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THE ZOMBIE SUBLIME

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Introduction

Here is a list, very incomplete, of things one should keep in mind when attempting to write seriously about zombies. Zombies do not exist. Zombies are not related to werewolves or vampires.¹ Zombies are not, literally, mindless consumers, enraged proletarians, or stupid Americans—though some were perhaps once these things—and there is little use in casting them, even metaphorically, as *essentially* such, especially when attempting to offer a “theory of zombies.” This is because zombies do not form a natural kind, not even a *fictional* natural kind. Within the genre, zombies vary greatly in behavior, cognitive power, and athletic ability: some shamble, some run at a near Olympic speeds; some are incapable of manipulating even simple objects, others play video games with erstwhile friends; some behave better, at least not worse, than the living, others are nazis; some are created by ill-advised government programs, others by hearing (Canadian) English.²

All of this makes it difficult, and likely a colossal waste of time, to make grand, general pronouncements on the nature of the living dead, the interest they hold for us, or their basic cultural significance, which is just as well, since I do not have a theory of zombies. In fact, my claim will be that zombies can offer a particular kind of philosophical and aesthetic reward precisely when we *do not know* just what they are, what animates them, or what it amounts to when we get to work killing them, self-defense notwithstanding. What I am after here is not a general account of zombieness or the point of the genre (there isn't one). Instead, I want to make available a certain way of taking an interest in the zombie and a range of philosophical and aesthetic possibilities the undead, if you will, embody. As Arnold Isenberg, the great and now dead (dead dead) philosopher of art had it, the job of the critic is not to say “true things” about art so much as to open up novel and, one hopes, valuable ways of experiencing it³, and here I continue in that tradition, though with the method suitably modified for camp and gore.

My claim will be that zombie art—I use “art” loosely, to include everything from a horror flick like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to a novel of high literary aspiration like *Zone One* (2011)—can, in rare but wonderful moments, both raise and turn on its head a traditional way of thinking about what is sometimes called *person skepticism* or, to say the same thing, *skepticism in respect to others* (hence the importance of *not knowing* just what zombies are and just what it means to kill them). And, at times, zombie art does so in a way that is more or less sublime, but sublime in a novel sense, what I will unsurprisingly describe as the *skeptical sublime*. I obviously need to explain

¹ I ignore the fact that the monsters in *I am Legend* (2007) appear to be hybrids of zombies and vampires, in cosmetics if not in nature. Of course the *Underworld* film franchise cross-breeds werewolves and vampires, but that is neither here nor there for an essay on zombies.

² To support some of the more outlandish claims made here, for an example of English as a cause of zombification, see *Pontypool* (2009); for an example of zombies who play video games, see *Shaun of the Dead* (2005); and for an example of zombie nazis, see *Dod sno* (2009).

³ See, for example, Isenberg (1949).

what I mean by “skepticism” and “sublime”, and I promise to bring these ideas down to earth as I proceed. But note, or trust, that skepticism is one of the longest-standing and most vexed issues in western philosophy, and the sublime in modern aesthetics. I hope the reader will see why one might be interested in uniting them, and that it is a way of paying a compliment to the genre to argue that the zombie can bring them together in a powerful and unique way.

Doubts That Will Not Die

Let me explain, generically and painlessly, what I have in mind when I speak of skepticism as a kind of stance one can take (or suffer) in respect to the world, and what it means to assume this stance towards persons. Part of what I ultimately wish to claim is that, contrary to a common interpretation, zombies represent not the return of ancient and repressed energies but are in fact quite modern creatures, in the sense that without a certain inheritance of modern skepticism about persons, we will be hard-pressed to explain at least one crucial respect in which zombies can provoke our interest, and provoke it in a way in which mere ghosts, ghouls, and graveyard fiends cannot.

