

## **Pretty, Dead: Sociosexuality, Rationality and the Transition into Zom-Being**

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Unlike other horror archetypes, zombies have an established presence in philosophical discussion. Following David Chalmers in particular,<sup>i</sup> many philosophers have evoked the undead when hypothesizing about consciousness. In recent years, zombies have been utilized to examine phenomenology and mental knowledge (see Furst; Malatesti; Macpherson), visual processing and intentional action (see Mole; Wu), and the relationship between consciousness and cognition (Smithies). These are all variations on the explanatory gap problem, which refers to a rift between psycho-physiological explanations of mental function (deriving from neuroscience, for instance) and the intuitive sense that selfhood, agency, and introspective knowledge are metaphysically significant.

Such discussion frequently feels nebulous. Neuroscience is fascinating, but its empirical findings can be difficult to relate to everyday, experiential reality. Indeed, neuroscience habitually seeks to uncover how the mind operates *in spite* of our intuitions. Abstract philosophical discussions about consciousness are just as intangible. Debates over philosophical zombies (hereafter, p-zombies) are commonly rooted in notions about hypothetical twin worlds, ruminations on the impossibility of imagining what it would be like to lack phenomenal experiences, and semantic discussions regarding whether conceivability equates to possibility. Again, it is often hard to comprehend how such discussion relates to personal experiences.

Although p-zombies and movie zombies are regarded as entirely separate entities by key thinkers in the field (for reasons that will become apparent in due course), I propose that movie zombies illuminate these somewhat opaque philosophical debates by offering an accessible route into the issues. Fundamentally, both the p-zombie debates and zombie movies are underpinned by the same focal point: zombies are non-conscious humans. Yet the filmic version of that problem is grounded in an experiential world rather than conceptual theorization. Cinematic storytelling devices – narrative, characterization, dialogue and so forth – allow filmmakers to present characters' experiences in an instinctively accessible manner. Protagonists interact in social worlds that are comparable to our own, and narrative drama is typically driven by social interaction. The characters' interactions are thereby rendered concrete and familiar, regardless of their fictionality. Whereas conjectural debates regarding p-zombies begin with theoretical models of self (seeking to test their legitimacy), zombie movies are rooted in and prioritize an experiential vision of selfhood.

This chapter focuses on a particular strand of the subgenre: transition narratives, in which human protagonists gradually turn into zombies. In transition narratives, protagonists are able to articulate their experiences as they undergo their transformation.<sup>ii</sup> As such, they directly reflect on changes in their mental states, linking those shifts to the physical and

social realms they occupy. The specific case study examined in this chapter is *Pretty Dead* (2013). The film is partially constructed from footage shot by lead protagonist Regina, a 24 year old MD, as she charts her metamorphosis into a zombie. After killing a pizza delivery driver and eventually turning on her fiancé Ryan, Regina is institutionalized. In tandem with Regina's autobiographical footage, *Pretty Dead* is comprised of videotaped interviews with a clinician (Dr. Romera)<sup>iii</sup> who is convinced that Regina is suffering from Cotard's syndrome: a delusion in which the patient believes they are dead. The narrative is ambiguous about the legitimacy of Regina's claims throughout, intercutting between her own assertions and Romera's rationalist explanations. The clash between Regina's experiences as a transitional being and Romera's scientific diagnosis is centralized in *Pretty Dead*. That is, the narrative brings two views on the self – intuitive and empirical – into direct conflict. *Pretty Dead* thereby encourages the viewer to question the validity of both, and their compatibility.

As is common among transition narratives, sociality is emphasized as a defining aspect of Regina's life in *Pretty Dead*. Transitional protagonists' metamorphoses are conventionally punctuated by turning points at which they attack living counterparts; usually their closest companions. For example, in *Harold's Going Stiff* (2011) and *Return of the Living Dead Part 3* (1993), full-blown zombies are depicted as inarticulate beasts who violently attack the living. Knowing that the same fate awaits them, the transitional protagonists "live" in fear that they will eventually turn on their loved ones. Both *Harold's Going Stiff* and *Return of the Living Dead Part 3* are stories driven by romantic couplings, meaning that the transitional protagonist's loss of rational control – their inability to halt their transfiguration into zombiedom (or zom-being) and the ruination of their bonds with other humans – is accentuated. This theme is ubiquitous in transition narratives, which typically situate metamorphosing protagonists within intimate relationships with living partners. Other examples of this trend include *Zombie Honeymoon* (2004), *Zombie Love* (2008), *Zombie Love Story* (2008), and *True Love Zombie* (2012).<sup>iv</sup>

Following this convention, when Regina films her transformation in *Pretty Dead*, she also captures a parallel change in her love life. In particular, the footage charts the detrimental effects her transformation has on her relationship with her fiancé Ryan. As such, Regina's identity and rationality – what she is, how she behaves, even how she experiences the world – are inextricable from her sociality; affiliations and interactions with other beings that give her (human) life meaning. Eventually, Regina loses control. Her romantic attachment to Ryan is replaced by her desire for his flesh. Although both types of desire reach their fullest expression carnally – human love-making or zombie flesh-eating – the former signifies Regina's recognizably human sociality, while the latter denotes Regina's movement into zom-being.

