BOOK REVIEWS: LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

Stacey Abbott, *Undead Apocalypse: Vampires and Zombies in the Twenty-First Century*
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016)

In Stephenie Meyer's popular teen vampire-romance series *Twilight* (2005-11), the protagonist, Bella Swan, 'unconditionally and irrevocably in love' with a vampire, opts to see a zombie movie when she wants to avoid all depictions of romance.[1] This decision reveals an obvious difference between dominant images of the vampire and the zombie in the twenty-first century: their relative sex appeal. Evolving from the sympathetic vampire on television (*Dark Shadows* (1966-71), *Forever Knight* (1989-96), *Angel* (1999-2004)) and heavily indebted to Anne Rice's popularisation of the eternally young and beautiful vampire (beginning with *Interview with the Vampire* (1976)), the contemporary boyfriend/girlfriend vampire (*Twilight*, Charlaine Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001-13) and television adaptation *True Blood* (2008-14); *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-17) and spin-off *The Originals* (2013-present)) is presented as a sexually appealing romantic partner. By contrast, the zombie, as rotting corpse in the style of George A. Romero's *Living Dead* series (1968-2009) or infected body (*28 Days Later* (2002), *Resident Evil* (2002), *Zombieland* (2009)), displays visible signs of degeneration and disease. Bodily degradation, combined with a lack of individuation, renders the zombie an unlikely romantic prospect for the most part, as may be seen in many contemporary zombie narratives (television series *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), and Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006) and film adaptation (2013)). Comedy-horror films such as *Burying the Ex* (2014), *Life After Beth* (2014), and *Nina Forever* (2015) are based on the incongruity of even the individualised zombie and a viable romantic relationship.

This apparent difference between prevailing incarnations of the vampire and the zombie is unsettled in Stacey Abbott's *Undead Apocalypse: Vampires and Zombies in the Twenty-First Century*. A growing number of romance stories featuring zombies as the love interest, including the successful Isaac Marion's *Warm Bodies* (2010) and film adaptation (2013), demonstrate that the zombie is not entirely antithetical to romance. According to Abbott, however, to focus on romance in relation to these figures is to obscure many

[1] Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), p. 195.

important similarities between the two kinds of monsters beyond the trend towards Dark Romance. Concentrating on dystopian texts, Abbott addresses the largely overlooked interconnections between vampires and zombies. Picking up where her work on vampires in film left off,[2] Abbott focuses here on the twenty-first century, a period that has thus far offered a vast array of vampires and zombies in fiction, film, television, and other media including video games, comics, graphic novels, and theatre. Presenting the seemingly distinct and separate figures of vampire and zombie as 'two sides of an undead coin' (p. 4), Abbott examines their shared generic connections and impact on one another, demonstrating how they are 'increasingly integrated and intertwined, engaged in a dialogue in which film, television and literature implicitly acknowledge their relationship and increasing influence on each other' (p. 4). Providing acute analysis of an impressive number and range of popular texts across fiction, film, and television, Abbott focuses on genre, medium, and the changing language and iconography regarding the undead. Moreover, she sets this discussion within the context of various media accounts relating the many perceived threats of annihilation facing contemporary western society, from disease through immigration to terrorism. Tracking the dystopian vampire and zombie narrative across a range of media, Abbott draws attention to and accounts for an alternative strand in undead culture characterised by 'horror and the threat of near-annihilation' (p. 4), existing parallel to the much-analysed vampire-as-love-interest in the twenty-first century.

Though the central focus is on twenty-first-century works, Abbott also discusses a range of relevant vampire and zombie narratives outside this period, thus further contextualising her consideration of specifically twenty-first-century changes to depictions of the undead. She establishes a foundational link between vampires and zombies in her reading of the influential, though until recently critically neglected novel, *I Am Legend* (1954), by Richard Matheson. This novel informs Abbott's analysis throughout the book, with Chapter One devoted entirely to a consideration of its legacy. In itself, the in-depth reading carried out in this chapter makes an important contribution to scholarship on Matheson's novel. Positioning *I Am Legend* as a significant precursor to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Abbott argues that the novel's zombie-like vampires establish an important link between the two undead figures. In particular, the idea, introduced in *I Am Legend*, that vampirism could be understood as a form of virus, leading to the possibility of a large-scale

[2] *Celluloid Vampires: Life After Death in the Modern World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007) examined vampire films up to 2002.

outbreak amongst the general population, is drawn on and developed significantly in twenty-first-century vampire and zombie post-apocalyptic works, as the subsequent chapters detail.