So what is skepticism? The term has such a wide range of uses in academics and intellectual life more generally that one must not expect anything resembling a tidy and uncontentious definition to be possible. That said, most who have thought seriously about western philosophy’s skeptical heritage will agree on a few basic points. The first is that skepticism has nothing to do with those forms of hip cynicism and cool contrainianism that pervade our cafes and classrooms and with which skepticism is often confounded.⁴ As a philosophical position, skepticism is best seen as designating not quite a belief or a conviction, for example the belief that the powers-that-be are liars, that established bodies of knowledge are fraudulent, or that no one but me really gets it. These are, after all, claims to know something, namely that something is false, or very likely so. And this is altogether too much knowledge for the skeptic, who knows neither whether something is true *nor* false, and whose doubt is more methodic, consuming and intelligent than that of the naysayer or crank. Skepticism, as either a philosophical position or a pathology, shakes our confidence so thoroughly that conviction itself is rendered impossible and the very grounds for belief vanish, except, of course, the belief or conviction that knowledge is impossible, perhaps the one truth to which the skeptic can claim cognitive access (though consistent skeptics will wish to doubt this, too). This is why the motto of the great Prythonian skeptics of antiquity, our skeptical primogenitors, was the blanket exhortation “withhold assent!”⁵ And as we move to the modern tradition of thought about, if not always endorsement of, skepticism—names that will appear on most *au courant* lists are René Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques

⁴ My own sense of what skepticism is and its importance to both art and culture is clearly, and heavily, influenced by the work of Stanley Cavell, though Emmanuel Levinas should be mentioned here, too. For primary texts, see Cavell (1979) and (1988), and, especially, the essays on Shakespeare collected in Cavell (1987). For an excellent survey of Cavell’s thought, see Hammer (2002). Also worth reading are Sheih (2009) and Putnam (2006). For relevant works of Levinas, see Levinas (1988) and (2003), and see Morgan (2007) for an interpretation of Levinas’ thought to which I am indebted.

⁵ For studies of the roots of ancient skepticism, see Annas and Barnes (1985) and Thorsrud (2009). For an excellent study of the ancient skeptic tradition that links it to modern philosophers, in particular Nietzsche, see Berry (2011). For clear and, usually, accessible general discussions of skepticism (and kindred topics, such as truth and knowledge), see Koethe (2005), Blackburn (2005), Landesman (2002), and, especially, Stroud (1984).

Derrida, and Stanley Cavell, though this ignores a great many—we find the picture of doubt and its apparent inescapability treated not as a curiosity from the history of ideas but a problem that rears its ancient head with virtually every step we seem to take forward in philosophy.

Put as baldly as possible, one can minimally characterize skepticism as a condition of mind in which it comes to appear reasonable to think that the world might be radically otherwise than we think it is, *at least as far as we can know* (hence the skepticism). To borrow a term from Theodor W. Adorno, it is a sense of inescapable “nonidentity” between how we perceive, speak, and think about the world and the way the world *actually* is, say a sense that everything we rely upon when we attempt to understand the world might be spectacularly ill-suited for the task at hand.⁶ Now many philosophers think skepticism, even so conceived, is at some level is a good thing, a stance that is essential for a healthy, honest mind⁷—the Greek skeptics surely did, as do many of the trends in theory and philosophy that have been in vogue since postmodernism stepped on the scene. And note that if skepticism strikes you as a little silly, you would probably find much more ridiculous a person who suffered his convictions so thoroughly that he could not even acknowledge the possibility that the world might be any other way than he believes it to be. At some level, intellectual honesty seems to call on us to take this possibility seriously, though it also easy to make a rather big deal of it.

The point I wish to make about skepticism—and here I stop speaking in a general tongue and begin to say things that are philosophically contentious—is that skepticism, and the kind of generalized doubt that issues from it, is not interesting if taken as marking the mere idea that the world might be otherwise than we think it is. For it to have teeth, it must *result* in a way of interacting with the world. It is a mistake to think of doubt as a cold, staid cognitive state. It may at times be that. But at other times it behaves in a way that makes it appear remarkably similar to a passion. And doubt, like passion, can be a good thing, since to have none of it is to make one appear equal parts naive and machine-like. But doubt also has a terrifying capacity to become unhinged, even to destroy its object, just as anger, envy, and, at times, even love, do. And if this seems unlikely when talking about skeptical doubt in general philosophical terms, it will not once we move to a particular inflection of skepticism, *person* skepticism, in which the skeptical doubt can damage, literally and often horribly, our connection to that those features of the external world that matter most to us. At any rate, if skepticism as a general epistemological posture strikes us as reasonable, even a little sexy, skepticism *in respect to others* is another beast altogether. Let me explain.