From Regina's anthropocentric view, the latter is monstrous. She understands love, in contrast, as a sign of her humanity. In *Pretty Dead*, Regina's humanity is measured by the self-control she exerts in resisting her urge to harm Ryan. As such, Regina's love for Ryan is characterized as rational agency. Yet that conception of sexual love is counter-intuitive: that kind of passion does not emanate from conscious, rational choice in the first instance. That is not to say that sexual passion is synonymous with complete irrationality. On this point I concur with Nikolay Milkov, although Milkov's subsequent assertion that "sexual experience proceeds in acts of reasoning" (159, emphasis added) does not adequately resolve the

problem either. Rather, it should be noted that phenomena such as love and sexual passion can be explained or reflected on via rationality, but the *emotional experience* of social kinship cannot be captured via such language. Experiencing and rationalizing are ontologically different. Sex thus illustrates that a) there is a troubling disjuncture between rationalist-theoretical conceptions of selfhood and selfhood as it is experienced in the real, social realm, and b) there is a natural bridge between personal, introspective self-knowledge and external social selfhood. Throughout this chapter, I use the term “sociosexual” to denote ways in which sexuality epitomizes the relationship between sociality and selfhood as it is experienced in the real, interdependent world.

By emphasizing sociosexuality’s role in self-experience, *Pretty Dead* illuminates aspects of consciousness that are neglected in philosophical debates regarding p-zombies. Consciousness sets apart humans from zombies. Ergo, so too does sociosexuality. Insofar as sociosexuality is measurable via behavior, it can be pinned down in a way that consciousness and qualia cannot. The p-zombie argument is undercut by the notion that p-zombies might have conscious experiences, but might not be able to articulate them. Similarly, an articulate zombie may lack qualia, but may lay verbal claims to consciousness that could not be proven false. Consciousness is invisible and intangible because it is introspective and metaphysical. This is not to suggest that all mental states are manifested in behavior.<sup>v</sup> Rather, when Regina turns on Ryan, that behavior evinces a significant change in her consciousness. The action violates Regina’s conscious will to maintain the sociosexual relationship she shares with Ryan, and manifests an ontological shift away from her identity as a human. Although she does not become a full-blown non-conscious zombie before the end credits roll, Regina overtly becomes less human and more akin to a zombie as the text progresses. Killing Ryan is a key indicator that Regina is “pretty dead,” but only inasmuch as Regina believes she is a rational being, able to know and control her behaviors via cognition and reflection.

### **Conscious State[ment]s: A Primer in Zom-Being**

Contributors to the p-zombie debates principally seek to test the legitimacy of physicalism (see Lehrer; Garrett; Horowitz) and/or to understand whether qualia – the essential properties of experiences – can be explained by functionalist accounts of selfhood. These debates hinge on the idea that p-zombies are physically identical to living humans, but have no conscious experiences. Consequently, “there is nothing it is like to be a [p-]zombie” (Chalmers, 249). To put it in concrete terms, although p-zombies are physically identical to any conscious person, they do not have qualia.<sup>vi</sup> So, a p-zombie can walk hand-in-hand on a beach with another p-zombie, look into their partner’s eyes and kiss as the sun sets, but during this interaction neither p-zombie will *experience* anything. The possibility of p-zombies poses a threat to functionalism since it amounts to saying that it is conceivable (and therefore possible)<sup>vii</sup> that consciousness is separable from our physical capacity for conscious experience.

As Chalmers notes in his influential argument, p-zombies are not the same as the filmic undead (95). Rebecca Roman Hanrahan succinctly summates the reason why: “it would be

very difficult to make a movie about [p-]zombies, since they behave just as their qualia-ridden human counterparts do.” Therefore, “[t]here would be no way for the filmmakers to depict any ... difference between [p-zombies] and ordinary humans” (303). However, the p-zombie argument’s premise – that zombies are identical to living humans but lack phenomenal experience – has become ever more pertinent to zombie fiction over the last thirty years. The lumbering, somnambulistic movie zombies Hanrahan has in mind are relatively uncommon in contemporary zombie narratives. Contemporary movie zombies are beings whose vital organs have ceased to function, and so they externally *appear* to be different to living humans. To answer Hanrahan, *this* is how filmmakers distinguish between living and undead individuals. Zombies also engage in behaviors such as flesh-eating, which are frowned upon by their living counterparts. In many contemporary zombie movies, zombies are akin to pale, cannibalistic humans who suffer from a severe skin condition. That is, their conventional behaviors and appearance do not necessarily evince a lack of cerebral acuity or any essential quality of their mental processes.

