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ADORNO, ŽIŽEK AND THE ZOMBIE: REPRESENTING MORTALITY IN AN
AGE OF MASS KILLING

Introduction

The opening scene of the *Walking Dead* presents us with a graveyard of icons. The police cruiser of protagonist, Deputy Rick Grimes, comes to a halt at an intersection strewn with overturned and scorched vehicles. He continues on foot, empty gas can in hand, toward a service station packed with abandoned cars and tents. As he surveys the debris of the desolate camp, children's toys (stuffed animals and a scooter) stand out, along with the decaying corpses of drivers still frozen behind the wheel. Rick is stirred by the sound of shuffling feet. He drops to looking underneath one of the cars to see two little bunny-slipper clad feet stepping slowly and a small hand reaching down to pick up a tattered teddy-bear. Rick rounds the car to address the little girl as she shuffles listlessly away from him. "Little girl, it's OK. I'm a police officer. Little girl, don't be afraid." She turns to face him, and we see her lacerated, mangled face and opaque, undead eyes as she lets out a moan as she shuffles rapidly toward Rick. We see the anguish in Rick's face as he looks down the barrel of his gun toward the girl and pulls the trigger.

This opening introduces a constellation of images and themes repeated throughout the *Walking Dead* series, almost ad nauseam. Figures of desiccated authority (police officers in a world without rule of law, patriarchs without families, families without homes) and moribund social spaces (evacuated and corpse strewn highways, city streets, convenience stores) provide the narrative backdrop. The glaring conflict between the norms of authority, of childhood, of everyday life and the events in this scene is driven home without much variation in every episode of the three seasons of *The Walking Dead*. But we might imagine other narrative devices for telling the story of decaying social norms. Why the zombie? Why is this narrative device so alluring and so pervasive in popular culture? Why are we so riveted by the image of the human body that lives on past the death of the personality that once inhabited it? What exactly are we working through in this fantasy of the zombie apocalypse? And what does it tell us about our cultural condition?

I would like to explore two interpretations of what is at work in the zombie fantasy, one from the work of Slavoj Žižek and the other from Theodor W. Adorno. On Žižek's view, our stories about the undead are representative of the space between symbolic death (the decay of meaning in one's life) and physical death. The zombie is a representation of the symbolic order that endures the physical death of the individuals who participate in it. In this way, the zombie

represents the no man's land between the social, symbolic, meaningful life and bare, biological existence. It is the space of the "neighbor with whom no empathic relationship is possible." I trace Žižek's interpretation through a key episode of the popular AMC series, *The Walking Dead*, in which the characters struggle, however briefly, with the humanity of the undead and the question of their moral responsibility toward them. For Žižek and the protagonists in the *Walking Dead*, the issue of the fundamental inhumanity of the zombie is settled; the only responsibility remaining is that of efficient killing. This interpretation, and narrative, becomes chilling when we consider the "real world" implications of Žižek's open defense of political violence against the moribund institutions of capitalist society. To summarize Žižek's view, inhumanity is constitutive of humanity, it is part of what we are, and so we should feel no compunction in using violence without remorse in the fight against social conditions that reduce us to inhuman "zombies."

From Adorno's perspective, the relevance of the undead image is located not only in popular fiction but in the inhumanity that created the *Muselmanner* of the concentration camps. In the camps, the horrific fantasy of the body that lives on after the death of the individual became a reality. The inhumanity of the camps is something we can represent only obliquely, through fiction. On Adorno's view, through our representation of the undead, the zombie fantasy, we fashion an externalization of the lifeless functions and social roles that render each individual life an expendable, replaceable specimen. The fantasy is a representation of what modern institutions and practices have done to humanity. In this way, Adorno does not locate the inhumanity or anonymity of society at an anthropological level as Žižek does. On Adorno's view, then, the undead image must be seen as an outward projection of our own vulnerability in the face of modern post-industrial society and not (contra Žižek) as a dramatic rehearsal for a collective act of revolutionary violence against some evil outside of us that we can kill with a shot to the head.