Strictly speaking, skepticism in respect to persons is possible whenever one finds a reason to doubt that a particular human body houses a genuine *human being*, in the full moral and cultural sense of the term. This is a kind of skepticism that was likely made possible as soon as the Greeks started calling other people barbarians or, for that matter, heroes (barbarians are in part animals in human clothing, heroes gods; for an example of each, consider Euripides’ treatment of Medea). But the particular notion of person skepticism I am after requires a distinctly (early) modern invention, a new picture of the self as the locus of personhood and as distinct from, as Galen Strawson puts it, the “living, embodied, publicly observable whole human being.”⁸ It is the picture of a person we begin to

⁶ Though Adorno himself was no skeptic. For a discussion of this in light of Adorno’s concept of “nonidentity” (*das Nichtidentisch*), see O’Connor, 2013, 60-64.

⁷ I thank Ed Commentale for getting me to clarify this point.

⁸ Strawson, 2009, 21.

see clearly in the work of Descartes, whose famous “cogito ergo sum” reduces the person to a *self* and the *self* to a mental entity that resides deep in our “psychological”—once upon a time we would have said “spiritual”—interior.⁹ Here’s the skeptical rub. In our interaction with others we only have access to their outward shell, *to bodies*, and thus we at best have only indirect evidence that there is actually a human self loitering behind the eyes and hiding behind the heart. So when we ask, as we at times do, whether a certain colleague or relative is a monster or a person, we can never peek inside and settle the question decisively.¹⁰ Needless to say, this picture of selves, of personhood, as a matter of what goes on in the inside of the human, makes possible an especially pernicious kind of skeptical doubt, one brought to view nicely when Descartes himself looked out his window and asked, perhaps seriously, whether all those people on the street below might just be automata.¹¹ Descartes was just having some skeptical fun when he asked this, but the very fact that the question is intelligible reveals something frightening, namely, that we implicitly possess the power to see others without thereby seeing other humans. *This* is what is made imaginable, and it offers doubt a clear invitation to go off the leash.

Borrowing from Stanley Cavell, I’ll introduce the idea of *skeptical anxiety* and I will take it to designate the kind of skeptical experience we have in respect to others when doubt registers as a kind of *worry*, a sense of puzzlement about the status of another that threatens to change, usually for the worse, how we receive that person and the kinds of claim (ethical, political, etc.) they can make on us. Think of it as the kind of worry that risks unburdening us of the sense that a genuine community is possible with another, that the other is *really one of us*. To be sure, there are times when we feel pleased, in a self-righteous kind of way, to experience this skeptical anxiety, such as when one finds oneself in line at the DMV or in a shopping mall thronged with enthusiastic shoppers. It can flatter us to feel human unlike (and above) those around us, a phenomenon Friedrich Nietzsche called the “pathos of distance.”¹² But to give ourselves to this pathos is also to open the doors to all manner of moral and political nastiness. Indeed, a skeptical anxiety of this sort can be seen at some level as underwriting a good amount of modern evil, particularly of the sort that was brought to us by the makers of the modern slave trade, the holocaust, and other examples of the vastness of our capacity to deny not merely the humanity but the *humanness* of others. In the realm of art it is an anxiety that will be familiar to anyone who has thought seriously about *The Tempest*, *Heart of Darkness*, or *Creature with The Atomic Brain* (the 1955 film, not the Belgian band). That is, it should be familiar to anyone who has thought seriously about what academics like to call “otherness” or, uglier still, “alterity”, and how the “is it human?” question the experience of otherness can provoke often plays out in an astonishingly horrible manner, in both life and art.¹³

This anxiety is clearly skeptical in nature because it registers the doubt, or, better yet, fear

⁹ This, and everything else I say about Descartes, comes from Descartes’ *Meditations* (2008). For a helpful discussion of the “cogito” argument and skepticism, see Williams (1986).

¹⁰ Of course this conception of a person or self does not have a date of birth and cannot be neatly linked to the ideas of any single philosopher, not even Descartes, and so to call it Cartesian, as many do, is simply to identify the the author whose work best embodies the view and has played a privileged role in popularizing it. For an discussion of this, see Thiel (2011).

