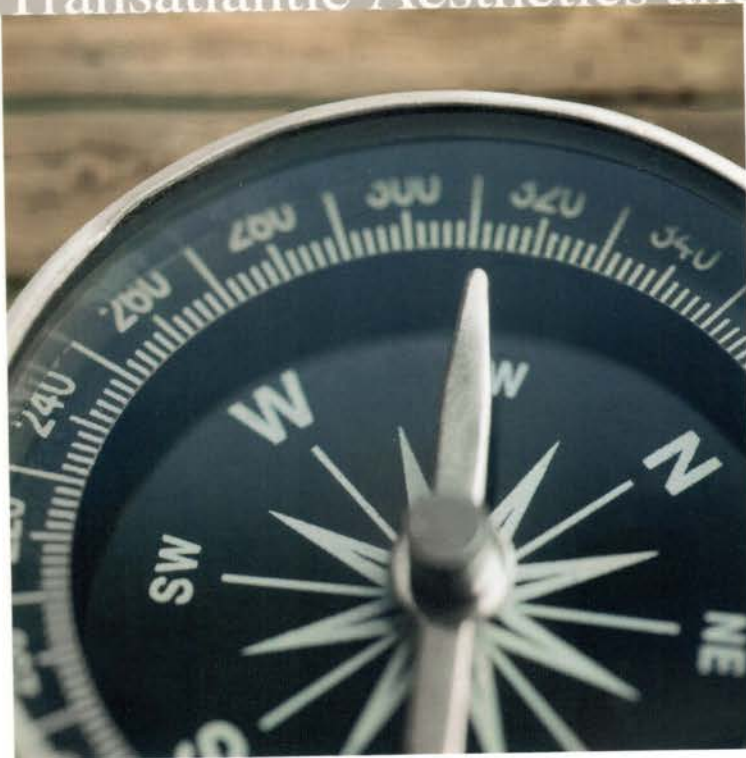


A CRITICAL GAZE FROM THE OLD WORLD
TRANSATLANTIC PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN STUDIES

Isabel Durán, Rebeca Gualberto, Eusebio De Lorenzo,
Carmen M Méndez-García, Eduardo Valls (eds)

Transatlantic Aesthetics and Culture

VOL. 9




PETER LANG

Transatlantic Aesthetics and Culture

Vol. 9

General Editors

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Bibliographic information published by die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche National-
bibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet
at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:
A catalogue record for this book is available.

ISSN 1661-805X
ISBN 978-3-0343-3480-8 pb.
ISBN 978-3-0343-3689-5 MOBI
DOI 10.3726/b14768
ISBN 978-3-0343-3687-1 eBook
ISBN 978-3-0343-3688-8 EPUB

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2018
Wabernstrasse 40, CH-3007 Bern, Switzerland
info@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com

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Printed in Germany

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On Human Consciousness and Posthuman Slavery: Representations of The Living Dead in T. S. Eliot, Thomas Pynchon and William Gibson*

Abstract: This paper addresses the cultural icon of the living dead and its evolution through works by T. S. Eliot, Thomas Pynchon, and William Gibson, with the aim of linking its iconicity to the foreshadowing sociopolitical power of written literature. After an introductory typology, the description of the living dead icon is analyzed in two well-known fragments from Eliot's poetry; relations are established also with *The Golden Bough*. Then, the paper evaluates the association of the icon to states of collective passivity, surrogation, and conformism in fictions by Pynchon and Gibson. By centering on symbolic aspects of the living dead, on their characteristics as shown in the selected corpus, and on their consideration as creatures which lack consciousness, the paper stresses the iconic cultural function of the literary creature while at the same time affirming its difference from past and current definitions of other living dead entities, especially zombies in American cinema.

Keywords: Living dead; zombies; surrogation; consciousness; posthuman

1. Introduction: Towards A Typology of The Living Dead

In recent years, zombies, the most popular iconic representatives of the living dead in present times, have become a hot topic in criticism¹ and some typologies have been elaborated, frequently having as target the film representations of the creepy being. Relevant books and articles on the topic have been written by scholars such as Peter Dendle (*Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, 2001), Gary D.

*The author wishes to acknowledge that the writing of this paper has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Research project FFI2015-63506-P).

¹ To a large extent thanks to the interest and editorial support of North Carolina publisher McFarland and Co, which has published many of the seminal books on zombie audiovisual representations.