Žižek on the Undead

On Žižek's view, the zombie, or the undead, is a fantasy revelatory of the tensions within the subject in its relation to the symbolic network of reference and meaning in which it finds itself, and out of which it derives its sense of identity and purpose. The subject cannot be inferred merely from its biological or neurological dimensions. Subjectivity is constituted symbolically, through culturally specific roles, metaphors and narratives. There is a difference, on Žižek's view of the subject, between the subject as participant in the symbolic network and as mere physical, biological life. What happens when we can no longer recognize ourselves within, or be recognized by, the symbolic network of our society. Is it possible for us to become bodies without subjectivity -- mere life without a language in which this life can be understood or communicated? How might such a possibility give rise to a fantasy about the undead? Here we will have to hold on tight and follow Žižek through a reversal of our accustomed philosophical assumptions about good and evil and the relationship between civilization and barbarity. Žižek follows a cue from G.K. Chesterton's insight that the allure of detective novels is "based on the fact that morality is the most dark

and daring of conspiracies” and that “civilization itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions.”¹ The transgressions of burglars, footpads and murderers are the transgressions of conservatives compared with the daring conspiracy of civilization itself that imposes the standard and forms the background condition for the possibility of their petty transgressions appearing as transgressions at all. On this point, Žižek writes: “when we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the normal non-violent situation is – and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as violent.”² The symbolic network, bearing all the hallmarks of civilization: “language, the medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition involves”, Žižek avers, “unconditional violence.”³ The idealized social roles and meanings out of which the social world is woven “push our desire beyond proper limits ... elevating it into an absolute striving that cannot ever be satisfied ... an ethereal, undead object.”⁴ The Western canon of moral philosophy has gotten it all wrong by linking immortality to the good and mortality to evil:

“what makes us good is the awareness of immortality (of God, of our soul, of the sublime ethical striving), while the root of evil is the resignation to our mortality (we shall all die, so it doesn’t really matter, just grab what you can, indulge your darkest whims). What, however, if one turns this commonplace round and wages the hypothesis that the primordial immortality is that of evil: evil is something which threatens to return forever, a spectral dimension which magically survives its physical annihilation and continues to haunt us.”⁵

We are all the more haunted by the social world when its norms have lost their vitality, and participation in them becomes anonymous and alienating. This, according to Žižek, is the condition in which we find ourselves in late capitalist society. As the title of one of his recent books proclaims, we are “living in the end times” in the twilight of a decaying symbolic order in which we no longer find a vital sense of agency and purpose. We are becoming “desubjectified,” reduced to mere life. The fantasy of the zombie apocalypse is a vessel for our rage against being reduced to one more shambling, anonymous member of the formless mass. There is ambivalence at the heart of the zombie fantasy between our righteous rage against a moribund and alienating social world and the desperate attempt to preserve the threatened stereotypes. Perhaps what is most horrifyingly evil in the *Walking Dead* is not the zombies at all, but the tenacious and grotesquely violent assertion of the threatened stereotypes of patriarchal authority, masculinity, and family. How can we avoid getting caught in this loop of acting out our frustration with the desiccated meanings and stereotypes by violently and frantically reasserting them?

The zombie is not only a subjective fantasy that reveals tensions within a

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York, NY: Picador, 2008), 64.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 65.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 66.

symbolic system. There are entire populations that are bereft of meaningful life, bereft of their humanity by oppression. But how can these desubjectivized humans, reduced to bare life, find a language in which their experience can be understood? Where is there room for the empathic relationship with the dehumanized, desubjectivized other? How can their stories, their narratives be told? And how might those narratives pose a challenge to the deadening symbolic order and perhaps begin to generate a new one?

