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Fighting a War You've Already Lost: Zombies and Zombis in *Firefly/Serenity* and *Dollhouse*

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Abstract

This article explores the use of zombie imagery in sf narratives created by Joss Whedon: *Firefly* (US 2002–3), *Serenity* (US 2005) and *Dollhouse* (US 2009–10). The translation of the zombie from its traditional horror-movie context to the far-future space opera of *Firefly/Serenity* and the near-future cyberpunk of *Dollhouse* reveals the zombie's allegorisation of the consequences of biopolitical governmentality and neoliberal capitalism. In both series zombies function as a figure for both the dehumanisation caused by state and market forces and the possibility of Utopian resistance to these forces.

Introduction

Recently I have argued that the American horror-movie zombie fantasy should be primarily read as a hyperbolic reenactment of the imaginary racial demarcation into *life* and *anti-life* that is crucial to the construction of the contemporary biopolitical state.¹ Biopower, charged with keeping its citizen population alive through the regularised, rationalised fulfilment of biological needs, retains its sovereign power to harm and to kill through the naming of persons for whom this obligation need not be fulfilled. Such persons turn out, in fact, to be such dire threats to the promise of continued prosperity for the general population that they must be disciplined,

quarantined or exterminated altogether for the sake of the biological security of the whole. Biopower, that is, retains authority over death through the deployment of the conceptual categories of race war (for Foucault) and included exclusion and states of exception (for Agamben) that can motivate and justify violence that would otherwise fall outside its jurisdiction to “‘make” live or “let” die’ (Foucault *Society* 241). The fantasy of the zombie, in this light, can be seen as the constitutive gesture of the biopolitical state; the zombie is a figure for those persons whose exclusion from ‘life’ secures biopower’s continued capacity for violence.

For Agamben the ultimate entelechy of biopower—the fully realised form towards which it is always already tending—is the zombic nightmare of the concentration camp, which, ‘now securely lodged within the city’s interior’, has become ‘the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet’, exerting a kind of gravitational pull towards hyper-security states which explains why ‘we must expect not only new camps but always new and more lunatic regulative definitions of the inscription of life in the city’ (*Homo Sacer* 176). As time goes on, this is to say, biopolitical regimes establish more and longer states of exception in which political life, *bios*, must be continually suspended in the name of its own preservation—a pandemic of exclusion which, in the spirit of Martin Niemöller’s famous ‘First They Came...’, turns more and more citizens into zombies until at last there is no one left. In this light the attractiveness of zombie scenarios and simulation exercises as tools for emergency preparedness planning (including, most recently, at the Center for Disease Control) takes on new relevance; we might indeed recast all security-minded operations of biopower as variations on a single, all-encompassing ‘zombie contingency plan’ to which we are all ultimately subject.

For Foucault, this paradoxical double action of the biopolitical state—what might be called the fundamental *insincerity* of biopower—can be seen clearest in its furthest extremity, the atom bomb: biopower develops a capacity to kill that is in essence a power to destroy life altogether, which is completely incompatible with the supposed aims of the biopolitical nation state (253). Roberto Esposito is likewise preoccupied with this paradox, which seems in part to motivate his own project:

How do we explain that the culmination of a politics of life generated a lethal power that contradicts the productive impulse? This is the paradox, the impassable stumbling block that not only twentieth-century totalitarianism, but also nuclear power asks philosophy with regard to a resolutely affirmative declension of biopolitics. How is it possible that a power of life is exercised against life itself? (39)

He speculates that Foucault is reluctant to accept that biopolitics and what he calls thanatopolitics are ‘continuist’ with one another within modernity because Foucault would then be forced, as a consequence, ‘to assume genocide as the constitutive paradigm (or at least the inevitable outcome) of the entire parabola of modernity’ (43). But we should not share this reluctance. The famous final command of Ur-imperialist Mr. Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to ‘exterminate all the brutes’ (66) is only the earliest movement of biopower’s self-undermining logic—and in the latter movements *all* inhabitants of biopolitical modernity become, at least potentially, such ‘brutes’. Esposito captures well the mechanism by which the ‘protective apparatus’ of the state comes to attack its own citizen-body when he compares the dysfunctional logic of totalitarian biopolitical regimes like Nazism to the accelerative degeneration found in autoimmune disease (10).

In this sense the logic of biopolitics inevitably grinds its own gears: it continually undercuts and deforms the very *bios* whose preservation is the reason for the emergence of the biopolitical state in the first place. Although not every modern state reaches a final moment of unbounded extermination – most staying instead within regimens of legal and customary segregation, ideological norms, imprisonment and unjust practices of labour exploitation—we nonetheless find the terrible exterminative *potential* of biopolitical logic lying in wait for us in all temporal directions: such terrors as colonialism, imperial warfare and the Holocaust in the past; the militarised American inner city, post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan, genocides in Rwanda and the Sudan, post-earthquake Haiti, post-Katrina New Orleans and any number of similar horrors in the present; and finally the fantasy of social breakdown that dominates the contemporary imagination of the future, the zombie apocalypse.

Accounting for the zombie's historical relationship with colonial and postcolonial imperial states and other state-like actors, as well as its usefulness as a figure for biopolitical subalternity, I argue that the zombie's strange persistence at the site of imperialism's limit fuels necrosis in biopower while in the same moment bolstering the capacity of resistance in those people whom biopolitical institutions have declared socially dead. After introducing the origins of the *zombi* in Haiti (which becomes in altered form the zombie of US horror cinema), I discuss the way this figure is deployed in Joss Whedon's recent sf productions *Firefly* (US 2002–3) and its film spinoff *Serenity* (US 2005) and *Dollhouse* (US 2009–10). These series translate the cinematic zombie from its traditional context to (respectively) far-future space opera and near-future cyberpunk in order to interrogate not the extrapolative perils of some imaginary future but rather the catalogue of horrors that are already all too real in the present. They offer us a narrative context in which theories of biopolitical statecraft meld with more traditionally Marxist analysis of capitalism and resistance, culminating in a dystopian nexus of biopower, biocapitalism and neoliberalism to which zombies allegorise an unexpectedly Utopian alternative.

Necropower and *Zombis* in Haiti

To draw out this relationship between biopolitics, capitalism and resistance I begin with the zombie's mythic origins in Haiti. For Achille Mbembe, the figure of the zombie perfectly captures the self-undermining way in which biopolitics, through ever-widening gaps of permanent emergency and states of exception, has always been as much a technology of death as of life – in his memorable terminology, a *necropolitics*. In his essay of that name Mbembe, echoing Agamben in proclaiming death camps the 'nomos of the political world in which we still live', argues that in the contemporary moment 'the human being truly *becomes a subject* – that is, separated from the animal – in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death (understood as the violence of negativity)' (14). Consequently 'the state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill. ... power (and not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy. It also labors to produce that same exception, emergency, and fictionalized enemy' (16).

Extending Foucault's theory that race war is the constitutive foundation of the modern state, as well as Hannah Arendt's argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the two world wars reflected the reimportation of technologies of violence from the colonies (in which they were first developed) into 'civilised' metropolitan Europe, Mbembe argues that the declaration of enmity required by the state of exception is an act of racialisation that has its origins in colonialism and imperialism, as well as plantation economics and the slave trade ('Necropolitics' 18). Sovereignty in this (post)colonial valence operates in accordance with a zombic logic of quarantine and extermination: 'sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not' ('Necropolitics' 27). This basic assumption of disposability, and the reign of terror it engenders, has necessarily taken many different forms in the many different locations and context in which it has been deployed; Mbembe's own examples range from the "'savages" of the colonial world' to refugees, stateless persons, enslaved persons and the working class. Mbembe's work suggests that colonialism's assignation of nonhuman disposability to human beings can be abstracted as modernity's foundational theoretical investment, its original (and ongoing) sin.