Rhodes (*White Zombie*, 2001), Jamie Russell (*Book of the Dead*, 2006), and Kyle Bishop, author of *American Zombie Gothic* (2010), an insightful book on zombies in American cinema. Bishop centers his research on Romero's influential films while also approaching the cultural icon from its primitive voodoo representations and the gothic tradition, linking the creature to American race and (post)colonial issues as well as to the ultimate fear of enslavement. In his work, Bishop shares the main contentions of preceding scholars on the issue and understands the (filmic) subgenre as a "valuable and complex manifestation of contemporary concerns and repressed cultural anxieties" (7), while also perceiving a connection between the present eruption of zombie representations (that he calls "zombie renaissance") and the collective effects of 9/11 (9). One of his main critical targets is to use zombie cinema as "the most likely and appropriate vehicle with which to explore America's post-9/11 cultural consciousness" (11). Similarly but in a more condensed form, this paper intends to find in some selected literary works a number of examples that use the iconicity of the living dead to contend that such representations are not there to explore any collective cultural consciousness but actually to warn of its lack as one of the principal sources of social malaise.

Before approaching the texts selected for this study, a few clarifications about the living dead iconicity seem to be in order. The first one is that not all creatures termed as "living dead" are zombies—let's think of the vampire, for instance—but traditionally all zombies have been considered to be living dead entities. The second one is rather obvious: the name of living dead does not respond to the actual description of the creature even when they embody our fears of what may lie beyond death. Zombies, vampires or any other kind of living dead are actually alive because they can move and they frequently kill or are killed by humans; only when killed they become actually dead in an ontological sense. The creatures' condition of being "living dead" is, therefore, figurative; there is no literal sense in the name applied to them. Sometimes—and zombies are a case to the point—the living dead are considered not to be alive because they show no apparent consciousness of their acts, and such state seems to be, most of the times, irreversible: these creatures usually die because they are killed but only in rare occasions they can revert to their former state of complete humanity, provided a cure is found and used on them. Thus, we can also observe that in some cultural representations humans who were considered to have no consciousness of their acts

were referred to or described as “living dead” on account of such lack; they are the main target of this paper.

When checked in the literature on zombie representations mentioned above, it also seems clear that for a living dead to be considered a zombie it needs to comply with a number of characteristics: it walks, it bites, it arises fear in the beholder, and from the critical perspective of classic psychoanalysis (be it Freudian or Lacanian), at least along the last few decades it seems to have embodied anxious reactions and collective fears motivated by slavery, disease, (nuclear) war, radioactivity, invasion, terrorism, or ecological disasters. However, there is another side of the matter: there is also a living dead creature that may appear as the symbolic warning that precedes disaster, that is to say, as an iconic caveat used by some authors who foresee social dangers ahead. In addition to showing relevant intertextual connections in their literary worlds, the three writers whose works are evaluated in the following pages also share the use of literary representations of living dead creatures as a warning against social conformism and political passivity; they perceive such state as the main impediment for social progress. In their works the living dead are not explicitly scary, as the audiovisual ones usually are. These writers’ iconic creatures represent the non-thinking masses, the manipulated consumer, the passive victim of political wars or, more recently, the stupefied surfer of the web or the cybernetic posthuman attached to their technological implements. They embody the reversal of what has been traditionally conceived as human intelligence, they are the passive victims of History who hold in themselves the seeds of their own slave condition.

2. Stage One. Modernist Antagonists: Of Wise Men and The Living Dead in Eliot’s Poetry

In various parts of his critical work, T. S. Eliot acknowledged the fact that he was extremely attracted to literary tradition even if his main artistic aim was to renovate poetry.²² Such paradox is also informed by his condition as a high-brow intellectual

² See especially “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) and “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), both of them collected in Eliot’s *Selected Essays*.

who fitted in the sophisticated community of the modernists, a generation of brainy artists strongly committed to represent the new understanding of reality then formulated from many innovative fields of knowledge, including the new physics, the recently-founded psychoanalysis, and a growing anthropology, among others. In his attempt to grasp this new complex reality, Eliot showed a strong self-conscious understanding of his role as an artist. He sided with his friend Ezra Pound in the consideration of the poet as the new savior of the dumb masses. In his influential review on *The Metaphysical Poets* Eliot openly declared the importance and complexity of his profession:

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary language into his meaning. (*Selected Essays* 289; Eliot's emphasis)

It is not uncommon to find in his writings definitions of the poet's "refined sensibility" as the main feature that elevates the writer to the category of priest or medium of civilization, unquestionably somebody superior to most humans, whose mission is to understand and spread the Word of absolute knowledge (*Selected Essays* 19–20). Again paradoxically, in his poetry Eliot refers reiteratively to his necessity to find the sacred or mythic word that *may transcend the world of opposites* (see McKenzie 257), but he often describes, by contrast with his own privileged condition, the existence of a type of people defined by their incapacity to think and react against the problems of their time. In effect, Eliot dedicated some of his most well-known verses to describe the dumb unfortunate creatures that populated his daily life. By 1925, such beings had already become the protagonists of his poem "The Hollow Men":

We are the hollow men	1
We are the stuffed men	
Leaning together	
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!	
[...]	
Shape without form, shade without color,	11
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion;	

In “The Hollow Men” Eliot expands in more detail the description of the emotionless beings that he had located, a few years earlier, at the end of part 1 of *The Waste Land* (1922). They read as follows:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,	62
I had not thought death had undone so many.	
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,	
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.	65

In both instances Eliot seems to be describing a type of (almost) non-thinking creature which, even if submissive, resembles contemporary representations of the living dead. Published only four years after the first release of *The Waste Land*, his *Hollow Men* insistently reproduce the traits that characterized Eliot’s description, in the four verses above, of the multitude of bank clerks who every morning had to cross London Bridge on their way to the City’s financial district—as he also had to do, being an employee of Lloyd’s at the time. It should be noticed that this crowd of anonymous people *flows* above the bridge as if they were the lifeless water actually flowing underneath it; the powerful image marks the notion that the multitude lacks, like the zombies and other manifestations of the living dead, any sense of individual consciousness. Of course, as the writer explicitly stated in a note, the verses had as intertext a quote from Dante’s *Divina Comedia*. Thus, by addressing the inescapable fear of the dead and connecting it to human dumbness, Eliot’s verses add to the persistent significance in art of the binary wise/dumb, from past cultures to present-day life, from humanist representations to our contemporary multimedia living dead. It should be noticed, however, that the contradiction in the use of the binary extends to the fact that in the fragment from *The Waste Land* the narrator’s apparent detachment from the people he sees walking along London Bridge becomes mixed with the fact that actually Eliot was also one of those bank clerks who had to cross the bridge every working day, as he confesses in the endnote provided for this section of the poem, on the dead stroke of nine of St. Mary Woolnoth’s clock. The narrator’s understanding of the complexity of life also takes him to finish the first part of the poem by recognizing his and the reader’s implication in the disastrous condition of their present culture, shattered by the Great War: “hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frère!” (Verse 76). Thus, the narrator, other characters raging from the aristocratic Countess Marie to Stetson (the American friend), together with the readers of the

poem are linked by their passive and therefore complicit behavior to the wasted condition of the land. By the end of Part 1 of *The Waste Land* we have all become creatures whom death has undone, we are the Hollow Men who still in 1925 offer themselves as warning that unless we fight against our paralyzing condition things will become worse.

Together with his bleak (but visionary) understanding of modern life, it should be pointed out that Eliot's description of the dumb masses and of himself as submissive beings is a feature present in one of the main sources for his great poem. In his first note to *The Waste Land* the poet acknowledged the influence of James Frazer's encyclopedic *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1915; 1922). The chapters Frazer dedicates to explain the rituals of fertility and the importance of the figure of the king or high priest for the annual rebirth of the land unveil an early configuration of human societies in strict categorical terms, with dichotomies that establish clear social divisions among our ancestors. In the primitive world order, continuously exposed to fights among different human communities, one of the most important dichotomies divided the winners from the losers in war. The winners usually killed or took as slaves the remaining members of the defeated faction. In one of the main vegetation ceremonies that allegedly brought forth the annual process that revitalized the land and the crops, a sacred victim—the king or a high priest—as representative of the divinity was driven into sacrifice. In this way, the flesh and blood of the divinity functioned as a metonymic and metaphoric symbol that in theory propitiated the regeneration of life, such as symbolically still happens in the Christian communion (Frazer 556–58). It is not difficult to understand that people in power, kings or high priests, were not very happy about their pending sacrificial death and eventually changed the ritual to be replaced by a type of being also very significant in recent fiction and cinema: the surrogate (or scapegoat). Surrogates have in common with both the living dead and Eliot's hollow men the fact that their will or consciousness is not actually theirs; the surrogate's has been occupied by another presence. Frequently, in audiovisual representations of the living dead zombies may try to level their fate by eating the brains and flesh of the humans they find even if, in this attempt of parodic communion, they will not become wiser by doing that. However, surrogates cannot acquire—neither metonymically nor metaphorically—the properties of their masters; surrogates are the ultimate living dead, commodified conformist humans with no will of their own and no body for themselves. In their condition as living dead, surrogates have no self at all, they have become enslaved containers deprived