Many scenes in the *Walking Dead*, begin to broach this question. Is there a consciousness that can be recovered from the desubjectivized zombie? I focus here on the episode 7 of Season 2 (*Pretty Much Dead Already*), one of several episodes during which Deputy Rick Grimes and his nomadic company of survivors are given temporary refuge on a farm owned by Herschel, an elderly physician, pastor and patriarch. Rick discovers that Herschel has been keeping “infected” family members in his barn, and insists that the undead family members be destroyed. Herschel refuses, “they’re just ill, they’re sick. You don’t kill sick people!” Rick acquiesces reluctantly to Herschel’s plea, and begins to assist Herschel in gathering his undead neighbors into the barn. The episode concludes with a dramatic scene in which Rick’s company rebels, egged on by Shane (the embodiment of exaggerated virility who competes for Rick’s alpha male status and for the affections of Rick’s wife, Lori). The mutinous group forms a firing line, opens the doors of the barn and proceeds remorselessly to gun down Herschel’s undead family members and neighbors as they emerge. Rick and his company are shocked as they see the last zombie emerge from the barn; it is the undead body of Sophia, the lost daughter of one of the women in Rick’s company, for whom they have been searching throughout the Season 2. The group stands dumbstruck, unable to muster the will to execute Sophia’s undead body. Rick’s fellows now stand grief stricken as Sophia moves toward them as Rick raises his gun and shoots her. The party’s hesitation offers us a fleeting moment of humanity, of a bodily and visceral empathy for the desubjectivized other. This is one of several moments in the *Walking Dead* series when we find futile, abortive and sometimes ghoulish attempts to see the humanity beneath the dehumanized other. And these moments are only brief reprieves in an otherwise endless spree of remorseless zombie hacking.

In *Less than Nothing*, Žižek addresses the difficulty in any attempt to represent or tell the story of dehumanizing trauma. His account of why this is impossible offers us a glimpse of the thin morally redemptive moments in the *Walking Dead*. According to Žižek, the magnitude of the trauma experienced in the Shoah defies our ability to tell a story at all; it is a story whose audience does not yet exist, an event that shatters the conditions of narrative and challenges the basic coordinates of reality -- of what is possible, and of what it is possible to speak about and to understand. The broad cultural sense of audience (or, in Žižek’s terminology, the “big Other”) is missing: “there is no proper public, no listener adequate to receive the witnessing.”⁶ The absence of an audience, of anyone capable of listening, haunted Primo Levi more than the thought of his own death at
Auschwitz:

⁶ Ibid., 29.

The most traumatic dream Primo Levi had in Auschwitz was about his survival: the war is over, he is reunited with his family, telling them about his life in the camp, but they gradually become bored, start to yawn and, one after another, leave the table, so that finally Levi is left alone.

Levi's nightmare is echoed by the women who survived the rape camps of the Bosnian war who find themselves in a world that cannot comprehend their suffering or provide a language in which their story can be told: "many of the girls who survived brutal rapes later killed themselves, having rejoined their community only to find that no one was really ready to listen to them, or to accept their testimony."⁷ The missing dimension here is not simply the absence of a caring, compassionate listener, but "the space of the symbolic inscription or registration of my words."⁸

But Žižek doesn't think this traumatic loss of a world leaves us at a dead end, "irrevocably trapped in the misery of our finitude, deprived of any redemptive moments".⁹ Even in the midst of the darkest moment in Jorge Semprún's novel, *The Long Voyage* – a scene in which two small children emerge as the only survivors in a freight car that has arrived at Auschwitz in the middle of winter – there is a moment that pierces through and gestures beyond the fractured narrative. As the guards set their dogs loose on the fleeing children, the following scene unfolds:

The little one began to fall behind, the SS were howling behind them and then the dogs began to howl too, the smell of blood was driving them mad, and then the bigger of the two children slowed his pace to take the hand of the smaller ... together they covered a few more yards ... till the blows of the clubs felled them and, together they dropped, their faces to the ground, their hands clasped for all eternity.¹⁰