The second chapter distinguishes the vampire of twenty-first-century film and television as the object of a medical gaze. Tracing ideas initiated in Matheson's text, Abbott further contextualises this development through a discussion of the use of the vampire as metaphor for disease in late twentieth-century films such as *The Hunger* (1983) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992). The vampire's reconstruction through scientific and medical language, images, and symbols is evidenced in films including *Blade* (1998), *Underworld* (2003), *Perfect Creature* (2006), *Ultraviolet* (2006), the remake of *I Am Legend* (2007), and *Daybreakers* (2009), and in TV shows such as *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *The Originals*, and *The Strain* (2014-present). In these texts, vampirism is variously imagined as a disease, a cure, or both. Imagining vampirism in this way, Abbott argues, frequently leads to the examination of, and often the imprisonment of and experimentation on, the vampire body. The change from the depiction of vampirism as metaphor for disease to an example of disease subject to medical scrutiny is presented as an expression of contemporary anxieties surrounding the integration of science, commerce, and the body. Abbott finds that these anxieties take three key forms: virology, pandemic, and the growth of trade in human tissues. This framing of vampirism allows a critique of the increasingly shared interests of medicine and business in forms of 'Big Pharma' in many of the texts examined.

Chapter Three examines the re-emergence of the zombie in twenty-first-century media. Abbott locates the start of the current wave of cinematic zombies in five important zombie films released between 2002 and 2005: *Resident Evil*, *28 Days Later*, the *Dawn of the Dead* remake (2004), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), and *Land of the Dead* (2005). These films heralded the mainstream emergence of the zombie and its subsequent proliferation on television. Avoiding a potentially reductive reading of the zombie renaissance as solely a response to the trauma of 9/11, Abbott favours a more open reading that allows for numerous influences to be traced in these films, brought together, as Abbott writes, citing Romero, in 'one big nightmare' (p. 74). While the medical gaze is fore-grounded in twenty-first-century vampire films, the mediated gaze is central to many zombie apocalypse films, as displayed in the remake *Dawn of the Dead*, *Diary of the Dead* (2007), *[REC]* (2007), *Quarantine* (2008), *Pontypool* (2008), and *World War Z*. These zombie narratives draw on a range of apocalyptic discourses, moving from localised stories to global pandemics, and making use of an aesthetic drawn from media reportage of twenty-first-century world events. In this context,

the zombie becomes 'a metaphor through which we express anxiety and anticipation of a potential extinction-level event that will bring about the collapse of modern society, if not humanity itself' (p. 64).

Chapter Four turns specifically to television and the proliferation of zombies on the small screen, adding greatly to current scholarship on the televisual zombie by exploring both the 'monster-of-the-week zombie' in shows including *Angel*, *The X-Files* (1993-2002/2016), and *Supernatural* (2005-present), and the recent emergence of the zombie series, such as *The Walking Dead*, *Dead Set* (2008), *In the Flesh* (2013-14), and *Z-Nation* (2014-present). The analysis reveals the zombie narrative's capacity to function as a means to explore 'a wide range of personal and political themes from the trauma of dealing with suicide and grief to contemporary issues around tolerance, terrorism, radicalism and the aftermath of war' (p. 113). Abbott's expertise on television horror is evident, as she elucidates the ways both the televisual format and changes within the television industry affect the production of horror.[3] For zombie television, this manifests most clearly in the tension Abbott points out between 'the allegorical approach to the genre and the more televisual focus on seriality' (p. 94). The zombie as allegory in the Romero tradition (used to critique race-relations in *Night of the Living Dead*, consumer culture in the original *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and the military-industrial complex in *Day of the Dead* (1985)) exists on television in one-off episodes, such as the episode 'Homecoming' in *Masters of Horror* (2005-2007) which offers a commentary on US involvement in the Iraq War, and short series such as *Dead Set*, which uses the zombie to critique contemporary celebrity culture. The 'very slow apocalypse' depicted across seasons of a serial television show such as *The Walking Dead* allows for 'a complex use of the zombie not as allegory but provocateur, confronting the audience with heart-breaking, thought-provoking and often shocking developments that raise questions about what it means to be male, female, child, adult, animal, human, barbaric and civilised' (p. 118).

Chapter Five explores hybridity in contemporary vampire and zombie narratives. Here Abbott considers some of the more positive examples of the synergy of science and the body, by focusing on the technologically hybrid hero, a figure that celebrates the breakdown of boundaries through composite identity. While acknowledging the 'tension between being a product of a corporate economy and evoking a critique of such systems' (p. 140), Abbott looks closely at franchises such as *Blade* (1998-2004), the *Resident Evil* films (2002-16), and *Underworld* (2003-16), reading the protagonists' cyborg identity as one that 'resists and

[3] Past work includes *TV Horror: The Dark Side of the Small Screen* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), co-written with Lorna Jowett.

challenges corporate and patriarchal organisations through their action and their bodies that refuse to be contained, regardless of the origins of their hybridity' (p. 140).