¹¹ See Descartes, 2008, 23.

¹² Nietzsche, 1989, 26.

¹³ See Gibson and Bertacco (2011) for a discussion of this in respect to so-called colonial and postcolonial literature.

that, *for all we know*, some others among us are not quite other *people*, in the sense that we find it intelligible, if not reasonable, to think that if we could look within certain others, we might not find ticking whatever it is that makes one tick like a genuine human or true person, whatever a “genuine” human or “true” person may precisely be (and it is gospel in the philosophical tradition I am using here that no answer is forthcoming the these questions.) What is interesting, in philosophy but especially in the arts, are the dramatic possibilities of exploring this capacity to see others as homo sapiens yet not quite human, animated but not fellow, living yet not a member of, as Wittgenstein would put it, *our* form of life.¹⁴ This is why much modern art and philosophy interprets this skepticism about persons as tragic and emblematic of a certain sickness of thought (just think of Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man*). We see in the most horrible moments of both modern art and modern culture a playing out of what it means to take a skeptical stance toward others, and of the great moral and cultural price we pay for it. As Stanley Cavell puts it, we see that “it is in respect to others that we live our skepticism.”¹⁵ In other words, the tradition of work on skepticism I am going on about takes this skepticism to be dangerous stuff, if also, unfortunately, altogether human. Hence all those theories that urge an act of reception to hold near the people the skeptic in us makes distant, say, if one reads Levinas, by an act of *recognition*, or, if one reads Cavell, by an act of acknowledgement.

One needs to be careful here, and the claim is not, of course, that for every person who denies the humanity of another we will find one in the throes of skeptical delirium. People can believe, *really* believe, all sorts of nonsense and stupidity, and a believer is not a skeptic. But if persons, even cultures, can be quite convinced that some group or another is not human, my point is just that skepticism, as described here, is needed to tell the whole story of how this could come to be (some academics would call it a “genealogical” or “originary” claim rather than a psychological one). It will just be one chapter of the story—other chapters, perhaps more central, will be dedicated to all the stuff Marxists go on about—but it will be one we will have to read if we wish to understand the phenomenon clearly. At any rate, even if one is unconvinced by the political and moral claims I have made on behalf of person skepticism, it does allow us to say something interesting about the zombie, to which I now return.

The Uncertain Dead

This modern skepticism about others offers endless opportunities for the artist of the undead. The zombie often dramatizes, but with a crucial twist, a hallmark anxiety of modern philosophy and art, one which I think we can now see as a distinctly skeptical anxiety. The zombie turns on its head this sacred tradition of thinking about skepticism and otherness just outlined. What is wonderful, and wildly immoral, about much zombie art is that it gives us reason to think that this skepticism that is so essential to the story of modern evil is at times a good thing, and in fact the key to our survival.

One can begin to detect some of what I have in mind here when one considers the concurrence of two common tropes in the zombie flick. The first is the idea of the *familiar* zombie, and the second is the idea of a possible cure for what ails the zombie. Combined, you have a nearly

¹⁴ Wittgenstein’s most famous use of “*lebensform*” is in paragraph 19 of *Philosophical Investigations*, when he claims that “to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.” (Wittgenstein, 2009, 11^e)

¹⁵ Cavell, 1979, 447.

perfect skeptical concoction, but in this case one that raises the possibility that all those zombies you've been dispatching might indeed be human, people, at least latently. Rather than turning the fellow human into a degraded Other, as most philosophy and 20th century art interprets the problem of person skepticism, the zombie flick has the power turn a degraded Other into a potential human. For it raises the possibility that they are *our sons, wives, husbands, and neighbors* we've been shooting in the head, and that they are not a shell of what they once were but, *as far as we know* (hence the skepticism), are just experiencing a kind of prolonged absence, in which case killing them is very much to kill a fellow human, in fact to diminish the ranks of the species you are presumably trying to save.