This moment breaks through the otherwise irremediably bleak and fragmented narrative of Semprún's novel. But it does not gesture toward a beyond, to a world of humanity beyond the hell created by the Nazis: "It is the pure surface of such fixed images of eternity, not any deeper Meaning, which allows for redemptive moments in the bleak story of the Shoah."¹¹ The pure surface, the appearance of this act of solidarity in all its fragility and finality is the redemptive moment, the moment of resistance within the fragmentary narrative that shows the impotence of the "big Other" is an accusation cast at the "big Other," like Antigone's resistance to Creon's orders not to bury her dead brother. It is an image of the ethical act that rejects the reigning order of reference, meaning and value. This appearance of something that resists the world around

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ Jorge Semprún, *The Long Voyage* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 172, quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing* (London: Verso, 2012), 30.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 30.

it without reference to some invulnerable beyond and with the fullest embrace of its own contingency and truth, is the “pure surface” which is “eternal” only in the specific sense that it resists wholly and completely the dominant current of the time (or historical horizon) in which it finds itself. If we place this lens before Žižek’s interpretation of Semprún’s “hands clasped in eternity” what appears is not merely the frail hands of the children but a vision of the monstrous faces of their killers. The “eternity” that thus appears carries with it a judgment upon the killers and a justification to unleash on them all of the inhumanity that they have perpetrated on the world. The irruption of this total judgment upon the symbolic order (“big Other”) -- which Žižek refers to as “Divine Violence” -- is the condition for the genesis of a new symbolic order.

But with this notion of world-shaping Divine Violence, Žižek would fail to see Rick’s moment of resistance to the stereotype, which comes through his visceral revulsion in the face of carrying out his duty. The closest thing we find to an Antigone-like moment in Rick Grimes is precisely his moment of weakness, when he is unable to carry through with the plan he set in motion against Herschel’s objections; when he fails to embody the stereotype of the steel-willed alpha male. When he feels, contrary to his own logic of self-preservation, the moral impossibility of shooting the undead body of Sophia. In that moment, death is not something outside of him that he can kill with a shot to the head. The empathic moment in which he cannot pull the trigger carries the brief promise that he is not “dead inside,” the empty bearer of a dead stereotype.

Žižek and Adorno on the Muselmann

At first blush, Žižek’s Lacanian reading of Hegel seems to intersect with Adorno’s negative dialectics. The dominant course of history, the narrative of progress, cannot provide us with a language in which our suffering can be understood. Understanding the objective, material, embodied dimension of history requires that we attend to what identity thinking (or instrumental reason) has done to the lives and bodies of those whom it deems expendable. In a formulation strikingly similar to that of Žižek, Adorno writes: “No recollection of transcendence is possible anymore, save by way of perdition; eternity appears, not as such, but diffracted through the most perishable.”¹² While they share this basic insight, they diverge dramatically regarding the political implications of this fragile redemptive power. Žižek sees this “appearance of eternity” as both the death knell of the dominant order and as a political call to action, to bring the big Other, along with the institutions, practices and meanings that it undergirds (i.e., capitalism and liberal democracy), crashing down.

In the almost lifeless bodies of those in the camps, Adorno sees the torsion between instrumental reason (identity thinking) and the human vulnerability that identity thinking excludes from its concept of the human. This act of exclusion or failure to integrate our materiality in all of its complexity is at the heart of our uniquely modern forms of barbarity. Žižek acknowledges this in his reading of Adorno, but he seems to miss the ethical implication of Adorno’s

¹² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 306.

position. In *The Parallax View*, he criticizes Adorno along with Levinas for their “failure to include in the scope of ‘human’ ... the inhuman itself, a dimension which eludes the face-to-face relationship between humans.”¹³ What Adorno fails to understand or adequately formulate, according to Žižek, is “the Otherness of a human being reduced to inhumanity, the Otherness exemplified by the terrifying figure of the *Muselmann*, the ‘living dead’ in the concentration camps.”¹⁴ In short, what Adorno and Levinas fail to understand, in Žižek’s view, is the inhuman and monstrous dimension of the face of the Other.