For Mbembe, the history of this assignation of disposability and the consequent 'rise of modern terror' begins not with state action but with the plantation system and the figure of the slave, which he notes 'could be considered one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation' ('Necropolitics' 21). But the exclusion of the slave from the body politic and her subsumption into the market as an object-commodity can never be completely realised; the productive capacity, creativity and intentional mind of the enslaved are required to produce wealth for the slave-owner, but these same human values must be denied in order for the practice of slavery to be justified in the first place. This is to say the humanity of the slave must be retained even as it is denied:

Treated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and

then stylize it. Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another. ('Necropolitics' 22)

In this way slavery, to modify Orlando Patterson's famous term, is not so much social death as *social undeath*, insofar the slave's expulsion from humanity is only ever partial and incomplete. The slave-owning class may deem the slave socially and legally dead, yet the enslaved person remains not only alive but a crucial, productive actor in society. In Mbembe's terms 'the slave is therefore kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantomlike world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity. ... Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life' ('Necropolitics' 21).

The zombie's usefulness as a figure for the intertwined social deaths of colonial domination and slavery should come as little surprise because this is precisely the terrain in which the original myth of the *zombi* developed: the plantations of colonial and post-colonial Haiti. Indeed, Haitian author René Depestre explicitly evokes this history when he writes, 'The history of colonization is the process of man's general zombification. It is also the quest for a revitalizing salt capable of restoring to man the use of his imagination and his culture' (qtd in Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 130) – that is, the history of colonisation is the story of man's zombification, while the history of decolonisation is the story of the search for a *cure* to a zombie plague. Marina Warner identifies the same trope in 1998's *Salt* by Trinidadian writer Earl Lovelace, which recounts the myth that 'zombies can find release from their endless labour by eating salt, whereupon they can fly back to their lost homelands in Africa' (366).

The need for a zombie 'cure' is complicated, however, by the observation C.L.R. James makes in *The Black Jacobins* that during the Haitian revolution 'Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and practice the rites and talk; and now, since the revolution, to hear the political news and make their plans' (86). Laurent Dubois too has called the syncretic vodou religion – which combines elements of Catholicism with Caribbean and African religion – 'a space for freedom in the midst of a world of bondage' (43), a fact of which the bondage-reliant slave-owners were all too aware. 'Nothing is more dangerous', he quotes eighteenth-century French historian Moreau St.-Méry, 'than this cult of Vaudoux' (45).

Others have likewise noticed the importance of vodou rituals as a means of communication, military coordination and morale-building during the 1791 Haitian revolution, a historical fact that prompts Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, in their recent 'Zombie Manifesto', to suggest that the *zombi*, in its position at the boundary between subject and object, rebel and slave, life and death, is still the best metaphor we have for what it means to resist power. They observe that 'In many accounts, there is some suggestion that the hordes that rose up to throw off the yoke of oppression had, through Voodoo practices, rendered themselves insensible to pain' (87 n. 7) – demonstrating well the double valence of the *zombi's* apparent lack of mind, which is as easily a figure for indefatigable resistance as total submission. Elsewhere Lauro and Embry note the extent to which these 'hordes' of rebelling slaves must have appeared to the white slaveowners as 'nearly supernatural', an unholy force of nature, much like the zombies of later zombie cinema; their citation of anthropologist Wade Davis's description of the moment 'fanatic and insensate hordes of blacks rose as a single body to overwhelm the more "rational" white troops' shows well the way subaltern resistance, from the viewpoint of the entrenched elites, becomes recoded as monstrosity.

This recoding becomes even more pronounced as the Haitian *zombi* becomes the horror movie zombie, a ravenous animated corpse, in films that follow in the wake of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (US 1968). The Haitian slave *zombi* was just as commonly a traumatised living person as a revived corpse, and its defining characteristic is the submission of its will to the will of a master; the zombie, in contrast, is defined almost exclusively by its unyielding appetite for human flesh.² In their book *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gerbert seek to demythologise the 'sensationalised' pop

cultural zombie by returning to its origins as a dialectical myth that reunites the deprivations of slavery with communal life. Citing the work of controversial anthropologist Wade Davis, who claimed to have identified the drugs and cultural practices that result in zombification,³ they highlight the unexpected cultural function such practices and narratives provide:

Davis contends that zombification is far from being the result of arbitrary sorcery performed by the bokor for his own personal gain. It is instead a 'social sanction' administered by the Bizango, a secret Vodou society, to those who have violated its codes. The Bizango function as 'an important arbiter of social life among the peasantry,' a force 'that protects community resources, particularly land, as they define the power boundaries of the village' (1988: 8-10). (129)

Michel Laguerre turns to the Bizango-created zombie, too, as 'the conscience of certain districts in Haiti in that it protects the residents against exploitation by outsiders' (81). The Bizango *zombi*, in this way, functions in Haitian society precisely as a kind of *homo sacer*: 'Haitians will shun zombies, but they do not fear them' (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 120). Individuals may still fear becoming zombies personally – but the *zombi* is nonetheless a social myth in which the dehumanising power of slavery and its attendant alienated labour might be repurposed, put to work *not* for the slave-owner's individual profit but on behalf of the collective social good.

This plastic capacity of the *zombi* to exceed, circumvent and resist the very social forces that have created it – in essence to slip the noose of power – is its animating spirit in both postcolonial resistance and its later transformation in popular horror films. Steve Shaviro notes that American movie zombies, like the *zombis* of colonial myth,

do not (in the familiar manner of 1950s horror film monsters) stand for a threat to social order from without. Rather they resonate with, and require, the very processes that produce and enforce social order. That is to say, they do not mirror or represent social forces; they are directly animated and possessed, even in their allegorical distance from beyond the grave, by such forces. (87)

Zombies, in this way, arise not from *without* but from *within*: not externally as a threat to power but internally as the truth of it. The *homo sacer* of the zombie, simultaneously included within and excluded from the body of the state, exists at the site of biopower's limit and in this sense beyond the control of either state or market. Thus the coloniser's originary *fabrication* of colonial subjectivity (Fanon 2) produces not just a structure of domination but also an unincorporable structural excess, a vital potentiality for resistance that can never be fully controlled.⁴ From this perspective zombiism might even be said to be its *own* cure.

This included exclusion is the true source of the zombie horde's peculiar immortality, which persists even in the degraded form the myth takes in American horror cinema. This is why (as Steve Shaviro notes) in typical zombie films 'the zombies are never defeated' and 'the best that the sympathetic living characters of *Dawn* and *Day* can hope for is the reprieve of a precarious, provisional escape' (90). So long as a system is predicated on domination it cannot help but produce its own opposite in the form of more and more zombies. And in any zombie film the zombies will eventually overrun the human heroes' careful fortifications, killing the bulk of the cast and destroying whatever fragile relations of sociality they have attempted to construct. Our enjoyment of these films derives from being held in suspense of this inevitable climax – which is to say, from our desire to see this ruination happen. But despite this narrative reliance on suspense these stories are never really about the future, about what *might* happen if the zombies rise or if our institutions collapse; they always dramatise instead the self-defeating inadequacy and insufficiency of the present – an observation that will become central the Utopian dimensions of the zombie myth discussed below.

In Shaviro's work these social forces are primarily the pressures of exploitation and consumption that have driven twentieth-century capitalism – but his insightful observation that 'Our society endeavors to transform death into value, but the zombies enact a radical refusal and destruction of value' (84) in fact reflects a brutal history of zombic violence and exploitation that extends much further back into the history of capitalist

modernity than the famous Monroeville Mall in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero US 1978). Modernity began at the moment colonial capitalism first sought to valorise death – and so long before the zombie was a consumer, she was a slave.

