurrected dead scene from the original Apocalypse is to be found not in the individual stories of mutated transcendence as the source of science-fiction heroes and antiheroes, but in the populations (and even civilisations) of the undead as popularised by the horror and science-fiction genres, particularly in their various combined niches.

The undead genre draws on the virtually universal fear of the “restless dead”, a concept with a huge visceral impact on and within the imaginary of various civilisations past or present, from the abject to the artsy and from sublime to ironic. The uncanny evoked by the undead relates to our primeval fears of not only death itself, but of dead bodies as the ultimate (surviving) taboo (cf. Freud, 1950: 12). The dead were not to be disturbed or summoned in trifle, but appeased and propitiated as they were seen as human essences freed of material limitations, ascended to near-godhood,

guardians but often also terrible avengers. Their former bodies thus had a dual significance, being the material anchors and vehicles of such awe-inspiring forces, symbolic as well as cultic, entities on another plane of existence and beyond the human values of “good” and “evil”, as they were understood as simultaneously hallowed and foul. Symbolically, they were the one persistent link to the afterlife, a two-way portal for the articulation of cosmic willpower, which rendered the corresponding ancestors departed but even more powerful, virtually indestructible potential assailants of the living.

Contemporary cinema and the derived new-media entertainment have capitalised on such culturally persistent imagery, popularising and partly reconceptualising the vampire and the zombie. Regardless of their particularities as affiliated to various cultures of the world, the two ghouls, as appearing in modern lore, seem to have always signified something beyond the “cheap thrills” they conveyed. Firstly, they resonate with our species consciousness in the key of biological horror: as opposed to the angst-fraught uniqueness of Frankenstein’s creature, denied a mate exactly so that his kind would not propagate (if even possible), modern vampires and zombies are able to multiply on their own, producing a genuine demographic plague. Though exponentially infectious in much the same way as a virus (itself on the cusp of living and dead matter), vampires and zombies do not, in fact, reproduce to generate actual new individuals or clones of an original, but instead mortally wound individuals of the opposing population to turn them into new members of their marching army. The process by which that occurs is arguably indicative of the origins of such ghouls in the worldwide fear of contamination, ages before the natural phenomenon was properly understood, but clearly also afterwards, in contemporary times, where the concept is compounded with the paranoia of deliberate infection, as related to the modern dread of biochemical warfare. Apart from the ancient fear of being “soiled” by contact with certain bio-waste matter, especially by their ingestion, surviving in several world religions to this day, the audience is gripped by the symbols of vampires and zombies because the latter feature perhaps the apex of human “uncleanness”, cannibalism. However, this is where their similarities stop. On one hand, vampires, regardless of the culture originating them, are always seen as robbers of life essence, as per the truism adopted by modern vampire enthusiasts that “the blood is the life”, being thus in many ways a parasitic race. In fact, modern western lore often depicts them as going to great lengths in containing their own demographic figures by the refusal to kill humans, whereby they would (according to certain lore variants) transform them into vampires instead of mere “farmed cattle”, thus empowering them. Since the resurgence of the Gothic genre, they have been increasingly described as keeping a complex

social order and having constituted a variably secret sophisticated civilisation. On the other hand, zombies are visibly less sophisticated, little more than mysteriously reanimated flesh lurching about driven by the basic mechanism of finding sustenance, most notoriously human brains. Although social organisation commensurate with canine packs is occasionally noted in modern zombie lore, the vast and traditional majority of them are simply dumb, if resilient, beasts.

The issue of their bodily resilience is one particular aspect of their multi-fold uncanny, since both categories, as embodiment of the restless dead concept, are essentially immortal from a logical standpoint, since they have already died. They are not, however, indestructible, yet their ability to withstand most conventional attacks makes them formidable foes on their own, and especially, as is the case with zombies, overwhelming when part of a demographic outbreak or a “horde” (even though multiple instances of recent popular vampire fiction TV series, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *True Blood*, feature groups of vampires used as expendable minion-armies by more powerful demonic creatures). The aspect of their unnerving resilience in death and in sheer numbers has made the transition from horror to science-fiction, with such notable nemeses as the Borg Collective—ruthless highly adaptive cyborgs bent on assimilating (technically counting as killing them first by annihilating their individual consciousness) all sentient species in the *Star Trek* universe—and the Cybermen—similarly ambitious robots ‘upgraded’ from humans in the *Doctor Who* franchise.