Transition narratives such as *Pretty Dead* flag this kinship between living and undead by focusing on protagonists who transform from the former into the latter, thereby linking those states. Transitional protagonists have consciousness at the narrative outset: they do not simply exist in the qualia-less twin-worlds of p-zombie argumentation. Because they begin as conscious entities, transitional protagonists can articulate changes they undergo as they experience them, so long as they remain partially human and conscious. In what follows, I am not concerned with casting doubt over physicalism, so for the sake of clarity let us take for granted that full-blown zombies’ mental states *are* different to their living counterparts.<sup>viii</sup> This is certainly implied by *Pretty Dead*’s evocation of cordyceps, the fungus Regina cites as the cause of her metamorphosis. Cordyceps is said to “infect” its host’s mind, “win[ning] control...compel[ling]” the host’s behavior.<sup>ix</sup> Regina’s experiential accounts indicate that her zombified mindset is unlike her conscious experiences. When she kills, she proclaims that the fungus “must have taken over...I don’t even remember biting him...I black out or something.” Her defensive assertion “[i]t’s not me, it’s what’s inside me” overtly distinguishes between her conscious awareness and the zombie-state the fungus instills.

Despite this clear delimitation of human consciousness and zom-being, the transition happens gradually, and the boundary between the two states is fuzzy. Regina does not become a full-blown zombie when she first eats human flesh since she exhibits leanings towards such behavior beforehand. She rejects fresh foods (claiming they smell “rotten”) and instead eats raw bacon; she bites Ryan; she sucks the blood from a used tampon. None of these transition behaviors is enough to denote that Regina has stopped living and has become undead. It is also unclear precisely when her body dies. Regina’s face starts to rot and she craves human flesh while she still has a pulse. Her heart has stopped by the time she is institutionalized, but she remains lucid. Regina’s physiological change is on-going, so there is no definitive break between life and death.

These gradual slippages mean that even if we agree that full-blown zombies are non-conscious, it is difficult to measure the difference between human and zombie by referring solely to physical modifications, reported mental experiences, or behavioral changes. Notably, these three elements are indicative of opposing schools within philosophy of self: physicalism/functionalism, phenomenology/consciousness studies, and behaviorism.

Regina's transformation reveals that the self cannot be apprehended by just one of these divisive theories, because selfhood is a compound of these elements. For instance, phenomenal experiences are shaped by physical, sensory faculties (see Schechtman). Ergo, without a body, our consciousness would differ in a way that we (as embodied beings) cannot imagine. The reverse is also true: one cannot envision what it would be like to be a conscious-less body, since such imagination *a priori* requires sentient, self-reflective experience. The p-zombie conceivability debate is founded on that impossibility. However, proponents of the p-zombie argument seldom explain embodiment's impact on consciousness in this way. Neither do they typically account for the connections between selfhood and identity. Regina's mutation into zom-being is a shift away from humanity, but her humanity has meaning as an aspect of Regina's social identity.

### **Zom-body to Love: Sociosexuality of the Living Dead**

Regina's struggle is grounded in concrete social relationships and structures. Contra to Fiona Macpherson's assurance that introspection is enough to validate phenomenal experience, because "introspective knowledge that I have of my own consciousness does not depend for its existence on conditions external to me" (231-2), in *Pretty Dead* it is recognized that human self-experience is always-already dependent on external factors. Identity does not tally with solipsistic asociality. Indeed, practical, social circumstances facilitate the individual's ability to form identity (see Werth, 339; Epright, 801; Winter, 235).

Entirely asocial selfhood is just as unconceivable as disembodied consciousness, because humans are interdependent from birth. The relationalist proposal that "the well-being of each member [of the populace] is interwoven with the well-being of all other members" (Killmister, 256) may leave little room for independence, but it underlines how significant social relations are in forging the self. In addition, many pragmatic social tenets stem from essential interconnection, including theories of dignity and moral responsibility (see Ober, 832). Thus, sociality impacts directly on how we position ourselves in the world, how we relate to others, how we assess ourselves, and so forth. This cultural-relational account does not supplant physicalism. Indeed, Amy Banks draws on neuroimaging to make an essentialist case that humans are interconnected by default. The cultural-relational paradigm implies that any one exclusory philosophical model (physicalism, behaviorism, functionalism) fails to paint a complete enough picture of selfhood, because these theoretical conceptions of selfhood do not do enough to account for how we actually experience selfhood in the social realm.

Although Regina prizes her social bonds, zombies – who routinely kill and devour – do not (or at least zombies do not express sociality in the way humans do). As she undergoes her transition into zom-being, Regina is torn between two incompatible modes of existence. Her auto-biographical accounts are thus conflicted. Even though she does not recall "doing any of the...shit" she is accused of, Regina expresses regret over her actions. For example, she admits liability for those actions as if she were conscious of her behaviors; "I know I did it...I didn't mean to do it." Regina's question "what kind of cure is there for the things I've done?...I don't want to be a monster," is particularly telling in this light. First, she takes

ownership over the killings committed (“things I’ve done”). Second, she assesses those acts according to human values, suggesting that they are incurably monstrous actions. Third, she writes those actions into her identity, dubbing herself “a monster.” Regina thereby anchors her liability for the killings in her selfhood. However, this means that she both judges her actions from a human perspective – distancing herself from the perpetrator’s monstrosity – and also recognizes that she is the inhuman creature she vilifies. Her discordant assessment is only deepened by her outright denials elsewhere in the film; “I swear I didn’t do this...that wasn’t me.”