I don't care, I'm still free: *Firefly*

We can perhaps best see this postcolonial resonance of the zombie at work when we look for it in a very unexpected place: in far-future space opera. Whedon's short-lived *Firefly* takes place hundreds of years in the future after unspecified ecological disasters⁵ have forced humanity off Earth and into 'The Verse', a new multi-sun solar system with 'dozens of planets and hundreds of moons' that might be terraformed and settled. *Firefly* is centred around a small, Firefly-class transport vessel called *Serenity*, ironically named after the Battle of Serenity Valley, the last major battle in the Unification War that united the entire Verse under a single interplanetary state, the Alliance, dominated by the rich Core Worlds. Power in the new system is distributed according to a spatial logic of periphery and metropole familiar to the postcolonial situation; the Inner Planets (the Core), generally the first to be settled, are more populous, more urban, more technologically advanced and significantly richer, perhaps because of all the aforementioned factors and because their mutual proximity allowed for more and better trading networks. In contrast, the Outer Planets – the Rim – are generally less populated, rural and poorer, with a level of technology (aside from their spaceships) roughly analogous to that of the Western American frontier during its nineteenth-century settlement; once a planet has been terraformed, we are told in the pilot, 'they'll dump settlers on there with nothing but blankets and hatchets and maybe a herd'. The spatialised distribution of money and power suggests itself as a metaphor for the unstable wealth differential between the so-called First World and the Global South in contemporary globalisation: here the haves and the have-nots quite literally inhabit different worlds.

Because *Serenity* operates primarily in the Rim, we spend nearly all of our time on poverty-stricken, backwards worlds – an aesthetic that has contributed to a consensus reading of *Firefly* as a hybridised 'Western in space'. This seems to be Whedon's vision for the series, as a viewing of the stylised, violin-and-guitar credit sequence makes clear; early episodes include not only six-shooters and saloon fights but even such things as a herd of cattle in the ship's storage bay. Indeed, just as the heroes in many Westerns are former Confederate soldiers scarred by what they had experienced during the Civil War, the captain of *Serenity*, Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion), fought as a 'Browncoat'⁶ on the losing side – indeed is one of the few Browncoat survivors of the calamitous Serenity Valley battle – and was deeply embittered by the experience. Perhaps it is no surprise then that *Serenity* now lives largely outside the law, taking on as many illegal and quasi-legal jobs as it does legal ones. In its brief depictions on the show in flashback the Unification War is treated as the American Civil War 'in space', though stripped of any discernable reference to the politics of slavery and abolition (or, indeed, any particular *casus belli* at all).⁷ In *Serenity*, intended to jumpstart the series as a film franchise following its television cancellation, we see a brief scene of pro-Alliance propaganda that explains their perspective on the war, as a teacher (Tamara Taylor) on one of the luscious Core Worlds begins her lesson on this history:

The central planets formed the Alliance. Ruled by an interplanetary parliament, the Alliance was a beacon of civilisation. The savage outer planets were not so enlightened and refused Alliance control.

The war was devastating, but the Alliance's victory over the Independents ensured a safer universe. And now, everyone can enjoy the comfort and enlightenment of *true* civilisation.

The children begin to ask questions – 'Why were the Independents even fighting us?' 'Why wouldn't they look to be more civilised?' 'I hear they're cannibals' – but the teacher continues: 'It's true that there are dangers on the outer planets. So with so many social and medical advancements we can bring to the Independents, why would they fight so hard against us?' A sullen-looking teenage woman in the back of the class, quickly revealed to be a younger version of the show's principal characters, River Tam (normally played by Summer Glau; in this scene played by Hunter Ansley Wryn), answers: 'We meddle. People don't like to be meddled with. We tell them what to do, what to think. Don't run, don't walk. We're in their homes and in their heads and we haven't the right'.

This brief exchange establishes a binary between risk/freedom on one pole and security/control on the other that defines both the war and the series' politics as a whole. Leaving no doubt about where the film's loyalties lie, the entire education tableau dissolves at this moment, revealing itself not as an authentic memory from River's childhood but rather a technological projection being transmitted directly into her brain as part of a torturous conditioning by Alliance military scientists: their efforts to brainwash her into a fiercely loyal supersoldier, ultimately unsuccessful, put a much more sinister gloss on the Alliance's claims to civilised enlightenment.

We should resist, however, reducing the Alliance to a 'totalitarian regime' or even a pure dystopia, as has frequently been the case in treatments ranging from *The Existential Joss Whedon* to Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan's 'The Alliance Isn't Some Evil Empire: Dystopia in Joss Whedon's *Firefly/Serenity*'. If the Alliance is a dystopia, it is the dystopia not of some imaginary possible future but of the here and now; the actions of Alliance have clear parallels in US military and economic hegemony, not only in the Civil War and white-settler-colonialism history it foregrounds but also with respect to such flawed contemporary police actions as (domestically) the welfare state and the war on drugs and (internationally) interventionism and the war on terror. Jeffrey Bussolini's 'A Geopolitical Interpretation of *Serenity*' draws this point out nicely with just a single line of dialogue from the film, 'chickens come home to roost', which Bussolini notes suggests not only Malcolm X's well-known comment about the Kennedy assassination but also Ward Churchill's infamous, controversial statements about 9/11 (149). Mercedes Lackey makes the crucial point that *Firefly*'s world-building is successful precisely because 'the rules by which this dystopia operates are familiar' (63): 'Demonization of the enemy, even the construction of enemies that don't exist, create the fear of nebulous threats and the willingness to sacrifice freedoms for security' (64). Nor is the Alliance solely malignant; it frequently combines genuine humanitarian efforts with gunboat diplomacy and, indeed, poses a threat to our beloved crew in no small part because they are smugglers and thieves.

In this respect *Firefly* should be understood as a deconstruction of the famous Federation of Planets of *Star Trek* (US 1966-1969), a series which was originally pitched to the network as '*Wagon Train to the Stars*'. Where *Star Trek* offers a vision of an Utopian intergalactic United Nations, transmitting American liberal values to the universe one planet at a time, *Firefly* reminds us how dependent those values have been on structural injustices, and how frequently they have been 'exported' not on the basis of their self-evident desirability but at the barrel of a gun. In a deliberate reference to *Star Trek*'s pristine starships – whose original blueprints, famously, forgot to include toilets – Mal visits the restroom in the show's pilot, suggesting *Serenity* as the dirty, dingy answer to the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, and the entire series as a vision of the Federation not from the viewpoint of those who captain its warships but rather 'from below', from the point of view of those who have to live under its rule. Spatial metaphors referencing the disparity of power between periphery and metropole abound in the series, from an exchange early in the original pilot – 'The world never stops turning, Badger'; 'That only matters to the people on the rim' – to a parallel exchange in the first aired episode, 'The Train Job' (September 20, 2002): 'I've given some thought to moving off the edge. Not an ideal location ... maybe get a place in the middle'. But the other side of the dialectic is just as central to the series: the Inner Planets may be richer and more secure, but they also more firmly under Alliance control. Our 'Big Damn Heroes' – as they sometimes call themselves – can operate at all only because they inhabit that marginal space where the Alliance's control is still fragmentary and incomplete. Like Deleuze and Guattari's nomads, the crew of *Serenity* live, work and steal at the limits and interstices of power, at that (post)colonial site where, to recall Ranajit Guha's memorable formulation, dominance is not yet hegemony.

The characters on *Firefly* frequently revel in their distance from civilisation with an eagerness that recalls the famous final lines of *Huckleberry Finn* that defined the ideology of frontier freedom for a century and a half of American literature.⁸ The lyrics from the memorable country-western theme likewise suggest the importance of a frontier myth: 'Take me out to the black / Tell them I ain't comin' back / Burn the land and boil the sea / You can't take the sky from me'.

Freedom (defined here as life outside biopolitical state control) is under constant threat, pushed further and further out towards the periphery – as governmental control over the Inner Planets becomes more and more established. Because *Firefly* simultaneously draws from the generic conventions of futurological sf and nostalgic Western, the abiding mood of the show is consequently one of melancholic anticipation: although the show nominally takes place in the future, where anything is possible, the inevitable defeat of freedom experienced by both the Browncoats and their post-war criminal heirs on *Serenity*, and the ultimate triumph of the Alliance, seems nonetheless assured. The frontier, in a sense, is for us always-already closed; despite the efforts to Captain Reynolds and his crew to slip through the net, authentic freedom is already a ‘lost cause’.