This is why it is crucial to much zombie art that *no* explanation is forthcoming of how the zombie virus quite makes zombiehood possible. For the viewer as well as the survivor of the zombie apocalypse, the very fact of zombies baffles, since their hunger and continued locomotion contradicts virtually everything we know about biology, physics, and the cosmos in general. It is for this reason that one can feel comfortable stipulating from the on high of an armchair that *any* zombie film that offers a tidy and plausible account of the possibility of zombie "life" will for that be a lesser work of zombie art. If the genre is to work is skeptical magic, we need to see the zombie as animated by a great question mark and not a physically or scientifically intelligible force. To render zombies intelligible, to explain just how they can do their zombie thing, is to turn them into workaday monsters and so to compromise the almost metaphysical sense of confusion they can provoke, a sense that is essential for getting these mindless dead to give the intelligent living the kind of experience only zombies, at their philosophical and aesthetic best, can deliver (more on this in a moment, when I turn to the sublime).

Forget that it is pretty unlikely that our zombie familiars will be coming back—and, if they do, presumably with serious cosmetic disadvantage. Chances do not matter when talking about skeptical anxieties. When Descartes invented modern skepticism by asking how we know that we are not just dreaming, his expectation was not that we'd find it probable that we indeed are. It isn't. It is our inability to dismiss the possibility, however remote, that is so unsettling, and that wreaks such havoc upon what we once thought we knew. This is why a genuinely skeptical doubt is so hard to shake, once felt: you *know*—and this, again, may be the one thing we know—that no knowledge is forthcoming that could relieve your doubt. Likewise, the mere making possible, imaginable, that the walking dead are just really, really ill raises an immensely important moral, political and epistemological question: *what* is it that we are killing? Or, simply, just what is it, living or dead?

One must keep in mind that even if we accept that zombies are dead and bound to remain that way—that they shall *never* recover from their affliction—this still does not resolve our basic skeptical worry. It makes all the difference in the world if a zombie is *one of ours* who has passed on or *one of them* who just won't go away, since we cannot, presumably, mess with the dead human the way we can mess with the merely walking dead: certain rights and forms of respect still apply in the case of human corpse. And the genre, at its best, makes this unresolvable, undecidable, and so keeps the skeptical anxiety dramatically present. Every zombie flick has a character for whom the zombie apocalypse provokes something like spring break fever, an opportunity for unbounded homicidal fun. And it is a central gimmick of the genre to get the viewer wondering whether she should feel utterly repulsed by this or just say, Why not? Just as for Descartes, the consequences are severe if the we find that we cannot eliminate the skeptical doubt these questions raise: what are these things, and

what stance should we take toward them, how should we perceive them? In this respect, the zombie is an analogue of what art critics sometimes call an anxious object. An anxious object “does not know whether it is a masterpiece or junk” and an introspective zombie, if it could just speak, would likely tell us the same, though with the distinction put in humanistic rather than aesthetic terms (a person being, if not a masterpiece, then, like one, an object of significant value; the zombie would be junk).¹⁶

The posthumanist, antihumanist, and transhumanist (what’s the latter, exactly?) will object at this point. My way of putting the matter, it may appear, makes everything entirely too dependent on the question of whether the zombie is potentially a form of *human life*. And this smacks of the foul speciesism humanists are thought guiltily of embracing, placing as they often do the human at the center of the moral universe and leaving no room for all the other things with which we share existence.¹⁷ But none of this really matters here. I take it as a simple fact that the genre makes the question of whether a zombie is a latent human central to the skeptical game it often plays. But of course it need not be such. One can easily imagine a posthumanist rendering of the zombie apocalypse (though good luck at the box office) in which the survivors, rather than worrying about the potential humanity of the zombie, just worry about *the fact that they are* and so whether they have a kind of moral status. After all, we think it is wrong, and ugly, to kill snakes, bears and annoying bugs just on account of the problems they pose for us, and so too with a zombie, one would think. Surely there could be a work of zombie art that complicates the skeptical questions I am raising, likely to decent dramatic effect, without making the matter hang on the human question. In short, if we heed the posthumanist call for “a new and more inclusive form of ethical pluralism”¹⁸ that extends beyond the category of the human, the genre can accommodate. In this case, it will still deal with skepticism *in respect to the other*, and the difference will be that we will not take “other” to designate necessarily another *human*.