The other major level of symbolism rendering the undead so uncanny is the socio-cultural one. As in the original Apocalypse, revenants strike the living with a concrete sense of alterity, while always contained in one's own self: the undead is the fundamental multilayered Other inspiring fear of the same potential within the Self. Building on that concept, vampires and zombies are indicative of the great paranoia permeating human society, of having been infiltrated: the mistrust of the Other possibly embedded within the very ranks of the Self, from plague-carrying individuals to the more recent sleeper-cell terrorists. As such, they are often used in modern and contemporary fiction to reveal certain truths about the unrests of the social milieu they originate in and occasionally to thus convey certain propaganda messages (as notorious in the first half of the twentieth century, when Nazis would use the symbol of the vampire as a racial slur against Jews and Slavs, while some of the latter retorted by comparing the ferocity of Nazis with that of werewolves).

As alluded to earlier, the distinctions between the respective social order of vampires and zombies mirror the social strata of class- or caste-based societies, with vampires traditionally perceived as the wicked aristocratic or

bourgeois elite and zombies associated more with the lower or working classes and, recently, with consumerist frenzies.

The most iconic vampire, essentially establishing the lore canon on the undead bloodsuckers, remains the infamous Count Dracula, as introduced by Bram Stoker (<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/345>) in a time of post-Victorian unrest where Britain saw itself confronted with international and domestic challenges as its global supremacy was being questioned. Within Stoker's novel, Dracula emerges as both a public threat (determined to constitute his new domain and vampire court on English soil) and—chiefly—a private threat, as he seduces and manipulates, ultimately turning Lucy and partly Mina into his minions. His description identifies him, by the predatory animal suggestions (the aquiline nose, the pointed teeth), as a cultural assailant against the English social norms, presumed to be those of the “civilised world” of the time, with his Victorian-disturbing “hard, and cruel, and sensual” aspect helping to cement the link between vampirism and sexual predation. Further pursuing his symbolic nature, we may discover Dracula to be an epitome of the Immigrant and, surprisingly, of the lower classes, for he is parasitic and endeavouring to spread his influence, uses exotic practices to bend the laws (of nature) and escape capture and, respectively, associates with vermin, dark spaces and the mentally unwell. The protagonists' struggle against him is not merely a private one, to save Mina, but a public one as well, a self-appointed West-to-East crusade meant to secure the socio-economical and class status quo (from its being overturned by the vampire upstart), a crusade complete with hints of ethno-cultural amusement and disdain, opposed to Dracula's same voyage from East to West, labeled an invasion.

From wretched creatures of the night vulnerable to a number of holy and vegetal paraphernalia and to drowning, decapitation, heart stabbing and especially sunlight (according to the established Hollywood tradition, rather than Stoker's depictions), connotative of the shadier elements of society, vampires are immensely glamourised over the past decades in works by Anne Rice and her followers. They thus garner a Gothic bohemian mystique emphasising their irresistible seduction and superhuman attributes such as agility, regeneration and immortality, turning them into a kind of belated Romantic *Übermenschen*, not far—certainly not in the most recent portrayals in the *Twilight* series—from the Victorian idealisation of the undead pharaohs. Lastly, vampires become stock figures (among the most recognisable “universal monsters”) in the contemporary genre of urban fantasy, often displayed in gritty, would-be realist tones, which allows them to become—much in the way of other contemporary superhumans, e.g. superheroes—conveyors of certain social messages. In the *True Blood* series, they are often used as thinly-veiled metaphors of sexual and racial minori-

ties, opposed by certain radical church groups as the series is set in the American South, but of other shady elements of society as well, including drug runners reaping the benefits of selling vampire blood-derived compounds. But if the vampire protagonist in *True Blood* appears as a country gentleman battling his own (blood)lust, the eponymous antihero in the *Blade* franchise, the so-called “Daywalker”, is a doubly resurrected hero of sorts, as he is born with his liminal attributes of both vampire and man from a mother initially said to have been killed by a vampire before giving birth to him. Blade exists in a punk dystopia rife with vampires, presumed a monstrous variant of mankind due to mutation, not occult forces, organised along gangland or Mafia structures and depicted as being the true elite controlling human society by means of “familiars” (human slaves) in every major institution.