of everything. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* offers many examples of surrogation since prehistoric times, frequently associated to cultural representations of the living dead, from human sacrifices to vampirism. The influential British scholar provided abundant examples that man has always been wolf to man in the most cruel and inhuman ways and that the commodification of people is not only a sign of late capitalism but a persistent condition since prehistoric times (Frazer 628–79). However, what the eminent scholar could not foresee yet was that in our present culture bodily surrogation also extends to the mental, virtual, and complete enslavement of the former human being.

3. Stage Two. From Modernist to Posthuman: The Living Dead as Iconic Representation of Contemporary Enslavement

Gradually, cultural representations of the dumb and the surrogate victim evolved from the primitive cultures studied by Frazer and from their Eliotian poetic manifestations to fit in our contemporary global community of addicts to virtual reality. As foreshadowed by Marshall McLuhan's in his influential essay "The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis" (45–52), thousands of millions of people are now trapped in the technological web that has progressively extended our selves since the first hominids started to use bones or stones as instruments for both social evolution and aggressive claims. Through multiple representations, literature and other arts have offered testimony of the passage from old means of enslavement to the more sophisticated ways deployed in present society for similar purposes.

As extensively argued by his critics, Eliot's most famous poem was a response to the Great War and to the lack of Western spirituality as well as a prediction of bleaker times to come, and when years later the Second World War was also over new fears replaced the old ones. Again, some postwar artistic manifestations attempted to conjure both the horror created by man and his old fear of death. The anxiety of facing a radioactive world became symbolized in a proliferation of sci-fi movies that featured post-holocaust mutants, gigantic monsters like Godzilla, alien duplicates, or red invaders coming from Mars. Within the grounds of popular culture, the postwar period produced vampire and werewolf

films and the zombie, coming from earlier filmic representations of the 1930s, rose to a more visible status from the 1950s, when a renewed interest in voodoo movies starts to grow and Edward L. Cahn releases his *Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957).

In 1968, with the release of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie as social icon gains in popularity, possibly on account of the film's bleak social symbolism and approach to race miscegenation (see Heffernan 66–69; and Bishop 94–127). By that year a first wave of postmodernism had already taken over American culture and the interest in the zombie started to rise at a moderate pace till, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it came to a peak with an overwhelming number of films, video-games and TV productions, *The Walking Dead* being one of the most well-known examples of what qualifies as the present zombie-fever (Drezner 825–27). However, along these past decades, amid the fast development of a new technological society, some American writers still shared Eliot's preoccupation with the dumbness of the masses of *Hollow Men*; they also understood social dumbness as the most serious threat to contemporary life and adapted its representation to present social conditions. For these writers, the icon of the living dead would not necessarily symbolize anxieties related to events which brought about collective traumas, as film directors of zombie films seemed to be doing (Bishop 7–11). Following Eliot's lead, some postmodernist fiction writers saw the possibilities of using living dead iconicity to symbolize and denounce the passivity of a multitude of beings trapped in consumerism and technology, examples of social conformism that makes them easy target of totalitarian views and, thus, collaborators in the destruction of democratic values.