Regina’s conflicting statements reveal not a tug of conscience, but a disjuncture in her being. The onset of zom-being impels Regina towards forsaking the values and social bonds that define her humanity. Zom-being necessitates anti-social activity<sup>x</sup> – flesh-eating – and so relinquishing social bonds is a necessary part of zom-becoming. Regina’s efforts to resist turning into a zombie are expressed as attempts to maintain her established notion of human sociality. For example, Regina declares, “I don’t want to hurt people anymore...so I stay away from them.” Although “stay[ing] away” means negating sociality, her intent is social in orientation since it recognizes her duty to defend others.

Regina’s conflict is most notable in her key social relationship: her love for Ryan. Regina wishes to maintain their affiliation, imploring “I need your help,” and angrily accusing Ryan of “ditching [her] when [she] needed [him] most.” Simultaneously, by keeping Ryan close, Regina poses a threat to his safety. Although Regina longs to maintain her social links in order to evince her humanity then, in doing so she risks eradicating those bonds. Moreover, Regina’s transition into zom-being can be charted via her changing relationship with Ryan, because Ryan’s presence underscores her loss of humanity-qua-sociality. The earliest point in the plot is Regina’s first date with Ryan, and the bulk of *Pretty Dead* maps their relationship until Ryan’s death. Ryan’s changing attitudes towards Regina also illuminates her gradual transformation. Ryan initially accepts Regina’s behavior. He laughs it off when Regina bites him (“I appreciate your enthusiasm, but Jesus Christ you’ve got to watch those chompers”), and proclaims that he loves her “despite the fact that [she is] eating raw bacon.” Ryan jokingly adapts Kelis’ *Milkshake*, singing “you like to drink human lard, I’m going to blow my chunks” as Regina consumes a glass of liquidized fat. Ryan admits that such jokes help him “cope.” As the film progresses however, Ryan’s gags articulate his escalating trepidation. Although light-hearted in tone, Ryan’s request “don’t eat me if I die” expresses a valid fear. As Regina changes and his doubts intensify, Ryan’s jokes are replaced by serious requests – “[l]et me take you to the hospital...it’s not funny” – and eventually outright terror; “you asked me to shoot you... I’m scared fucking shitless.” These shifts chronicle the decline of their relationship.

Ryan provides a constant human presence that throws Regina’s changes into relief. The disjuncture between Regina’s self-as-experienced and the social world that situates her increases as she transforms. Regina attempts to resolve that tension by embracing death: that is, consciously turning her back on her previous life. After a bleach cocktail (“kill juice”) fails to cure her, Regina decides to shoot herself. This suicide attempt is shown twice: once at the outset, and again towards the end of the film. This repeated incident bookends Regina’s transition into zom-being and the decline of her union with Ryan. The suicide attempt fails, only scarring her face. Regina then immediately kills Ryan. Although her

ontological status remains unclear in the remainder of the film, killing Ryan is a significant marker in Regina's movement towards the "end of her life" as a sociosexual being.

The second most significant turning point in her transformation is presented at the film's conclusion, and again appears to connote the end of Regina's life. In the final frames before the closing credits, Regina's rotting body is carried away on a gurney. A pulsing double-beat redolent of a heartbeat occupies the soundscape, and is eventually replaced by a high-pitched tone reminiscent of a heart-monitor flat-lining. To think of this as a straight-forward physical death is to misread Regina's transformation and the sequence's sociosexual significance. The sound does not indicate that Regina completely "turns" or physiologically dies. Nurse Boyle is unable to find Regina's pulse some time before these closing frames, and so the final soundscape does not denote asystole. Furthermore, Regina already survived flat-lining at a much earlier point in the plot. Before Regina and Ryan are engaged, she overdoses on drugs. In a retrospective voice-over, Regina theorizes that when Ryan resuscitated her, she was brought back as one of the undead; "I died that night, I've been dead ever since." Regina's statement is definitive, as if there was a single moment in which she became a zombie. This distinction is not corroborated by the gradual transition she undergoes. More precisely, when Ryan resuscitated Regina, he started her on the path from humanity to zom-being. The flat-line tone recurs throughout the film. It is heard regularly during Regina's interviews with Dr. Romera, and also sounds in the wake of Ryan's death.

The film's closing sequence underscores that Regina's relationship with Ryan is inextricable from her sociosexual identity. The film's final flat-line tone is another phase in her on-going transition rather than a distinct physiological tipping-point. Indeed, visual cues suggest that the flat-line is metaphysical rather than literal. CCTV shots of Regina's decomposing body being carried from a padded cell are intercut with flashes of Regina and Ryan together before the onset of her transformation. The insert shots are edited to the soundscape's pulsing heartbeat. Intercutting between Regina's lost relationship and images of her putrid body (the state in which she caused Ryan's death) suggests that Regina's *metaphorical* heart – her capacity for love – dies in these climactic moments. Her memories of Ryan pulse like a heartbeat, indicating that Regina's brain functionality (her consciousness) ceases simultaneously. The flat-line tone indicates the death of Regina's humanity-qua-sociality. The cessation of Regina's sociosexuality punctuates the film's closure.

