

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

---

4-1-2012

Review of *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism* by Henry A. Giroux and *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* by David McNally

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, [gerard.canavan@marquette.edu](mailto:gerard.canavan@marquette.edu)

---

Accepted version. *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 2012): 143-416. DOI. ©

2012 Liverpool University Press. Used with permission.

Gerry Canavan was affiliated with Duke University at the time of publication.

Gerry Canavan, Duke University  
 book review for *Science Fiction Film and Television* (1 December 2011)

**Henry A. Giroux. *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*. London: Peter Lang, 2011.**

**David McNally. *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*. *Historical Materialism Book Series, Volume 30*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011.**

The second season premiere of AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010-) slaughtered previous ratings records for basic cable in the U.S., drawing 7.3 million viewers for the first airing, 11 million total viewers for the night including replays, and 4.8 million adults in the so-called "demo," the Adults 18-49 demographic most coveted by advertisers. The show's 3.8 rating (measuring what percent of all the nation's televisions were showing the program) marks the series as not only more popular than other, more critically acclaimed AMC series like *Mad Men* (2007-) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-) but more popular than many broadcast network series as well—unprecedented, even staggering numbers for basic cable programming. Something unusual is happening here, beyond the mere novelty of zombie survival horror on television (*The Walking Dead* is the first such series in U.S. television history to make it to air). The struggle of former police officer Rick Grimes, his wife Lori, his son Carl, and their unlikely group of fellow travellers to survive in the face of a once-impossible nightmare of chaos and deprivation has struck some chord in a national psyche traumatized by a decade of war, corruption, disasters both natural and manmade, and ongoing economic collapse; the precarity, casual violence, and basic *ugliness* of the fantastic zombie world seems for the show's viewers to be in some important way isomorphic with our own.

For Henry A. Giroux in his *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism* narratives like *The Walking Dead* map onto a form of capitalism that has itself become completely monstrous:

A casino capitalist zombie politics views competition as a form of social combat, celebrates war as an extension of politics, and legitimates a ruthless Social Darwinism in which particular individuals and groups are considered simply redundant, disposal—nothing more than human waste left to stew in their own misfortune—easy prey for the zombies who have a ravenous appetite for chaos and revel in apocalyptic visions filled with destruction, decay, abandoned houses, burned-out cars, gutted landscapes, and trashed gas stations. (2)

Giroux traces this vision of zombie politics from Wall Street (where zombies "roam the halls ... of Goldman Sachs" [2]) to Washington, D.C., where they gut the social safety net and launch missile strikes on civilians on the other side of the world at the push of a button. The figure of the zombie—which for Giroux becomes not *undead* but *hyper-dead* through its rejection of "any institution, set of values, and social relations that embrace the common good or exhibit compassion for the suffering of others" (32)—stands here not only for neoconservatism and the Tea Party Movement (which come in for particularly harsh denunciation) but for the ideology of neoliberalism more generally, whose free-market corporatist hegemony has in the twentieth-first

century become indistinguishable from authoritarianism. (Obama, of course, is largely indistinguishable from Bush in this calculus, and indeed is all the worse to the extent that he seems, to most political observers on the liberal-left, to be much better.)

From this recasting of American elites' monstrosity flows the rest of *Zombie Politics and Culture's* critique, ranging the general coarsening of political discourse and the explosion of eliminationist rhetoric, to new embrace of anti-intellectualism and denialism, to the abandonment of the welfare state by both parties, to bipartisan acceptance of assassination, pre-emptive war, and torture in the name of "homeland security." The final third of the book hinges in particular on the increasingly precarious position of America's youth under these new conditions, essentially arguing that Zombie America has decided, in the end, to eat its children. The decline of the welfare state has left more than one in five American children living under the poverty line; the police-prison-industrial complex targets young people (especially young men of color) for nonviolent crimes under a hyperbolic "drug war" enforcement model that has proven itself to hopelessly compromised and corrupted; even schools themselves have become increasingly militarized spaces at all levels; and those students who are able to graduate college at all are left permanently burdened with unpayable (and undischageable) student loans in an era of historic joblessness and underemployment.