Chapters Six and Seven investigate the influence of the sympathetic vampire on the zombie genre, and of the post-apocalyptic zombie on the vampire genre, respectively. In these chapters, Abbott draws attention to the 'borrowing and reworking [of] conceptions of monstrosity to create new meanings' (p. 179) in both vampire and zombie genres. Side-stepping the conspicuous growth of the vampire as love-interest in twenty-first-century texts, Abbott focuses instead on the impact of positioning the vampire as providing the principle viewpoint on his/her own story. Looking closely at the Swedish film *Let the Right One In* (2008) and its American remake *Let Me In* (2010), Abbott presents the use of the vampire point of view as one that brings out moral ambiguity. Television shows, such as *Buffy* (1997-2003), *Angel*, *Being Human UK* (2008-13)/*Being Human US* (2011-14), *The Vampire Diaries*, *The Originals*, and *Hemlock Grove* (2013-15), that involve entire or partial positioning from vampire perspectives, offer a 'space that allows for a slow and complicated exploration of identity', making audiences 'increasingly involved and implicated within the vampire's story' (p. 148). This chapter also provides keen readings of indie vampire films *Byzantium* (2012) and *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), exploring the imbrication of power and storytelling in *Byzantium*, and the depiction of the vampire as a 'celebration of living' in *Only Lovers Left Alive.*

Abbott then draws attention to the post-millennial emergence of texts that allow a zombie perspective and even use the zombie as narrator. Examples include the novels *Warm Bodies* (and its film adaptation), *Husk* (2012), and *Zom-B* (2012-16); comic *I-Zombie* (2010) and its television adaptation (2014-present); television series *In the Flesh* and *Z-Nation*; and films *Colin* (2008), and *ParaNorman* (2012). A variety of uses are made of the zombie perspective: in a film such as *Colin*, the trope 'showcases the violence of humanity, which is presented as brutal when divorced from their perspective' (p. 166); in *Z-Nation*, it is 'designed to unsettle the audience' and obscure easy divisions between human and monster (p. 164); in *ParaNorman*, it challenges normative ideas and conformity. Through an insightful reading of the television series *In the Flesh*, Abbott demonstrates how the zombie perspective facilitates the exploration of themes such as 'sexual identity, a subject which bridges the personal and the political in terms of identity politics' (p. 172). This chapter argues effectively that the undead perspective reveals zombies and vampires to be 'inherently similar, distorted versions of humanity, struggling with fear and questions of identity' (p.

176). Abbott argues that orienting the narrative from this point of view need not be 'domesticating' in the sense of stripping the monster of Otherness or difference. The readings presented demonstrate how privileging the undead viewpoint may in fact engender new and more complicated interpretations.

Chapter Seven looks at the reverse influence of the post-apocalyptic zombie genre on representations of the vampire. Abbott tracks an apocalyptic trend in vampire film and television that 'captures in its dystopian vision confused and ambivalent responses of a society coping with drastic changes in science, economics, war, globalisation and religion' (p. 196). The monstrous vampire appears in films including *Perfect Creature*, the 2007 *I Am Legend*, *30 Days of Nights* (2007), *Daybreakers*, *Stake Land* (2010), *Priest* (2011), and TV shows such as *Ultraviolet* and *The Strain*, and 'provides a space through which we can project our cultural anxieties in order to safely destroy a clear and visible villain' while simultaneously 'remind[ing] us that the monster we seek to destroy is in fact a part of ourselves' (p. 186).

Finally, the cultural fascination with the undead is considered here as a vehicle for the expression of apocalyptic preoccupations and even a means of preparing for emergency events. The undead are figures whose allegorical and metaphorical potential make them useful in a variety of contexts, from political arguments to fun runs. As a whole, *Undead Apocalypse* demonstrates the evolving and adaptive nature of the vampire, the zombie, and their interconnection. The undead are read as expressions of cultural anxiety, utilised as metaphor, as allegory, and as vehicles for social commentary. They are, Abbott argues, particularly amenable to the exploration of a wide range of themes apposite to twenty-first-century society. In 1923, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that '[d]eath is our friend precisely because it brings us into absolute and passionate presence with all that is here'.[4] One gets the same sense reading Abbott's insightful and perceptive analysis of the undead; they emerge here as figures that we would do well to recognise as friends, since they aid us in multiple ways in exploring and articulating some of the more difficult and unspeakable aspects of life in the twenty-first-century.

This reader would have loved to see more on the French series *Les Revenants* (2012-present), referred to briefly. M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) and recent film adaptation (2016) would also have fit well in the discussion, though the film may not have been released prior to publication. However, these are minor notes reflecting personal interest

[4] Rainer Maria Rilke, letter to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crouy, in *A Year With Rilke*, ed. by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 6 (6 January 1923).

and a desire to read Abbott's interpretation of these texts. Overall, this is an enlightening, well-researched, and fascinating read, indispensable for scholars of vampire and zombie culture, and, given its entertaining and accessible style, recommended for anyone with an interest in the area.

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