Zombies in space: Reavers

But the standard reading of *Firefly* as a Western in space should not cause us to neglect its frequent borrowing from the horror genre. Central to the series (and especially the film) are characters known as Reavers, who, stepping into the role archetypically played by Native Americans in the historical Western,⁹ periodically raid ships and settlements in the Rim. Few, if indeed any, have encountered Reavers and lived to tell about it. We first hear about Reavers early in the show’s pilot,¹⁰ when we are told that an old associate of the crew was killed when his ‘town got hit by Reavers’. At the very name even the show’s stereotypical tough-guy, Jayne (Adam Baldwin), shudders: ‘I’m not going near Reaver territory’.

The very spatial logic of marginality that empowers Mal and his crew – the frontier, the edge, the black – also creates this deadly menace. Reavers, we are told, are ‘men gone savage on the edge of space’, ‘men too long removed from civilisation’; they exist as the living embodiment of the dark side of a free life outside state governmentality. When Jayne observes in the film that *he’s* been to the edge of space without being driven mad by the darkness,¹¹ another character darkly echoes the lines from theme song that previously suggested deep space as a new site for freedom: ‘I don’t know. It can get awful lonely in the black’. Although Whedon did not commonly use zombies on either of his previous supernatural-themed programs, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (US 1997–2003) and *Angel* (1999–2004),¹² here he introduces a modified form of the zombies as a central part of *Firefly’s* mythology. During one close call with a Reaver vessel, Zoe (Gina Torres) warns another that if the Reavers attack they will ‘rape us to death, eat our flesh and sew our skins into their clothing; and if we’re very very lucky they’ll do it in that order’ (*Serenity* (December 20, 2002)); no wonder the mere threat of a Reaver attack brings widespread panic and even (on the part of one female character) the digging out what appears to be a suicide kit. Transformed into monsters, Reavers are simply outside the family of the human altogether: ‘Reavers ain’t men. Or they forgot how to be. Now they’re just nothing. They got out to the edge of the galaxy, to that place of nothing, and that’s what they became’ (*Bushwhacked* (September 27, 2002)). They are likewise beyond life and death. The crew’s first close-up vision of a Reaver vessel directly suggests this undead status; they immediately know it is a Reaver ship because it is dangerously operating without radioactive core containment.



‘Serenity’, *Firefly*. Twentieth Century Fox

One classic version of the zombie replicates by an infectious bite, and 'Bushwhacked' shows us the Reaver version of this contagious reproduction. The crew runs across a ship that has been hit by Reavers and begins to attempt salvage; in the process they unexpectedly discover a survivor, who is physically unharmed but who appears at first to be violently mad with grief. Soon the truth is made clear: the man has been so traumatised by his experience that he has become a Reaver himself. Mal explains this trauma-based twist on zombie contagion:

They made him watch. He probably tried to turn away – they wouldn't let him. You call him a 'survivor?' He's not. A man comes up against that kind of will, only way to deal with it, I suspect ... is to become it. He's following the only course that's left to him. First he'll try to make himself look like one ... cut on himself, desecrate his own flesh ... then he'll start acting like one.

This is exactly what happens: he tattoos himself, splits his tongue down the middle (giving himself the zombie's inability to speak) and soon after begins to run violently amuck.

At this point in the series neither the audience nor the crew has ever actually *seen* a Reaver. This changes in *Serenity*, which begins when the crew's bank heist is unexpectedly interrupted by a Reaver attack on the planet. The animalistic sound effects that accompany Reavers in the film – as well as the quick-cut images that represent River's psychic flashes of the violence lurking in their minds – have been borrowed directly from zombie cinema, most directly the 'fast' zombies of *28 Days Later* (Boyle UK 2001) and its recent descendents. The Reavers' actions, too, suggest the extent to which they have been modelled on zombies; when they capture a man during the crew's escape, they begin to eat him, and when Mal takes pity on the man and shoots him through the skull, they immediately drop the corpse. River understands why: 'They want us alive when they eat us'. The zombie genre's hoary ethical clichés, too, are in ample evidence: in a scene that might have been borrowed from any classic horror movie, the crew of *Serenity* must contend with a local trying to stow away to safety on their already full hovercar, begging them to 'take me with you'. But the difficult choice has to be made; Mal pushes the man off the car to certain death, prompting the comment that during the Unification War 'we never would have left a man stranded': 'Maybe that's why we lost', Mal replies, with obvious bitterness.

Serenity's early Reaver attack seems to be a gratuitous action sequence in a film that is otherwise about the crew's attempts to evade an uncannily serene Alliance agent known only as The Operative (Chiwetel Ejiofor) dedicated to retrieving the fugitive River. Near the end of the film the importance of the Reavers emerges with newfound clarity; the 'campfire stories' about men driven mad by the blackness of space turn out to be fairy tales, obscuring the more disturbing truth that Reavers are actually the accidental byproduct of deliberate Alliance experiments with behaviour-modifying drugs. We discover that on the Rim planet Miranda – the furthest yet colonised – the Alliance attempted to create a pliable, docile population by mixing pacifying gases in with the usual terraforming equipment. The gasses worked, but too well; they rendered nearly the entire population so passive that they were unable to feed themselves. For a tiny fraction of the population, however, these gases had the opposite effect: they became hyper-aggressive and ultra-violent, which is to say they became the first Reavers, quickly slaughtering both the clandestine government scientists and the rest of Miranda's population and then taking off to attack other planets.

Here we see an implicit critique of the logic of power at work in biopolitical statecraft: the Alliance state quite literally produces the very monsters from which it subsequently derives the authority and justification for its violence. The Operative gives voice to this paradox when he explains – in the aftermath of a massacre of people whose only crime was that they might potentially shelter *Serenity* – the extreme lengths to which his service as an intelligence agent have driven him, up to and including the murder of children in the name of a better, safer world. In this *Serenity* echoes one of the most crucial intellectual contributions of postcolonial studies: its recognition that the brutality of colonial and imperial modernity deforms *the coloniser* as surely as the colonised. In the psychological study of the mental disorders produced under and by colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon attends to the mental health of *both* the parties operating in the colonial relationship.

The case he calls A-4 describes the post-traumatic stress disorder of an otherwise happy European police officer working in Algeria: 'What troubled him was having difficulty sleeping at night because he kept hearing screams' (194). A-5 describes 'a European police inspector [who] tortures his wife and children' (196):

This man knew perfectly well that all his problems stemmed directly from the type of work conducted in the interrogation rooms, though he tried to blame everything on 'the troubles'. As he had no intention of giving up his job as a torturer (this would make no sense since he would then have to resign) he asked me in plain language to help him torture Algerian patriots without having a guilty conscience, without any behavioral problems, and with a total peace of mind. (198-199)

Few have written of colonialism's second, rebounding mode of dehumanisation as eloquently as Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism*:

First we must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and 'interrogated', all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward *savagery*. (35)

In this way biopower itself becomes the primary agent of its own creeping necrosis, corrupting itself and the legitimacy of its own self-asserted mandate for 'life' in the ceaseless consolidation and exercise of its power.

Thus we arrive at the moment Achille Mbembe calls, in 'The Aesthetics of Vulgarity', 'the mutual "zombification" of both the dominant and the apparently dominated' (104); in the structures of domination arising out of the colonial system, both parties are ultimately sapped of their vitality. *Serenity* makes inescapable the perils of 'mutual zombification': in its ongoing efforts to justify its own existence and expansion in the name of 'a better world', the biopolitical Alliance state permanently erodes not only its own legitimacy but its own effectivity. Recalling the efforts of colonial and imperial powers to expand their economic markets over its globe at dire human cost, as well as the word 'blowback' coined by the Central Intelligence Agency to euphemistically denote the inevitable 'unintended consequences' of such efforts, we find here the state first producing monsters and then becoming monstrous in a doomed effort to destroy them – producing still *more* monsters like the Operative and River to aid them in that subsequent effort, of whom it once again loses control. In its pursuit of limitless expansion the Alliance state only reproduces over and over again the site of its own limit.