The central theoretical question hanging unanswered over this strident (and at times quite stirring) critique of contemporary American culture is why it is the *national elites* who are the zombies—the elites and not, as I would have it, everybody else. To be sure, the zombies of American horror cinema are bloodthirsty and monstrous, but they are also just as crucially figures of total abjection: skeletal, directionless, desperately hungry, and easily dispatched. The sort of premeditated, *systematic* cruelty Giroux rightly identifies in *Zombie Politics and Culture* at the core of contemporary neoliberalism corporatism—callous, calculated—has its proper analogue not in the zombies but in the surviving humans, who, in the ruins, mercilessly slaughter dozens of their former friends, family, and neighbours without any hint of remorse. (Think again of *The Walking Dead*: our hero is a cop, and all the human characters have guns. Or recall that Giroux's "apocalyptic visions filled with destruction, decay, abandoned houses, burned-out cars, gutted landscapes, and trashed gas stations" describe not some imaginary future for America's suburbs but the already existing situation of abandoned cities like Detroit, Oakland, Camden, and New Orleans.) In the political economy of zombie cinema it is the *zombies*, and not the surviving humans, who are the disposable objects of unchecked, systematic violence—and from this perspective the true horror of the contemporary moment is not that global elites have become inhuman but rather that they have decided all the rest of us are.

This alternative approach to the zombie is the one David McNally takes up the final third of his *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires, and Global Capitalism*, where he identifies zombies with the subaltern labouring bodies whose suffering makes the smooth operation of contemporary capitalism possible at all. Historicizing capitalism in terms of the stories about monsters it produces, his account passes through *Frankenstein* and vampires to a contemporary zombic moment in which bodies themselves are being harvested and commodified. McNally's zombie has more in common with the *zombi* mythos of the Haitian plantation, the nightmare of total submission to slavery that continues even after death, than with the ravenous flesh-eater of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and its U.S. horror-film successors; many of his examples are drawn from neo-zombie narratives of witchcraft and soul-theft from contemporary Africa and Latin America:

Across these stories, real bodies are implicated and at risk: they perform unseen zombie-labour; they are possessed by evil spirits that turn them into money-machines; they are dissected for marketable parts. (201)

These are, in short, the *victims* of the very modes of biopolitical and neoliberal violence that Giroux identifies. The diagnosis is more or less the same; only the assignation of zombiism differs.

The conclusion of McNally's text suggests his approach may have richer, more interesting possibilities for theorizing resistance than Giroux's. McNally extends his identification of the zombies with the precariat and the subaltern into a discussion of utopia's relationship with the grotesque, the explosive revolutionary potential that arises when one has nothing left to lose:

...because they are the *living* dead, zombies possess the capacity to awaken, to throw off their bonds, to reclaim life amid the morbid ruins of late capitalism. As much as they move slowly and clumsily through the routinised motions of deadened life, zombies also possess startling capacities for revelry and revolt, latent energies that can erupt in riotous nights of the living dead. Bursting across movie-screens and the pages of pulp-fiction, such zombie-festivals contain moments of carnivalesque insurgency, horrifying disruptions of the ordered and predictable patterns of everyday-life. Without warning, a rupture in the fabric of the normal transforms the living dead into hyper-active marauders. The maimed and disfigured seize the streets and invade shopping malls; authority collapses; anarchy is unleashed. (254)

Reading McNally's celebration of this "monstrous utopia" (266) I think of nothing so much as the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in Zuccotti Park in New York in August 2011 and quickly spread to dozens of cities worldwide. Here we find an oblique vision of another type of world, one that runs counter to the traditional American narrative of consumer happiness and which has proved completely inscrutable to elites in business, government, and the media. Writing in *n+1*, Marco Roth calls attention to the movement's appropriation of the iconography of homelessness, all the way down to the handwritten, cardboard signs reading "We Are the 99%" and tent-based shantytowns that remain the movement's self-advertisement: "Just as the early communists heralded the proletariat as the repository of potential revolutionary consciousness, so OWS holds up the homeless as the privileged figure of contemporary American post-capitalist life." The shantytowns of the Occupy movement suggest the mainstream's new identification with those left behind by an increasingly cutthroat American capitalism; the radical abjection of the zombie—hunger, desperation, *need*—signifies a precarity that is increasingly understood to be a near-universal condition, shared to one extent or another by all but a tiny silver of the global elite.

When Rick Grimes rides into downtown Atlanta on his horse and points his rifle at shuffling, lurching, groaning walkers in rags—human forms this police officer has cast out of the circle of protection and designated as wholly Other—just who is it he mowing down? What are we to make of university cops pepper-spraying the very students they have been hired to protect in the name of campus security, or of the spectacle of riot police furiously beating and arresting peaceful citizens "whose only crime," as David Graeber notes, "was the violation of local camping regulations?" We are witnessing the fevered spasms of a sick system that is lashing out in all directions, trying to hold itself together—a system whose basic legitimacy is challenged every day by more and more hungry zombies gathering outside. This is the other side to Rebekah Sheldon's recent memorable observation on Twitter that "Occupy camps are the closest I've been

to a post-apocalypse social form. Yet.” More and more members of the 99% seem to feel the apocalypse has indeed already happened and we’re all already zombies—and there’s nothing left now but to wait for the part of the film where the survivors’ last defenses fail, the walls come down, the guns run out of bullets, and the zombies have their turn.