When we are confronted with a *Muselmann*, we precisely cannot discern in his face the trace of the abyss of the Other in his or her vulnerability, addressing us with the infinite call of our responsibility – what we get is a kind of blank wall, a lack of depth. Maybe the *Muselmann* is thus the zero-level neighbor with whom no empathic relationship is possible.¹⁵

If we consider the inhuman dimension of the Other in light of Žižek’s interpretation of Semprún’s “hands clasped in eternity” what appears is not merely the frailty of human life, but a visceral, inhuman rage directed at a world that renders life so expendable.

The irruption of this total judgment upon the “big Other” -- what Žižek, borrowing a phrase from Benjamin, calls “Divine Violence” -- is not simply an act of violence against a few perpetrators, but an act of violence that destroys the basic coordinates of the dominant culture and leaves us without the resources for finding a deeper meaning. The “hands clasped for all eternity” is one figure of divine violence. Like the story of Job, such a figure resists any attempt to find a deeper meaning behind suffering. There is something “obscene” about the attempts of Job’s friends to find some moral or theological judgment, some “reason” behind his suffering, why he was singled out by God. Žižek writes:

This legacy of Job prevents us from taking refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master who knows the meaning of what appears to us as meaningless catastrophe, the God who sees the entire picture in which what we perceive as a stain contributes to global harmony. When confronted with an event like the Holocaust or the death of millions in the Congo over these last years, is it not obscene to claim that these stains have a deeper meaning through which they contribute to the harmony of the whole? Is there a whole which can teleologically justify and thus redeem or sublimate an event such as the Holocaust?¹⁶

This figure of the senseless suffering of innocents is only one figure of divine violence – an intrusion into history of violence without meaning or justification. Another figure emerges when the tables are turned and the victims become the vehicles of a world-cleansing, angelic violence perpetrated against the “big

¹³ Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 111.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Žižek, *Violence*, 180-181.

Other” that has failed to hear the cry of the poor and the oppressed. This figure is invoked in the famous passage from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in which he interprets Klee’s painting, *Angelus Novus* as the “Angel of History” looking back in horror upon the catastrophic injustices piling ever higher. Only through the irruption of the “retaliatory and destructive rage” of the Angel can history be righted and take on a new meaning.

The notion of redemptive, revolutionary violence has been criticized by Peter Sloterdijk for having its roots in the same world-weariness and “resentment” that Nietzsche definitively criticized as the nihilistic core of Judeo-Christian morality.¹⁷ Žižek accuses Sloterdijk of drawing from a superficial reading of the implications of Nietzsche and Freud. What is typically, and superficially, taken from Freudian (or Lacanian) psychoanalysis is that our moral autonomy is only a veneer behind which some base drive (resentment, sadism, etc.) provides the real motive. Žižek insists that something entirely different is taking place through divine violence. In the act of total resistance or rejection directed toward the oppressive “big Other” there is a moment of genuine moral autonomy. This, in Žižek’s view, reverses our usual Freudian suspicion of Kant:

What is truly traumatic for the subject is not the fact that a pure ethical act is (perhaps) impossible, that freedom is (perhaps) an appearance, based on our ignorance of the true motivations of our acts; what is truly traumatic is freedom itself, the fact that freedom IS possible, and we desperately search for some pathological determinations in order to avoid this fact.¹⁸

What Sloterdijk cannot countenance is “the MIRACLE of ethical universality that cannot be reduced to a distorted effect of lower libidinal processes.”¹⁹ This faith in ethical universality, the faith in our capacity to reshape the world as a whole, is not a power that comes from outside of history. In this sense, the use of the term “divine violence” is misleading; the significance of divine violence is the opposite of what the term seems to imply. Divine violence is not the judgment of an omnipotent God upon the injustice of history; instead, “divine violence is a sign of God’s (the big Other’s) own impotence.”²⁰

We should take care to understand the new and alien terrain on which Žižek is placing Kant here. The *faith* in ethical universality cannot mean for Žižek what it meant for Kant, for whom autonomy is grounded in the conformity of our will with the moral law. For Žižek, universality is the gateway for a world-shaping, self-affirming act that can only unfold through the total negation of the world as it is. For Žižek, autonomy is the product of global revolution. Without the insistence on (or faith in) “ethical universality” Žižek reminds us, a revolution “is just a noisy crime that destroys another crime.”²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 194.