Becoming Reavers

Early in the film Mal sloughs off any thought that the Alliance might actively be fought or resisted; when the Operative, in their first meeting, taunts that Mal could never defeat the Alliance, Mal's honest, self-interested reply is 'I've got no need to beat you – I just want to go my way'. In this respect, the film *Serenity* is anti-*Star Wars* in much the same way that the series was an anti-*Star Trek*. This point driven home by an early line from the Operative that suggests he knows exactly which genre his story falls into: 'Nothing here is what it seems: he is not the noble hero, the Alliance is not the *Evil Empire*, this is not the Grand Arena'. But uncovering the horrors of Miranda changes the otherwise roguish Mal, reigniting the political investment and revolutionary fervour of his youth, and he commits himself to exposing the Alliance's misdeeds even at the cost of his own life. In a plot that now seems eerily prescient of the recent Wikileaks releases, the film's climax involves the crew's efforts to bring video proof of the Miranda incident to a character they call Mr. Universe (David Krumholtz), who has the capacity to disseminate the information quickly over the Cortex, the Verse's Internet, beyond the Alliance's capacity to censor it.

This plan suggests the new opportunities for resisting power that arise in the digital age. But my interest is less in the plan and its eventual success than in the positionality the crew must adopt to achieve their goals. Over and over again we are shown the power that comes from recognising oneself as already dead – in essence, as already a zombie. This theme begins with the last words the Operative says to Mal before he heads to Miranda: ‘You’re not a Reaver, you’re a human man and you will never understand...’. At this moment Mal cuts off the transmission because he realises exactly what he must do next: become a Reaver. In a reprisal of a ubiquitous scene in zombie cinema in which a live human must attempt to pass for a zombie to escape an otherwise hopeless situation,¹³ Mal orders his crew to retrofit *Serenity* as a Reaver vessel, complete with a leaking containment core and corpses lashed to its exterior. Over the horrified protests of his aghast crew, Mal transforms their ‘home’ into an ‘abomination’ and thus allows them to do the impossible: pass safely through Reaver-controlled space (and, indeed, through what appears to be a major Reaver fleet) to reach Miranda, which he consequently discovers is the Reaver homeworld.



'Serenity', *Firefly*. Twentieth Century Fox

Returning from Miranda, the trick is doubled. Recognising that Mr. Universe’s home is now blockaded by an Alliance fleet, the crew again passes through the Reaver cloud – only this time they use a gun mounted to the hull to aggravate the Reavers and compel them to give chase, thus putting *Serenity* at the head of the only existing power that can confront the Alliance: a Reaver armada. Most of the crew has by now accepted that this is a suicide mission, and that they are already dead. Reaching Mr. Universe’s world, they battle Alliance operatives face-to-face: both Mal and River win their fights only insofar as they are able to access a Reaver state beyond life and death, indeed beyond the human altogether. In accordance with earlier observations about superhuman powers of the resisting *zombi*, the brainwashing that robbed River of her original personality involved not only physical and mental conditioning but also a partial lobotomy that gives her split-second reflexes and reasoning and appears to have rendered her at least partially psychic. Recall that our first view of River in the show’s original pilot was of a frozen corpse that needs to be revived; in another episode, ‘Ariel’ (November 15, 2002), this symbolic death and zombic rebirth is reenacted a second time. Now able to access her supersoldier training in a conscious and controlled manner, in *Serenity* River dies a third time, throwing himself into apparently hopeless hand-to-hand combat with Reavers to save her friends. Her violence is calculated and deliberate, not berserk, and her state of living death controlled and only temporary – but the end of the sequence nevertheless finds her uncannily inhuman, covered in blood, having essentially become a Reaver herself. Meanwhile Mal, in his fistfight with the Operative, endures a targeted ‘touch of death’ (borrowed from kung fu cinema) intended to temporarily paralyse one’s opponent. The Operative takes a moment to gloat: ‘You should know there’s no shame in this. You’ve done remarkable things. But you’re fighting a war you’ve already lost’. The Operative turns his back – and Mal strikes: that particular nerve cluster was removed as a result of a war injury. Already metaphorically dead – his nerve cluster literally so – Mal has just enough of the zombie’s immunity to power’s domination to win his fight.

I recite the climax of *Serenity* at length to show that all of the victorious action is allegorically predicated on the crew's capacity to harness the Reavers' zombie excess in and for themselves. Their initial horror at Reaver 'life' – the assumption of their basic inhumanity, their monstrosity – must fall away if *Serenity's* project of resistance is ever to succeed. Over and over, we find our Big Damn Heroes must transform themselves: they must push their marginality to the limit and become zombies. Or perhaps, better said, that they must realise they have been zombies all along; the sequence of parallel zombie transformations in the ship, River and Mal demonstrates nothing so much as the libidinal pleasure Shaviro argues is at the heart of zombie fiction: 'The hardest thing to acknowledge is that the living dead are not radically Other so much as they serve to awaken a passion for otherness and for vertiginous disidentification that is already latent within our own selves' (99).

Zombis in cyberspace: Dollhouse

Dollhouse literalises cognitive science's frequent metaphorical comparisons of the brain to a computer and imagines a world where this has become literally true: the computational architecture of the brain has been fully mapped, ready to be modified, copied, cloned or wiped clean like any hard drive. In such a world a new type of slavery becomes possible: *Dollhouse* depicts a world in which (mostly female) human bodies might be fully stripped of their autonomy and made zombies – or more specifically *zombies* – and in the process extends the horror of *Serenity's* Miranda experiment by bringing it back to Earth.

Dollhouse centres around a group of characters working in an underground Dollhouse operated by the allusively named Rossum Corporation, after 'Rossum's Universal Robots' in Kapek's *R.U.R.* (the origin of the word 'robot'.) Our characters work in the Los Angeles Dollhouse; there are twenty-two other Dollhouses around the world, including the most-recent in Duabi. The characters break down into two roughly two sorts: untouched, original humans, receiving a regular wage and 'Dolls', cognitively modified humans who have signed away their autonomy for a five years in exchange for a large cash payment at the end of their contractual tenure. The Dolls themselves are nominally volunteers, having signed a contract (if, in some cases, under duress) that often promises that some aspect of their original psychology will be reprogrammed to make them happier people afterwards¹⁴ – but questions linger about the extent to which one can decide to sign away the very power to make decisions. The Dollhouse, the series makes abundantly clear, coercively preys on the disenfranchised and the desperate to acquire its Dolls, literalising Marx's description of a proletariat that has 'nothing to sell but themselves' (873).



'Ghost', *Dollhouse*. Twentieth Century Fox.

When at home at the Dollhouse, the Dolls wander about the spa-like environment in a childlike Doll state with a detached, narcotised bearing reminiscent of the enthralled Haitian *zombi*. (Driving home the metaphorical connection with undeath, the Dolls even sleep in pods that resemble coffins.) But when the Dolls are on a job (euphemistically called an 'engagement') they are imprinted with an appropriate, simulated personality culled

from the millions of MRIs and CAT-scans Rossum has gathered in its business as a major manufacturer of high-tech medical equipment. Under such circumstances they are believed by Rossum to be under such perfect programmatic control that they can be allowed to operate almost completely freely, with a 'handler' waiting nearby only for emergencies.¹⁵

Nearly all of these engagements involve the fulfilment of sexual fantasies of one sort or another; as a business venture the Dollhouse is essentially a secret underground brothel, catering to the (often dangerous or disturbing) peccadilloes of the extremely wealthy and powerful as a means of funding and perfecting their larger research. The show metaphorises the hidden costs of the era of capitalism Kaushik Sunder Rajan has called 'biocapitalism', particularly the profit-oriented exploitation of raw materials, labour, intellectual property, the commons and even the sick themselves that makes biocapital possible. In particular *Dollhouse* literalises Rajan's claim that 'our very ability to comprehend "life" and "economy" ... is shaped by particular epistemologies that are simultaneously enabled by, and enable, particular forms of institutional structures' (17), most directly the multinational corporate form. The dystopic Rossum and its hollow promises of a greater good promoted by the operation of the Dollhouses likewise throws into stark relief the salvational narratives of miraculous scientific advancement that biocapital firms frequently promote.