Cumulatively, Regina's overdose, suicide attempts, and gradual putrefaction are inseparable from the metaphoric demise of her sociosexuality, her consciousness, and thus her humanity. However, Regina's subsequent state is not fully realized in the film. Her continuing transition into zom-being does not evoke death as an ending. After all, even full-blown zombies continue to exist. The narrative shape corroborates this theme. The film features two post-credit sequences, further underlining that ostensible endings are instead points of continuation. *Pretty Dead* also opens with Regina's apparent suicide which a) only *appears* to be an ending, and b) happens more than once: it is repeated later in the film. It is beyond the film's capacity to finally elucidate Regina's experience of full-blown zom-being. Instead, *Pretty Dead* de-naturalizes Regina's assumptions about the difference between humanity-qua-rationality and "irrational" zom-being. Despite her desire to control (hinder) her transformation, Regina cannot impede the inexorable change. Regina's behavior is thus at odds with her ability to control or rationalize her conduct, leaving Regina torn between

two states of being. *Pretty Dead* thereby flags that rationalizing discourses are unable to capture or wholly explain self-experience.

### **Zom-Beauty/Zom-Beast: Rationality and the Experiential Hierarchy**

Rationality is premised on the idea that humans ought to be able control their behaviors and desires. In this view, the capacity for rationality separates humans from animals, and animal consciousness is implied to be deficient in comparison to human consciousness. An archetypal version of this argument is John Stuart Mill's valorization of human satisfactions (14). Although he has no insight into what it is to be like a pig, Mill presumes that because a pig lacks the human capacity for understanding, a pig's experiences of the world are inferior to a human's. Mill's partiality towards human consciousness is commonplace. Indeed, it is replicated in and legitimated by the authoritative structures of medical science, psychology, law, economics, and so forth. These vast institutions contribute to the existential grand narrative that human consciousness is the standard against which all other experiential viewpoints are tested and found wanting. Experiences of selfhood that contradict that overwhelming grand narrative are consistently invalidated. Indeed, the specter of mental illness underlines that there are "incorrect" ways of experiencing the world. Those who fail to adhere to established "correct" visions of reality and self-experience are routinely institutionalized, for example. Life-forms that "lack" "full" human consciousness – sentience and/or the capacity for rational reflection – are typically treated with disdain (or even destroyed).

On Mill's scale, the zombie would be a lower-life form because the undead lack consciousness. It is clear why zombies are ostensibly incomplete beings: from the living human's perspective, death is the ultimate loss, and so zombies embody deprivation. Yet, undeath does not strictly equate to lifelessness, since zombies continue to exist and remain animate. The zombie's state is incomparable to the human's. As the p-zombie argument elucidates, it is inadequate to think of zombies as sub-humans. Zombies do not have phenomenological consciousness, and therefore occupy the world in a way that is unintelligible to the living because human psychology is rooted in experiential awareness. Although zom-being is a fictional state, as a thought-experiment zombies flag how inadequate Mill's hierarchical stance is. The world may be experienced in numerous ways. Since we have no access to alternative modes of experience, the argument that human sentience supplies the "best" experiences is groundless.

Transitional zombie narratives highlight this inadequacy. Regina offers no direct access to what being a zombie is finally like, since full-blown zombies (following the p-zombie paradigm) can no longer verbalize or reflect on their state, since they have no qualia to refer to. However, this does not mean her slippage into zom-being is an experiential "decline." To Regina-qua-human, her relationship with Ryan deteriorates. However, it does not follow that Regina's transition into zom-being is itself degenerative. To Regina-qua-zombie, the relationship is meaningless; sociality is not relevant to the zombie's state. Human inability to conceive of what zom-being would be like denotes that our conceptual capacity is insufficient for understanding other entities' states, and even the world itself. Regina flags



that inadequacy. Regina's autobiographical statements are themed around her social bonds, her identity, her capacity for consciousness, and her physicality. These reflections underline how she conceives of herself, what she values about her existence, and what (as a human) Regina fears she will lose as a result of her metamorphosis.

Her anxieties stem from the degree of control she has over those changes, and her in/ability to comprehend those changes via an anthropocentric understanding of self-experience. Regina reacts by gripping onto the kind of rationalist view Mill venerates. Yet the scientifically credible actions Regina implements to hinder the process only expedite her transformation; "[e]verything I do to fix myself," Regina observes, "just makes things worse." Eventually, Regina's quest to retain control spirals towards irrationality. For example, she announces that she wishes she could turn her "body inside out and scrub [the fungus] off." Regina's grotesque yearning emphasizes her internal, experiential viewpoint at the point when her rational actions and language fail her.