Yet the genre itself seems content to complicate the question of whether the zombie is a latent *person*. The very best example of this of which I am aware comes from the *The Walking Dead*.¹⁹ The show itself does an extraordinary job of exploring the plenitude of forms of zombie perception the genre makes possible. It plays upon what philosophers and psychologists sometimes call “aspect-dawning” and the difference between seeing-that and seeing-as, which, among other things, explains the ability of an object to appear suddenly a different object, often due to a subtle shift in the cognitive or perceptual stance we take toward it (Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit is the most popular example of this²⁰). The scene I have in mind revels in the chaos that is created when these different perspectives, these different forms of seeing-zombies-as, come crashing into one another. There is the old humanist, Hershel, a veterinarian who is a *pater familias* and proprietor of a farm where the

¹⁶ Rossenberg, 1982, 12.

¹⁷ Hence posthumanists tend to urge that we replace humanism with *vitalism*, that is, with a view that extends the range of existence that matters (and matters not just from the human perspective) not only to animal life but to nature and, perhaps, beyond.

¹⁸ Wolfe, 2010, 137.

¹⁹ “Pretty Much Dead Already.” *The Walking Dead*. AMC. 27 Nov. 2011.

²⁰ Here it is, for the curious



group of survivor seem to have found sanctuary (there don't seem to be any zombies around, and they can do things like bake cakes). Hershel's perception of zombies is crucial to the scene I have in mind, and to my point, since he is the one who most powerfully feels the skeptical worry that, despite appearances, the zombies might simply be ill, and indeed he hides his infected relatives and neighbors in a barn to keep them safe while he hopes beyond hope for a cure. Hershel insists on perceiving zombies as *people*, as suffering and so in effect *passive* and hence blameless in respect their crimes against the living. At the opposite end of possible forms of zombie perception is Shane, a deputy who simply hates zombies, though his hatred likely represses a deeper anxiety. He in effect sees zombies as just a bunch of assholes. There is Rick, the sheriff and the de facto head of the survivors, who neither hates nor loves zombies but sees them as obstacles to be overcome, somewhat like the stoic frontiersman from old Westerns who does not have anything against the natives but won't hesitate to shoot if they begin circling wagons. And then there is Carol, the most tragic of the bunch, who is looking for her lost daughter and seems to be terrified of how she will perceive her if found infected: as a child who is in need of protection or as a child who is in need of a burial.

In the scene I have in mind Shane discovers all those zombies in hiding and wants to get busy killing them. After a brief debate, he says "to hell with it" and liberates them from the barn, in this way creating the context that will justify killing, or whatever one calls it, the undead. And of course the young, lost girl appears, now zombified, and her mother's eyes register a supreme form of skeptical bewilderment; Hershel sees his lost family and neighbors about to face a firing squad, and Shane sees a bunch of assholes to be killed. But in each case one sees a crisis of confidence in how each perceives the zombies, as fragility in their conviction that they know what they are seeing. It is a terrific scene, especially because it does not feign to *settle* the question of how the walking dead should be perceived. Before any of the characters, or the viewer, can draw a conclusion, necessity rears its head and the survivors have to defend themselves, as if it is the nature of questions to put aside instead of answered. Of course it has to be that way, for reasons both artistic and philosophical.

It seems fair to me to characterize the dramatic core of this scene as skeptical, and the show works whatever magic it has because it more or less successfully complicates the problem of zombie perception by showing it of a piece with the general problem of skepticism in respect to *others*. Or so this one scene does. It is true that the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) has that scene in which a father sees his infected wife give birth to a little zombie baby—the father mistakenly tries to cuddle it—but its effect is schlocky rather than skeptical. But this moment from *The Walking Dead* strikes me as getting as close to a philosophical achievement as one can get on cable TV.

The Incomprehensible Dead

If one will grant me this outline of a skeptical reading of at least one representation of zombieness, I can stay something about why this zombified enactment of skepticism can approximate the sublime.

To save time, I will pluck indiscriminately near the intersection of Kant and de Man and say things with which likely neither would agree.²¹ Kant of course is the great architect of the modern concept of the sublime,²² and it is de Man who brings the Kantian sublime in line with characteristic

²¹ I draw from Kant (1998) and de Man (1990). See Guyer (1993, 186-191) for a comparison of their views, one I am indebted to here.