In the above examples we have seen how vampires may express the public’s insecurity towards the apparent disdain of the major institutions regarding their socio-politically enslaved average citizen, itself the revaluation of the age-old resentment of the unempowered masses towards those who seemed to have it all. However, even the vampire rulers in Blade’s universe are terrorised by other types of undead invader-converters appearing in their midst, particularly as described in the second and third films of the cinematic trilogy, where science (both vampire- and human-driven, respectively) has produced bioengineered monstrosities. In the first case, vampires are being hunted down by an “enhanced vampire”, a Reaper, of alien monstrosity even by vampire standards, whose mere scratch is able to turn both vampires and humans into Reapers, and resistant to most attacks (e.g. due to its bone-encased heart) except ultraviolet rays. Secondly, in order to do away with all vampires, humans produce the so-called “Day Star” virus, which Blade must take a lethal risk of using in order to put an end to the rule of a returned nearly omnipotent Dracula.

Science, in particular mad, exotic science, warped for economic or military-political profit, is a staple of contemporary pop-culture fiction, and the trope does not fail to be associated with the undead. Alongside the above examples involving vampires, zombies are routinely depicted as created by and for nefarious corporations, some as a result of research in biological warfare, including cases of providing both human and animal corpses with ghastly genetic upgrades, in e.g. *28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, George Romero’s genre-establishing *Living Dead* films (<http://www.timeout.com/film/news/631.html>) and the *Resident Evil* franchise. In general, the horror genre is replete with various dead characters returning with horrendously murderous grudges, such as the Candyman (with its own legend resurrection and duties conferral act), Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees and Samara of *The Ring* notoriety. On occasion, inanimate objects gaining deleterious volition,

if not sentience *per se*, and thus seemingly coming alive, provide excellent opportunities to ponder our dependence on objects in an uncanny key (reminiscent of Eastern mythologies dealing with abandoned household wares coming to vengeful or mischievous life after years of neglect)—and give rise to such unforgettable classics as Chucky, the abusive doll, or Christine, the revengeful haunted car. On occasion, the proliferation of the various undead (of both types described herein), treated ironically and even parodically (*Shaun of the Dead*, *Fido*) leads to memorable instances of dark comedy, such as in *The Addams Family*, *Beetlejuice* or *The Corpse Bride*. Just as vampires hinted at class-based society inequality and the paranoia of invasion, zombies are reminiscent—through their very roots in Voodoo slave work, itself a culture steeped in slavery—of current diverse forms of socio-economic slavery, most typically illegal immigrant work, being thus often quoted as a metaphor of the evils of consumerist culture. Lastly, the science-fiction undead carry their own political messages, as both the Borg Collective and the Cybermen, particularly the latter in their sarcastic depiction of a would-be glorious Cyberman future, strongly connote with the still relevant fears of real-world totalitarian *evil empires* banning freedom of thought or individuality and perpetuated through forceful indoctrination.

Fear of the undead, by means of the uncanny conceptualisations of their encounter, has stirred mankind for ages and is, unsurprisingly, also found in sacred texts such as the Apocalypse, a particularly rich trove of meaningful terrorising imagery including other representations of the uncanny itself. In this research paper we have argued that the initial sense of divine teleology permeating the Cosmos and making the Apocalypse a sublime-conveying *memento mori* may have largely been lost to the secular progress. Instead, the uncanny of the Apocalypse's undead is now arrayed with the addictive virtuality of the vicarious on-screen fear, otherwise a contemporary form of the sublime itself. In doing so, in reconceptualising some of the most primeval fears of mankind in the keys of cynicism, paranoia or irony, we are able to gain new insight into the contemporary human experience, as well as the eternal duality of Self and Other and perhaps even predict the future development of pop culture.

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