The sovereignty of rational consciousness is bolstered by institutional structures, and *Pretty Dead* undercuts that ostensibly integral position. The second viewpoint offered on Regina's transition is external: having been institutionalized for murdering Ryan and a pizza delivery driver, Regina is observed by Dr. Romera. Here too she reflects upon her experiences, but her report is contested by Romera's diagnoses. Romera is the mouthpiece for a version of rationalist thought that carries disquieting connotations. *Pretty Dead's* portrayal of a woman a) whose rationality is called into question, b) whose carnality is deemed monstrous, and c) whose liberty is infringed upon by medico-legal apparatuses, is reminiscent of "hysteria:" diagnostic rhetoric that carries deeply misogynistic overtones. As Julie Lokis-Adkins observes, "by the end of the [19<sup>th</sup> Century], half of all women were thought to be hysterics" because they resisted the societal limitations imposed on them; "there were two options for young, unmarried women: enter a convent or marry" (40; see also Greer, 55). That is, gender-biased socio-sexual norms were implemented via two types of institution – medical and matrimonial – legitimating the broad fear that any woman who did not adhere to their "proper" social place would "become a sexual predator: a monster even" (Lokis-Adkins, 40; see also Mesch, 107). Ironically, such terror itself smacks of hysteria. This overwrought reaction implies that female sexuality is enormously potent, even capable of disturbing the entire patriarchal structure. Neither historically rooted gendered oppression nor contemporary gender politics will be dwelt upon in what follows.<sup>xi</sup> Of greater pertinence to the discussion in hand are the ways in which a particular view of existence is validated. The legal-medical structure not only confirms but also enforces a vision of reality that stems from scientific rationality. In *Pretty Dead*, that ethos is embodied by Romera, who seeks to "cure" Regina and return her to "normal." That is, Romera imposes his established rationalist view, ignoring Regina's objections to his diagnosis. Romera talks over Regina's protests rather than considering her purported self-experiences, thereby indicating his belief that his explication is incontestable.

Although Regina's and Romera's diagnoses clash, it is not that their appraisals of Regina's situation are entirely dichotomous. Regina's auto-diagnosis shares Romera's judgment that zom-being is unacceptable. Before Regina is arrested, she proclaims "obviously I'm out of control. I'm a monster." Her assessment is directly echoed in Romera's concern that Regina "is out of control." Regina's self-evaluation denotes her devotion to a rational

anthropocentric view of existence despite its incongruity with her self-experience. Although Regina apprehends her position via scientific models (“I’m not schizophrenic...[or] delusional”), she documents her experiences during her transition by referring to how she *feels* (“I can feel it in me,” “I feel pretty dead already”). *Pretty Dead* thereby validates her sensations as a mode of understanding her transition rather than rejecting those expressions of self-experience (as Romera does).

The same balance is achieved via *Pretty Dead*'s form. *Pretty Dead* is characterized as a “true story;” on-screen captions posit that the film is “a collection of...recovered” footage.<sup>xii</sup> Yet *Pretty Dead*'s viewer is not encouraged to side with Romera's rational, external view and reject Regina's internal-experiential claim that she is undead. Romera's and Regina's clashing diagnoses are reflected in *Pretty Dead*'s dual formal perspectives. In the asylum, Regina is perceived via a sterile observatory stance. These sequences are shot via three cameras that are aligned with Romera's perspective, thereby implying that his diagnosis is accurate. The first camera is situated alongside Romera, and films Regina front-on. No reverse angle is available (no camera captures Romera front-on). Regina is clearly inspected in a way that Romera is not, implying that her version of events requires justification, whereas his is unquestioned. The second is a CCTV camera situated behind Romera. Although much of the room is covered in these shots, the camera faces only Regina: Romera remains anonymous. Additionally, this camera captures other figures (orderlies and nurses) who concur with Romera's diagnosis. Their presence corroborates that his clinical opinion is a majority stance. The third camera is less definitive. Placed side on to Romera and Regina, this camera frames their conversation in a more balanced fashion: Regina on screen-right, Romera on screen-left. Romera is scrutinized on the same level as Regina in these shots. This third camera is more broadly indicative of *Pretty Dead*'s methodology. Approximately 60 per cent of the movie is captured by Regina and Ryan's camcorder. In much of that footage, Regina expounds her experiences. Even where the content is highly personal in nature, depicting Regina and Ryan's relationship for example, the found-footage mode paints these incidents as empirical fact, equal to Romera's observations. Indeed, the camcorder tape's status as evidence is verified firstly by an on-screen caption stating that the video is “all that remains to tell [Regina's] story,” and secondly by Romera's declaration that the camcorder footage would authenticate Regina's self-diagnosis.

Since *Pretty Dead* includes Regina's auto-documentation, her seemingly irrational diagnosis is legitimated for the viewer. In contrast, Romera fails to cure Regina, despite his plausible explanation for her condition. Scientific rationality is incapable of capturing what is happening to Regina. For instance, although Romera states that “it would be easy to prove what you say is true if we do a physical,” even the most rudimentary medical methods fail. Nurse Boyle deems that her equipment is “broken” when she cannot find Regina's blood pressure. The sedatives Romera prescribes are ineffective. Regina's own reliance on scientific rationalization is just as flawed. Although she perceives her transition as a “big medical breakthrough,” her documentation quickly spirals into an autobiographical mode, focusing on her crumbling sociosexual relationship. There are no discoveries, just personal effects. Her self-shot video is not available to evince her case to Romera. Instead, the tapes serve an intimate social function: they are an extended suicide note to Regina's companions. In Regina's final moments of auto-documentation, she apologizes to her loved

ones (“sorry Dad, this isn’t your fault”) and expresses her self-destructive intentions (“I’m already dead already [sic], I just need a little help lying down”).