²² Kant did not introduce the notion of the sublime to modern aesthetics, though he did organize the concept into its

forms of twentieth century disappointment with thought and language. Kant, it should be said, would be delighted that we are celebrating zombies in the year of Thomas Kincaid's death, the popular American painter of landscapes, main streets, and firesides. And this is because in the realm of the aesthetic, the sublime has much greater status than the pretty and the just-so. In fact, Kant's various comments on the sublime and the beautiful—in the realm of the aesthetic, the beautiful and the sublime are the only categories that traditionally matter—suggest that George Romero might be Milton's equal in art. Not quite, but Kant does give us reason to think that the monstrous and not an assortment of water lilies might be the stuff of the highest art.²³ For Kant, poetry is the greatest of the arts, and Milton is the greatest poet. And while Kant himself seemed to restrict the notion of the sublime to nature, many others would find it perverse to think of Milton as anything other than the supreme poet of the sublime, indeed that if he, as Kant thought, is the greatest poet, it must in part because his poetry is the most perfectly sublime. And it goes without saying that many of Milton's most sublime moments are in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, namely, those that concern Satan and his fall.²⁴

To understand why the monstrous rather than the formally perfect (that is, the beautiful, for our purposes) is able to attain to the sublime, consider that monsters themselves, in both high literature and low film, are built upon what some scholars of horror call “category transgressions.”²⁵ Monsters are categorically transgressive in the sense that they combine, in their very person, classes of things that strike us as naturally or conceptually opposed. Hence this idea of a *fallen* angel, a *man* wolf, a murderous *doll*, or the *living* dead, a category transgression that is so unabashedly direct that it should register as ridiculous but somehow works. If the horrible object is just right, our attempt to understand it—to make it fully available in thought—is shot through with an almost delirious violence: it confounds but exhilarates, bewilders but entices. For De Man, what we find when contemplating a sublime object is that we cannot fully arrest the world in thought and language, that there is a *beyond*, a region of massive interest to us but to which we have no cognitive or linguistic access. For this reason the experience is both humiliating yet liberating, that is, both painful and pleasing. We feel, as it were, the presence of light and but we cannot see what it is illuminating, and it results in a kind of Dionysian ecstasy that enlivens the mind not despite but because it encourages a bit of suffering. And this combination of bewilderment and awe, of deliriousness and delight, is symptomatic of the experience of the sublime, in fact is arguably what largely constitutes it.

Now it matters crucially here what kind of object we are experiencing. The idea of, say, an ambitious bidet is categorically transgressive but contemplating it will never amount to a sublime

most influential and persisting form. Kant wrote about the sublime as early as 1764 (in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*), but his treatment of it *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) is in effect the source of the modern concept of the sublime. The notion of the sublime itself makes its way into modern aesthetics in the 17th and 18th centuries, in good part by way of the writings of British travelers, often after making the “Grand Tour” of the continent and commenting on the glorious terror of certain expanses of the Alps. The writings of figures such as Anthony Ashley-Cooper (the third earl of Shaftesbury), John Dennis, Joseph Addison, and Edmund Burke are especially important in this regard. Kant was of course influenced by many of these writers.

²³ See Abaci (2008) for a discussion of this puzzle. See Crowther (1989) and Guyer (1993) for excellent general discussions of Kant's theory of the sublime.

²⁴ See Budick (2010) for an excellent study of this.

²⁵ See, for example, Carroll (2001).

experience, since we are put in touch with nothing of significance when marveling about its possibility. But when contemplating Satan, a fallen angel, a rebel against the very source of law, we surely are, and this is why we need great nature or great art to experience the sublime. For in working through the concept of Satan, we are put in touch with what matters most to us, morally, humanly, and, for some, theologically. And while this contemplation is bound to end in frustration—in bewilderment rather than understanding—we very much do delight in the experience of being brought closer to it, since it places us in the proximity of *value*, like a cypher that holds out the promise of a great truth. It is bound to end in philosophical frustration, but it is still a powerfully philosophical experience, and it is one that is conditioned *by art* and not a mere argument and it is for this reason that it is capable of immersing our frustration in aesthetic delight. Kant's *philosophy* cannot do this, But Milton's poetry can, even if at moments they share the same subject (moral freedom, for example). Likewise, what keeps the idea of the living dead from being just plain silly is what I have argued is the skeptical anxiety it provokes, forcing us as it does to work through what matters in a way that on the surface is almost as grand as we get from Milton. What grounds our reception of something as someone? What does it mean to see a human body but not quite see a human? How can we perceive someone familiar as wholly other? And, most importantly, how ought we receive someone, or something, in the absence of any any certainly as to what it is?