¹⁸ Ibid., 196.

¹⁹ Ibid., 194.

²⁰ Ibid., 201.

²¹ Ibid., 203.

But does Žižek's notion of divine violence, and the refurbished Kantian framework he draws from, avoid the trap of adding more noise to the noisy crime of the administered world? Meticulous resistance to the *Sittlichkeit* of the "wrong state of things" is at the heart of Adorno's lectures on moral philosophy. On this distorted terrain, we are, at best, pre-ethical agents acutely aware of the fallibility of our moral position.²² Adorno writes:

We may not know what the absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity – but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed. I would say that the place of moral philosophy today lies more in the concrete denunciation of the inhuman than in vague and abstract attempts to situate man in his existence.

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The concrete denunciation of the inhuman brings us to question the affective element in judgment. The bodily recoil in the face of injury is woven into judgment as a motive and as a lingering uncertainty. In her reading of Adorno, Judith Butler sees this back and forth pull as Adorno's "model of ethical capaciousness, which understands the pull of the claim and resists that pull at the same time, providing a certain ambivalent gesture as the action of ethics itself".²⁴ In the administered world, the responses to injury are readily packaged and presented as fodder for our "resolute" moral stance against an injurious and threatening world. This moral resoluteness keeps the response to injury and suffering entirely within the moral narcissism of the administered world. As Butler puts it, "One seeks to preserve oneself against the injuriousness of the other, but if one were successful at walling oneself off from injury, one would become inhuman."²⁵ With this, Butler illuminates the moral peril of Žižek's version of divine violence, which turns injury into a rage against the world – and heralds not an ethical revolution or transformation, but a more intense, spectacular and "resolute" repetition of the cycles of violence in the administered world.

This brings us back to the *Walking Dead* and its relentless march of dying stereotypes of traditional authority and kinship steeling themselves against a hostile and anonymous world and lashing out against the bodies of the undead other with whom no empathic relation seems possible. Butler's reading of Adorno allows us to see the protagonists of the *Walking Dead* as the mirror image of the dehumanized zombie hordes. The "living death" is a fate we all share. The fantasy of violence against the undead is violence directed at ourselves, at our own vulnerability and the anonymous death that threatens all of us. The zombie genre has long served as a vehicle for the externalization of our cultural anxieties. The proliferation of the zombie theme in popular culture after 9/11 is telling. The fantasy allows us to project our vulnerability and our fear of a

²² Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 104.

²³ Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 175.

²⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 103.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

random and meaningless death outward. Instead of allowing us to integrate our vulnerability into a sense of solidarity with others who suffer the same fate under the administered world, it steels us against this vulnerability through a violent nationalistic chauvinism. The outward projection of vulnerability and its “prepper” mentality should be replaced by the realization that the zombie apocalypse has already occurred; it is woven into our historical horizon and has crystallized in Auschwitz, Srebrenica, Nyarubuye, the killing fields of Cambodia, and in the convulsed bodies on the outskirts of Damascus. It is a historical horizon in which the administration of life has become more important than the lives of those administered. Individual lives are rendered expendable and insignificant in the face of a broad historical narrative that transforms our vulnerability into an evil that we can project outside of ourselves and eliminate once and for all. The zombie fantasy is one of many ways in which this externalization is rehearsed. The study of the genre illuminates the structure of our anxieties and how these anxieties can be mobilized for acts of catastrophic political violence. Breaking this cycle would require the recognition that the object of all this violence is our own mortality, our radical vulnerability – the very things that might bind us together in a more human world.

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