The fantasy encounters the Dollhouse provides naturally allow it to pull in not only immense capital but also power and influence; aside from its high-profit margin, addictive potential and the opportunity for blackmail, Rossum is eventually shown to have been placing its Dolls in long-term engagements in positions of power, including a young senator whose meteoric career bears eerie parallels to both Barack Obama and George Bush. One of Rossum's executives crows as he announces a new product line ('complete anatomy upgrades', the *permanent* uploading of a consciousness into a Doll body for a lump nine-figure sum): 'This will all be legal within a year. Anyone who matters is already a client, or one of ours' ('Epitaph One' (July 28, 2009)). Befitting the neoliberal organisation of late capitalism, and recalling Mbembe's extension of biopolitics to institutions beyond the nation state, Rossum's immense multinational scale makes it the rival of any government; when we discover in 'Stop-Loss' (December 18, 2009) that Rossum has, as a subsidiary, a Blackwater-esque private security firm working on military applications for the Dollhouse technology, we are more or less completely unsurprised. Of course they do. Over the course of the series characters from the FBI and NSA looking to expose the Dollhouse are shown by turns to be bumbling, corrupt and totally inefficient; the two principal anti-Dollhouse investigators are both co-opted by the end of the series, ultimately working *for* the Dollhouse rather than against it. The state itself now seems somehow superfluous, even moribund; the real power is in entirely private hands.¹⁶

Society of control

In all of this the Dolls of *Dollhouse* tap into an alternative zombie filmic tradition that might have developed had the enthralled slaves of *White Zombie* (Halperin US 1932) become the paradigmatic American zombie rather the ravenous, mindless killers of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. We see hints of what this tradition might have been in Romero's own *Day of the Dead* (US 1985), in which the military experiments on zombies even in the midst of zombie apocalypse, as well as in such films as the parodic *Fido* (Currie Canada 2006), in which the zombie apocalypse has been stopped altogether by electronic collars that make zombies susceptible to simple commands and turn them into servants. The horror of the zombie in most episodes of *Dollhouse* is not her violence but her fundamental passivity – the extent to which she can be entirely controlled and made to work.

Worst of all, the suggestion of the series is that this state of affairs may be in many ways preferable to late-capitalist life outside the Dollhouse – that, indeed, many people would choose it freely, or even that they already have. In the first season's breakthrough episode, 'Man on the Street' (March 20, 2009) – said to be the first in which Fox executives did *not* meddle – the usual multi-camera format is interspersed with material from a diegetic news report on the urban legends about the Dollhouse that circulate throughout Los Angeles. Many of these interviewees express an expected horror at the notion of a company that turns bodies into zombies in comments such as 'It's human trafficking, end of story. It's repulsive'. But as the episode goes on we see 'men

on the street' who seem to be attracted either to the idea of patronising a Dollhouse – an elderly man's comment, 'If they'd have had it in my day I'd have had Betty Grable every night' is only one example of the fantasies the idea suggests in male and female interviewees alike. Two women separately endorse the idea of the Dollhouse, one clearly with a particular (though unstated) fetish in mind and the other romanticising Dollhood as a noble act of loving sacrifice, perhaps akin to organ donation. (It is not entirely clear whether she imagines herself as the Doll, as the client or perhaps as both.) Another man, standing next to his girlfriend, unwittingly reveals his fantasy of using the Dollhouse to 'test out' homosexuality: 'Hey, everybody's got their fantasy, right? Guy wants to know what it's like, you know, to be with another man. Just once, nothing queeny – two guys checking it out and then the other one forgets. That could be sweet for some guys'.

Still another woman, dressed as a Wal-Mart employee, suggests she would be quite happy to work as a Doll. 'So being a Doll, you do whatever, and you don't gotta remember nothing, or study or pay rent, and you just party with rich people all the time. Where's the dotted line?' This woman's eagerness perhaps demonstrates the truth of the interviewee depicted immediately before her, an African-American woman who angrily denounces the very idea that workers in the Dollhouse are 'volunteers': 'There's only one reason why a person would volunteer to be a slave: if they is one already. Volunteers. You must be out of your fucking mind'.

Finally the newscaster interviews a college professor, perhaps a teacher of biology or cognitive science, sitting at his desk before a blackboard with a diagram of the brain and the words 'temporal cortex' written in chalk. The professor takes a decidedly apocalyptic view of the possibility of the Dollhouse:

Forget morality. Imagine it's true. Imagine this technology being used. Now imagine it being used on you. Everything you believe, gone. Everyone you love, strangers. Maybe enemies. Every part of you that makes you more than a walking cluster of neurons dissolved at someone else's whim. If that technology exists, it'll be used. It'll be abused. It'll be global. And we will be over as a species. We will cease to matter. I don't know. Maybe we should.

Consent, in this light, becomes merely a formality; the Dollhouse will get us all in the end. The immediate suggestion of the episode, however, is that this professor is importantly and chillingly wrong: the technology *already exists* in the real world in the form of the narcotising spectacle of the entertainment industry, especially television itself. The next and final interviewee, who appears immediately after a commercial break, drives this point home with a critique of mass culture that might have originated in Adorno or Debord: 'You think it's not happening? You think they're *not* controlling you? Don't worry about it. Just sit back and wait for them to tell you what to buy'.

In fact many features of the show suggest precisely this sort of metafictional interpretation. The stunningly beautiful but emotionally hollow quality of the Dolls, slipping easily between this role and that one, suggests a stereotype of the Hollywood 'pretty face' looking to break into acting. Certain mannerisms and dialogic tics of Topher (Fran Kranz), the computer genius who programs the Dolls, suggest the character as a stand-in for writer/director Whedon himself, who tells the Dolls what to do and say, and who, indeed, constantly compels them to enact *precisely* the sorts of exploitative sexual fantasies the show nominally critiques. In this reading the Rossum Corporation ultimately becomes a stand-in for the multinational Fox Corporation: both Whedon's quiet, allegorical revenge for the cancellation of his beloved *Firefly* and a postmodern self-denunciation of his own participation in the culture industry.

The question becomes, from this perspective, not whether you might somehow be turned into a Doll, unknowingly operating in accordance with the whims of corporate interests that own your labour power and free time; the question is whether it has happened already, without your even noticing. We see in *Dollhouse* an articulation of Gilles Deleuze's 'society of control', which he describes as the essence of biopolitical control under informationalised late capitalism. Through the continued winnowing of statistical data, splicing and dicing the population so finely that 'populations' now once again consist more of less of *individual bodies* whose behaviour can be predicted with near certainty,¹⁷ as well as a deterritorialisation and regularisation of the

technologies of discipline such that they are seen as self-interested and 'free' rational consumer choice, postmodern biopower upgrades its mechanisms of control not by threatening with violence but through efficient management of needs through the marketplace – that is, through mass media and biocapital.

Most important of these technologies of control might be the total triumph of the ideology of the market: 'The family, the school, the army, the factory are no longer the distinct analogical spaces that converge towards an owner – state or private power – but coded figures – deformable and transformable – of a single corporation that now has only stockholders' (Deleuze 6). In all its business ventures, after all, the many-tendrilled Rossum is only giving both employees and clients what they want at a price they are willing to pay. In the postmodern economic milieu of *Dollhouse* volitional economic exchange becomes the ultimate ethical trump card and the sole criterion of value, rendering moot all disputes about the rightness or wrongness of any aspect of the enterprise. (The Dolls, remember, are 'volunteers'.)