These skeptical questions the zombie provokes entitle us to say something interesting about the nature of the sublime itself, in fact to offer an addition to the traditional the categories of the sublime. Kant himself found no less than five kinds of sublime in his career (the noble, terrifying, splendid, dynamical, and mathematical forms of the sublime, though eventually only two would stick; more on this in a moment), and of course others have added to it, too. To simplify perversely, the beautiful—say a beautiful painting, face, stretch of nature, or beer—delights on account of its “just-rightness” for the human mind and the senses that feed it. When I open myself up to world aesthetically and find that I can receive it as beautiful, I experience a kind of harmony, a sense of perfect fit, between the object and those powers of thought and perception I enlist when contemplating it. The object is *as though* made for my mind and my senses, such as they are, and there is a sense of perfect intelligibility, of perfect comprehension of the object. But the sublime object is endlessly puzzling for philosophers and theorists of art because it seems to work its particular magic not despite but precisely on account of its “just wrongness” for the human mind, such as it is, opening up as it does a powerfully felt gap between the object and our capacity to grasp it, to experience it as fully intelligible, at least in a way that would satisfy us completely. I say “completely” because there may be scientific, psychological, etc., explanations available, but, just as when we contemplate one who kills for the mere fun of it or an electrical fire that announces itself just in time for a boy scout congress, we can still feel mightily burdened with questions of the “but *how*, really?” variety. There is something, if not unexplainable, then unimaginable, something that defies our sense that we really get it, even if reason provides a respectable answer. Kant's two basic categories of the sublime embody this well: the “mathematically” and the “dynamically” sublime. The dynamically sublime is, for example, the aesthetic rapture occasioned by a display of huge power or force (think of romantic paintings of violent storms at sea), and the mathematically sublime by an image that hints at an “impossible” expansion of space, time, or objects (think of the stoner overwhelmed by the awesomeness of the idea of deep space).

So here we are. The zombie sublime—the kind of sublime experience the genre is most apt

to provide—surely includes moments of the dynamic and the mathematical sublime: the great, violent hunger that animates zombies (the dynamic sublime), the virus, capable of turning both the living *and* the dead into the living dead and so nearly unbounded in its ability to keep the apocalypse rolling (the mathematical sublime), just to give a couple obvious examples. But as I have been arguing here, there is a often unique and irreducibly *skeptical* sublime moment at play in addition to these. The skeptical sublime, as one might call it, is tethered both to the forms of doubt that are inescapable for the those who have to live with zombies in the aftermath of the virus and to the possibilities of dramatic investment this makes possible for the consumer of zombie art. The awkward confrontation with one's zombified familiars, the hesitant mercy killing of the just-bitten, the expression that registers a second-thought about one's brio with a machete, are all invitations to the skeptical sublime, at least if the acting and writing do their part to make this possible. This is essential, and intentionally so, to some of the genre's better moments. But we can now also see, I hope, that regardless of how works of zombie art understand their own dramatic business, if *we* read them as in part dramas of doubt, as in part enactments of this odd but pervasive modern problem of person skepticism, we can elevate the better products of the genre out of the gutter of teen horror fun and offer them a philosophically and aesthetically respectable address.

Conclusion

At this point I suspect many readers are thinking *bullshit!* No zombie flick quite does what I have talking about here. But it is just a contingent fact of cinematic history that a Milton has not yet done a remake of *Night of The Living Dead*. At any rate, if one thinks that I have been discussing not actual representations of zombies but something more abstract and suspicious like the very idea of a zombie, that should be fine. Just pretend that what I have discussed here is the outline of a philosophically and aesthetically *ideal* work of zombie art, and my point is that there are very good chances that it could be almost perfectly sublime, and that this would be on account of the skeptical possibilities the genre is well-suited for exploring.²⁶

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²⁶ I thank Ed Commentale, Aaron Jaffe, and Espen Hammer for helpful criticism and advice while writing this paper.

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