Despite their powerful supporting structures, rationalist medico-scientific understandings of Regina’s condition are ultimately subordinate to her personal experiences and social identity in *Pretty Dead*. So, contrary to the commonplace notion that rationality is a precondition for forming meaningful social bonds (Anderson, 2013: 127-8), *Pretty Dead* indicates that a) phenomenological experience is the foundation of selfhood, and b) social bonds provide an index for the formation of identity. These are the elements Regina loses during her transition into zom-being. Rationality provides one mode of apprehending self, but here it pales in comparison with experiential understanding of selfhood in the socio-sexual realm.

### **Zom-bequeathed: Sociosexual P-Zombies**

Although *Pretty Dead* does not answer the question of what it is like to be a zombie, Regina’s transition highlights crucial differences between human experience and zom-being. Most notably, *Pretty Dead* probes the role sociality – here, epitomized as sociosexuality – plays in self-conception. The narrative thereby also undercuts the anthropocentric “experiential hierarchy” on which rationalist notions of human consciousness are founded. Thus, transitional zombie narratives such as *Pretty Dead* highlight areas in selfhood philosophy that would benefit from greater critical attention. First, intuitive self-experience should not be neglected. Self-reports are typically viewed as problematic because they are prone to bias and error (see Doucet; Hohwy; Whiting). However, dismissing autobiographical accounts entirely risks privileging rationalism and misses what is useful about such accounts: that they reflect how selfhood is experienced in the social realm. Second, we should not be blind to the impact institutional arrangements of power have both on self-experience and on conceptions of selfhood. In *Pretty Dead*, these structures are embodied by the rationalist medico-legal institution in which Regina is detained. The conflict between Regina and Romera’s viewpoints evinces the need for a new discourse that is attuned to Regina’s self-experiences rather than one that quashes incompatible reports.

To neglect the social world – in which experiences happen, in which behaviors manifest, in which identity is formed – is to hark back to a Cartesian model of selfhood, which separates interior and exterior. As Andrea Nye observes, Rene Descartes’ dualistic paradigm is flawed because he envisages consciousness as “solipsistic...removed from passion and imagination,” and ultimately drives a wedge “between feeling and knowing” (26). Although dualism is largely rejected in contemporary philosophy, we should take care not to replicate his conceptual flaw: privileging self-experience to the extent that “self” is divorced from social reality. A coherent theory of selfhood must bridge between the personal, internal world of desires, motives, and intentions on one hand and the external social world on the other. Many proponents of the p-zombie debates fail to achieve this balance because they focus on rationalizing paradigms such as “physicalism,” and are not attuned to our experiences of self.

It is surprising that interdependent sociality has featured so little in discussions regarding zombies and consciousness to date. Sociality is fundamental to self-conception, and so it impacts on self-experience. Transitional zombie narratives offer an avenue into examining consciousness that is sensitive to an intuitive version of selfhood, one that develops the p-zombie debates by thinking about selfhood in a pragmatic way. In contrast, p-zombie debates are typically hypothetical in nature, and lead to some outlandish assertions about self-experience. For instance, Philip Goff proposes that he cannot imagine what it is to be a zombie, but can readily conceive of being an equally hypothetical “lonely ghost.” It is little wonder that some philosophers have rejected p-zombies altogether. Daniel Dennett, for example, has labeled the p-zombie argument “preposterous,” elaborating that it is a “strangely attractive” but “unsupportable hypothesis” that ought to be “dropped ... like a hot potato” (171).

Those zombies we *can* apprehend – those represented in popular culture – are of philosophical value in ways that their p-zombie brethren are not. Contemporary movie zombies are becoming ever more akin to humans, and commonly occupy human social situations. Rather than being denizens of apocalyptic wastelands, the undead are now frequently placed in unexceptional “human” scenarios, as titles such as *Zombie Cheerleading Camp* (2007), *Zombie Beach Party* (2003) and *Brunch of the Living Dead* (2006) evince. As they come to inhabit a broader range of everyday social spheres and become increasingly alive to human experiences, movie zombies are becoming progressively valuable conduits for philosophical reflection on the self and ourselves.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, *Pretty Dead* is a prototypical example of how zombie movies can be utilized for philosophical enquiry into sociosexual existence. *Pretty Dead* is rooted in reality, both formally (employing found-footage realism), and thematically (focusing on Regina’s medico-legal and social conditions). Crucially, *Pretty Dead* underlines Regina’s *experience* of transition, and this is what viewers engage with. Rationally, we know Regina’s story is fictional, that Regina is performed by an actor (Carly Oates), and that zombies do not genuinely exist. Viewers who engage with *Pretty Dead* as a narrative do so at an intuitive, experiential level. Compared with the cold, dead analysis of p-zombie argumentation, zombie movies are animate and vital. Interaction with Regina’s story is closer to a social, emotive experience than it is an intellectual process. That experience is not adequately captured by the rationalist conceptual tools currently at our disposal. Films such as *Pretty Dead* do not just engage its viewers in an intuitive kind of philosophical thinking. By depicting a form of selfhood that defies rationalist logic (zom-being), these films also challenge their viewers into developing new conceptual (theoretical and imaginative) vocabularies via which to describe and engage with both selfhood and sociosexuality.