The Dollhouse, the ultimate synthesis between biopower and market logic, is thus the culminating moment of neoliberal hegemony Foucault identifies in *The Birth of Biopolitics* when he writes that 'the *natural* mechanisms of the market' now 'constitute a standard of truth which enables us to discern which governmental practices are correct and which are erroneous' (32, emphasis mine). The market, imagined now as an ontology that transcends the human, becomes the final arbiter of all disputes; the market now *speaks*. Foucault captures well this absoluteness attributed to market pronouncements when he notes of the organisation of neoliberal agricultural policy: 'The idea was not, given the state of things, how can we find the economic system that will be able to take account of the basic facts peculiar to European agriculture? It was, given that economic-political regulation can only take place through the market, how can we modify these material, cultural, technical, and legal bases that are given in Europe?' (*Birth* 141) Reminiscent of the Alliance's social engineering experiment on Miranda and the raw programmability of the Dolls, neoliberal governmentality identifies first the necessity of market hegemony and then sets out to produce laws, practices and even citizens to match.

Whenever alternative values outside the commodifying logic of the market emerge in *Dollhouse* – values like friendship, loyalty, justice or charity – it is only in the form of twisted funhouse parody, as when a billionaire software developer hires a Doll to impersonate his dead wife one day out of the year; or when another hires a Doll to provide his infant son with the parental affection he will not; or when the deranged traitor working in the Dolls' midst reveals himself and provides the reason why he intends to protect them (as part of a select elite) during the global apocalypse he plans set in motion: 'You're here because you're my family. I love you guys' ('The Hollow Men' (January 15, 2010)).

Losing control

The Dolls appear to be perfect corporate slaves, programmed to always 'be their best'¹⁸ and sapped even of the very *notion* of resistance. It is only the audience – capable of seeing what Rossum's employees cannot – that realises the characters are in fact retaining their memories despite the technology's promises and, indeed, are exerting quiet forms of resistance at the margins even as the series begins. The imprinting technology turns out to be fundamentally and fatally flawed; in its efforts to produce perfect slaves, the Dollhouse technology produces instead a structural excess in its zombie Dolls in the form of a new type of consciousness, one that is capable of resisting and subverting the imprinting technology and repurposing it towards their own ends. The amnesiac Dolls begin to *remember*. And through this power of memory, Dolls become progressively less braindead zombies and more rebelling *zombis*; slowly gaining control over their unique situation, the characters played by the show's regular cast become increasingly autonomous actors, ultimately becoming protectors of each other and the society of large. Their hybrid status – no longer their original unitary selves, but each one containing a new multiplicity – gives them purchase on a new sort of human potentiality. This is especially true in the case of Eliza Dushku's Echo and Alan Tudyk's Alpha,¹⁹ both of whom slowly patch together new composite personalities that are the sum of all the imprints who have been uploaded into their minds. Alpha, whose original personality already contained strongly violent tendencies, is driven mad with multiple personality

disorder, becoming a brilliant but murderous sociopath in his quest for revenge against the Dollhouse.²⁰ But Echo is able to organise all her Dolls under a new, multitudinous personality and, driven by an urgent empathy, seeks to awaken and liberate the other Dolls. The very formlessness of the Doll state becomes her greatest strength; the living death of the *zombi*, in essence, gives her a plastic superpower with roots in postcolonial hybridity, queer subjectivity and DuBois's double consciousness: the ability to choose between multiple selves at will, to construct herself however she likes.

But *Dollhouse's* exploration of the *zombi* myth ultimately brings in the mindless, murderous Romero-style zombie archetype as well, beginning with the series-transforming episode 'Epitaph One' which closed the first season but never aired. 'Epitaph One', centred on an entirely new cast of characters, skips the story ahead ten years to a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles. The ruined city is in flames. What precisely has happened is never made clear, but Los Angeles is now divided between 'Actuals' (unmodified humans), 'dumbshows' (pacified wanderers in the base Doll state) and 'butchers' (berserk killers suggestive of nothing so much as *Firefly's* Reavers). Finally, our two species of zombies get to meet – and the result is the end of the world.

A small group of Actuals trying to escape the city argue about where to go in terms that suggest nuclear apocalypse; some suggest heading into the desert, where there is no 'tech', while others suggest they should head underground. As their conversation continues it becomes clear that broadcast technology itself has run amuck, transmitting 'signals' that transform Actuals into either dumbshows or butchers – the broadcast band replacing nuclear fallout as an invisible, radioactive killer. Finally they do decide to head underground, where they discover the long-abandoned Dollhouse. Using the now primitive imprinting technology on a dumbshow they have reluctantly brought with them they piece together the history of the apocalypse at the site of its origin, in pursuit of either a cure or a rumored Safe Haven: 'a place where you can't be changed: you die as you were born; heart in concert with the mind'. They discover, too, the probable origins of the butchers: Topher seems to have devised a means by which imprinting might be done virally, over the telephone. In a flashback, Topher (seemingly driven mad by his culpability) recounts the disaster:

An entire army, in a single instant, in the hands of any government, and boom! We went boom! Millions programmed to kill anyone who's not programmed to kill. And then the war has two sides, those who answered the phone, and those who didn't. You know what? Don't answer the phone! Promise me you won't answer the phone!

Here the inclusive/exclusive logic of biopower reaches an absurd, hyperbolic climax in literal 'viral advertising'; the foundation of the ultimate race war is an utterly arbitrary division, a quirk of pure chance.

In season two's series-concluding follow-up, 'Epitaph Two' (January 29, 2010) – continuing the plot thread begun in 'Epitaph One' after a season spent manoeuvring the series towards the 2019 disaster – we discover the series' regular cast are still alive in this future, hidden in an agricultural enclave in the deserts of Arizona. In a sense they are partially responsible for what has happened to the world; not only did Topher and Adelle (Olivia Williams) selfishly abet the Rossum Corporation's drive for better technologies of control, but the rebelling Dolls' original victories over Rossum ironically introduced the power vacuum that made the global catastrophe possible in the first place.

They are still fighting the remnants of Rossum, as well as periodic hordes of butchers, but this is not a war that can be won. Topher announces that he has come up with a plan to 'bring back the world'; bouncing blanket signals off the atmosphere, he believes he can simultaneously return *every* imprinted person to their original, state: nothing less than a high-tech version of Depestre's miraculous 'revitalising salt', to be administered not selectively, or in deference to economic status, or with regard to medicinal biopolitical reason, but indiscriminately, at once, over the entire globe. After a dangerous return to the Dollhouse to recover necessary technology, the device is built, the world is 'saved' – and history, in effect, rebooted. Outside the Dollhouse, confused dumbshows and former butchers begin to wake up out of a fog into a completely transformed world. We see nothing of what they think or of the world they might construct from the ruins of ours. All we know is

that they now have the opportunity. The camera's focus is instead on our zombie-cum-*zombi* Doll heroes, most of whom have chosen to remain underground for two years until the de-imprinting signal fades and it is safe to reemerge. Completely unexpectedly—and, given that the show began with the Dollhouse as an obvious metaphor for human trafficking and the sex industry, somewhat disturbingly—most decide they do not *want* to be restored to their original selves. They have become something new, something powerful, something posthuman: in becoming Dolls, they have gained more than they have lost.

Zombietopia



Dawn of the Dead. Universal Studios

The power Echo has gained, however, comes at a very high cost: permanent dependence upon the biopolitical structures of domination that have transformed both her and her world. Having begun with a single, clear agenda of bringing down the Dollhouse – both in her original, Actual state as eco-terrorist Caroline Farrell and then again in the earliest incarnations of Echo's nascent composite personality – she ends the series still living inside it, *requiring* the Dollhouse more than ever for her own continued existence. Likewise, the characters of *Firefly* do not bring down the Alliance; they merely embarrass it, perhaps slightly weakening its grip, and carve out just enough space that they can 'keep flying' in its gaps and at its margins. In this respect both programmes seem perfectly to encapsulate the well-known suggestions of Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. (In *Dollhouse* this is quite literally the case; the Rossum megacorporation is still going even after it sets the world ablaze.) Both programs suggest themselves, in this sense, as anti-Utopias: imaginative proofs of the futile impossibility of wide-scale, transformative resistance.

Recalling Jameson's distinction in *Archaeologies of the Future* between *the Utopian programme* (an imagined blueprint for Utopia, always hopelessly compromised and corrupted by its origins in the pre-Utopian mind) and *the Utopian impulse* (the dream of a better world, stripped of any particular content or ideological investment), however, we might nonetheless rehabilitate these apparently anti-Utopian depiction of the post-capitalist world on the level of Utopian form. As Jameson writes:

For it is the very principle of the radical break as such, its possibility, which is reinforced by the Utopian form, which insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary. The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things will be like after the break. (232)

The radical disruption of the grand narratives of history offered by the violence of apocalypse in these zombie narratives directs us precisely to 'think the break itself'. Apocalypse, after all, is the imaginative engine of disruption most readily at hand and, indeed, in our time seems perhaps the only thing that might be strong enough to shake the foundations of capital, the only thing that might somehow create some free space in which another kind of life might be possible.

But the break does not create a Utopia for *us*, but rather for *them*. In both *Firefly* and *Dollhouse* – and, indeed, in most zombie narrative – it is the *zombies*, not the heroes, who actually best exemplify the Utopian break, the zombies that create an alternative organising order for the globe: a zombie nation, territorially overlapping with ours, which has the power to hail us as subjects and which also has power over life and death. But where the violence of the state exterminates the zombie, the violence of the zombie's bite (or the Reavers' replication by torture, or the butchers' personality-destroying 'signal') connotes not exclusion but rather *inclusion*. The zombie's 'bite', whose virulence kills you and therefore turns you into a zombie, is precisely what brings you into *their* fold. For zombies, violence is not a *casting out*, but rather a *drawing in*. Where once the state had to produce terrorists, pirates, monsters, 'enemies of all mankind',²¹ to justify its universalising grasp, at the end of this logic zombies return unexpectedly to assert themselves as a competing universal, one which does not rely on the same inclusive/exclusive logic of the state but operates in an entirely new way. Rather than an *anti-state*, zombies allegorise a radically egalitarian *counter-state*, brought about through our total transformation into a new mode of subjectivity.

What we find when we strip the zombie narrative of its horror trappings, then, is a latent Utopian form that allegorises the Utopian break as a rupture not only of society but of the self. In this sense the zombie provides an unexpected vision of what the negation of the biopolitical state might look like; not only do zombies inherit the Earth, they do so precisely insofar as they are able to eliminate the inclusive/exclusive logic of the state altogether. Of the example I have considered, the butchers of *Dollhouse* are the least able to replicate or reproduce themselves, because they are incapable of working the technology on which their reproduction depends. No wonder then that they are the least 'successful' in establishing a new zombie hegemony over the globe. At the other end of the scale we can place the zombies of Romero's zombie films, who do not even need to bite you to turn you; because in a Romero film your posthumous transformation into a zombie is inevitable, regardless of the circumstances of your death, the zombies do not really need to kill you – they just need to wait you out.

From this perspective Romero's ravenous zombies and all its various reincarnations – from *Night of the Living Dead* all the way up to *Firefly*'s Reavers and *Dollhouse*'s butchers – turn out to be something like worthy successors to the rebelling *zombi* after all. These bloodthirsty zombies enact, in fantastically excessive form, that mode of violence Benjamin once called 'divine': that violence which does not make law or preserve it, but suspends it altogether to usher in a new era.²² The deepest pleasure of the zombie story lies always in its depiction of the break, that exhilarating moment of long-hoped-for upheaval: the fulfilment of a sometimes avowed, sometimes disavowed desire to see power at last unmade, laid finally to waste and torn limb from bloody limb – and our structures of dominion and domination replaced finally and forever with Utopia, if only for the already dead.

Endnotes

1. See "'We Are the Walking Dead': Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative' in *Extrapolation* 51.3 (2010): 431-453.
2. Marina Warner identifies one underappreciated thematic commonality linking the original colonial myth to Romero's adaptation of it: both figure resistance to power, and are stories of 'soul-theft' (357), whether to the whims of the enslaving zombie master or to the mindless herd instinct of a body without mind. Laurent Dubois also notes historical accounts of blood ritual in Haiti that blur the line between the two archetypes (100-101).
3. This material is included not to endorse Wade Davis's conclusions, some of which have been very strongly challenged for quite some time. See, for instance, Booth. My purpose is simply to highlight the paradoxical function the *zombi*/Bizango narrative plays in Haitian colonial and postcolonial ideology.

4. Reading an earlier draft of this essay Donald E. Pease suggested to me, in a play on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's well-known essay, that the zombie may well be better thought of not as a figure for colonialism's Other but as the way the subaltern speaks.
5. According to the brief plot summary that preceded several early episodes, the 'Earth-that-was' was 'all used up'. At the start of *Serenity*, a character explains that 'Earth-that-was could no longer sustain our numbers, we were so many. We found a new Solar system, dozens of planets and hundreds of moons'.
6. Fans of the show, following its cancellation, have taken on the term 'Browncoat' to refer to themselves and their own doomed pursuit of a 'lost cause': the series itself.
7. Slavery is, in fact, still a part of life in the Outer Rim, with the behavior of slavers an occasional reference. Presumably this behavior is illegal, but enforcement difficult.
8. 'But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before' (307).
9. In 'Reavers and Redskins: Creating the Frontier Savage', J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson draw out this connection to Western's Native American 'savages' at length.
10. Due to executive meddling at Fox, this was actually the last of the episodes of *Firefly* to be aired.
11. As discussed below, the usually incorrect Jayne is more right about this than anyone recognises at the time.
12. Whedon admits great admiration for the film work of George Romero but seems quite unhappy with what he's done to the zombie and uninterested in working within those terms. His characters on *Buffy* and *Angel* frequently correct anyone who suggests that a zombie might be a mindless consumer of flesh or brains, and instead insist (in accordance with the original Haitian zombi myth) that they would only ever do such a thing if ordered to by their zombi master (see Canavan 'Zombies, Reavers, Butchers, and Actuals in Joss Whedon's Work').
13. The zombie impersonation scene is so ubiquitous that it even appears in parody form in *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright UK 2004), as well as with astounding gore in AMC's *The Walking Dead* (US 2010–).
14. One Doll, for instance, has asked to have her grief following the death of her young daughter removed; another, a veteran of the Iraq War, will have his post-traumatic stress disorder removed. It is frequently suggested that these quasi-medicinal psychological alternations may be more valuable to the characters than the money.
15. True to the conventions of the genre, most episodes of the first season depict the flawless Dollhouse technology breaking down in some way or another, at which time some Rossum employee—having apparently forgotten entirely the events of the previous week's episode—declares any such failure completely inconceivable.
16. This was also, intriguingly, the direction *Firefly* would likely have taken had it not been canceled; the frequent visual references to a 'Blue Sun Corporation' would likely have culminated in a similar plotline. In the DVD commentary, Whedon suggests that Blue Sun was originally intended as a powerful corporate conglomerate that more or less completely controlled the notional government of the Alliance. However, in the franchise in its finished form the governmental structure of the Alliance remains apparently independent of corporate capture and little narrative attention is directed at the Blue Sun logo that appears on clothing and props.
17. I hope to evoke, among other things, Hannah Arendt's anxieties over the science of behaviorism in *The Human Condition*.
18. This is one of the call-and-response mantras the Dolls have been programmed to repeat on command while in their Doll state.
19. All of the Dolls have been renamed in accordance with the NATO phonetic alphabet, suggesting their basic exchangeability.
20. In the flashforward episodes discussed below, Alpha is revealed to have gained control over his imprints at some point after the end of season one. In 'Epitaph Two', set in 2020, we find he has achieved a kind of Zen calm and is now an ally.
21. Thank you to Sonja Schillings for bringing the history of this terminology in international law to my attention in her excellent seminar paper 'Enemies of all Humankind: A Cultural-Legal Nexus'.

22. 'If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the later is lethal without spilling blood. ... Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living' ('Critique of Violence' 297).

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