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## Filmography

*Brunch of the Living Dead* (2006, USA, dir. Dan Dujnic)

*Chip and Bernie's Dating Guide for the Zombie Apocalypse* (2011, USA, dir. Pasquale Murena)

*Dating a Zombie* (2012, USA, dir. Jack Abele)

*Harold's Going Stiff* (2011, UK, dir. Keith Wright)

*Last of Us, The* (2013, USA, dir. Bruce Straley)

*Pretty Dead* (2013, USA, dir. Benjamin Wilkins)

*Return of the Living Dead* (1985, USA, dir. Dan O'Bannon)

*Return of the Living Dead Part 3* (1993, USA/Japan, dir. Brian Yuzna)

*True Love Zombie* (2012, USA, dir. Paul Blevins)

*Zombie Beach Party* (2003, Canada, dir. Stacey Case)

*Zombie Cheerleading Camp* (2007, USA, dir. Jon Fabris)

*Zombie Honeymoon* (2004, USA, dir. David Gebroe)

*Zombie Love* (2007, USA/Netherlands, dir. Yfke Van Berckelaer)

*Zombie Love* (2008, USA, dir. Ken Morris)

*Zombie Love Song, A* (2013, Canada, dir. William Morrison)

*Zombie Love Story* (2008, USA, dir. Marcus Slabine)

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<sup>i</sup> The philosophical zombie was evoked earlier by Kripke and Block for example, although Chalmers' contentions have inspired much recent debate.

<sup>ii</sup> A terminological point requires clarification. The term "transition" carries established meanings in the context of sociosexual identity discourse. Individuals experience sociosexual transformations of all kinds, ranging from pubescence to "coming out" to transsexual transition. My use of "transition" does not seek to draw a comparison between any of these particular shifts and becoming undead.

<sup>iii</sup> This play on "Romero" evinces that the narrative is clearly staked as a zombie film, despite the ambiguity over Regina's undeadness.

<sup>iv</sup> There are two notable variations on this theme. First, films such as *Zombie Love* (2007) and *A Zombie Love Song* (2013) depict zombies falling in love with living persons. Zombies are limned as having autonomy in these cases, and so they will not be considered here. Second, *Dating a Zombie* (2012) presents a living protagonist who eschews relationships with the living in favour of partnerships with the undead. In this case, sociality's value is called into question. Anyone interested in the practicalities of sociosexuality in the wake of outbreak may wish to consult *Chip and Bernie's Dating Guide for the Zombie Apocalypse* (2011), which outlines problems associated with "zomance" and offers advice on handling the "opposite" (undead) sex.

<sup>v</sup> Indeed, zombies exhibit behaviours, but (presumably) have no underlying mental states.

<sup>vi</sup> Qualia, in this view, are indicators of consciousness.

<sup>vii</sup> On the conceivability of p-zombies and epistemic limitations, see Hanrahan; Goff; Diaz-Leon; Majeed.

<sup>viii</sup> As an aside, some full-blown zombies claim to have experiences and display awareness of their state. One prototypical example is the female zombie torso in *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) who is able to articulate that being undead "hurts;" she explains that zombies eat brains because it temporarily assuages the agony of being dead. This zombie purports to have at least one kind of phenomenal experience (pain), which signifies self-knowledge: the zombie describes herself as an entity that has undergone an experience. One could argue that the zombie is mistaken and does not really have phenomenal experiences. There is a difference between stating that one has had an experience and actually *having* an experience. However, the same line of thought would give us reason to doubt the veracity of qualia in general. We have no means of knowing whether other living humans' reports of experiencing are as false as the zombies' are. Moreover, if the zombie believes that they are experiencing, there is every chance that one's own claims to experiencing are also false. Incredulity over the zombies' claim to consciousness leaves the living sceptic with no grounds for demonstrating their own claim to consciousness (on this quandary, see Macpherson, 231-2).



<sup>ix</sup> Cordyceps fungus also causes the zombie plague in the recent videogame *The Last of Us* (2013).

<sup>x</sup> Flesh eating is anti-social according to Regina's norms. In some cultures cannibalism is a social practice rooted in compassion and interpersonal obligation. For example, see Conklin.

<sup>xi</sup> For discussion of zombies and gender politics, see Jones.

<sup>xii</sup> Moreover, the film-makers have declared that they intended to make a realistic, "scientifically plausible" zombie film. See Ben Wilkins' "Director's Statement," <http://www.prettydead.com/about-2/cast-crew/directors-statement/> [accessed 04/07/2013].