In "The Mental lives of Zombies," Declan Smithies contends that a "zombie is a creature that is just like a conscious subject in all relevant physical, functional or behavioral respects, except that it has no conscious states" (341). Smithies is interested in cognitive processes and therefore his scholarly approach to zombie iconicity misses the element of fear that characterizes popular, especially audiovisual representations of this figure. Nevertheless, his definition fits better into the more general condition of the living dead as contended in this paper. For Smithies the zombie has become the symbol that represents any beings which lack consciousness of their actions. In this sense, the zombie/living dead qualifies as the one who does not care, a condition frequently associated to the fate of the masses in present postindustrial communities and thematically also linked to Eliot's iconicity of the *Hollow Men*. The strong power the modernist poet's views exerted on his own fiction is explicitly recognized by Thomas Pynchon in the Introduction

to his collection of short stories *Slow Learner* (1984), one of the very few occasions in which the invisible author has commented on his own poetics. Soon in the Introduction Pynchon acknowledges the influence *The Waste Land* had on “The Small Rain,” his first published narrative (4) and shows again the influence Eliot’s poetry had on him in connection with his well-known story “Entropy” (15).

When Pynchon publishes his first novel, *V.*, in 1963, the Eliotian imprint of his *Hollow Men* resounds strongly in a book that features two main protagonists and focalizers. The appearance of one of them, called Benny Profane, happens in Christmas Eve. Parodically, Profane is defined not as a new Savior but as somebody who tries not to care, abandoning himself to the inactivity of *yo-yoing* or riding up and down the New York underground, with no purpose or apparent consciousness of his acts. Of course, being a Pynchonian protagonist and symbol of the post-war American youth, Profane is not abandoned by his author, who tries to inject some nerve into him and into his readers by providing us with one of the most celebrated paradoxical mottos of the period: “Keep cool, but care” (*V.* 369), thus keeping the door opened to the old Eliotian priestly aim: consciousness and emotional care should be effectually injected from the artist into the common people. The situation seems to demand again a scholarly intervention. Already in 1963 Pynchon’s narrator describes a dystopic social reality where most people’s brains are trapped by the mass media:

People read what news they wanted to and each accordingly built his own rathouse of history's rags and straws. In the city of New York alone there were at a rough estimate five million different rathouses. God knew what was going on in the minds of cabinet ministers, heads of state and the civil servants in the capitals of the world. Doubtless their private versions of history showed up in action. (225)

In point of fact, in the last decades of the 20th Century many artists seemed to show their optimism again about the possibility of “educating the masses” even at a moment when the limits between popular and high culture seemed to be falling down (Parker 155–58). If T. S. Eliot thought that he was a leading (although failed) prophet for his time, the 1960s sprouted with a renewed revolutionary confidence in the possibilities of art to improve the world. At the time, tradition and conservatism were confronted and partially defeated by the younger generation, civil rights were granted to some minorities, and many artists, the youth, and academics shared the belief in the possibilities of art to improve social conditions.

By then, following the publication of *The Crying of Lot 49* in 1966, Thomas Pynchon had already acquired the status of cult author. Despite its brevity, his second novel proclaimed “the possibilities of revolution” (Schaub 31) and the liberation from postwar conservative stagnant politics that had turned American society into the passive population whose collective fears had been embodied or conjured in the iconicity of the audiovisual zombie (see Bishop, especially Chapters 1 and 2).

As the New Right gradually regained political control and started to revert the changes propitiated by the 1960s social struggles in some pages of American fiction the official history of the USA became supplemented with other, non-official records that point to the existence of a conspiracy to keep people in ignorance, as entropic living dead servants of the status quo. In the fiction responsible to a large extent for the birth of that other, hidden history—best represented by writers such as Pynchon himself or Don DeLillo—the notions of paranoia, entropy, and mass-media control became frequently associated to new forms of enslavement, in the line described by the theorists of the Frankfurt School. Following the premises of his earlier fiction but in a much more complex way, in his third novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), Pynchon advanced the notion that paranoia may also be a reaction against signs that can be found not only in the individual psyche but also in external, objective reality; what is often pursued by the unknown conspirators is to establish their supremacy by reverting the mental patterns of the people to a stage of mental entropy, a condition that again resembles that of the Eliotian living dead.

At the time, in a seminal study on the fantastic published in 1981 as *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson evaluated the subversive social quality of gothic fiction and later forms of disturbing fantastic literature by associating them to Freudian and Lacanian theories, which took her to suggest a new definition of entropy associated to mental states (72–77). In her views, which strongly echo Pynchon’s symbiosis of Eliot’s images with thermodynamic metaphors, not only the whole universe is cooling down towards a final state of physical entropy, but humans are also subject to an irretrievable entropic condition that affects our bodies but also our mental will or consciousness, a state that can be reversed only by keeping the mind bouncing, alert, and thinking. When extrapolated to society as a whole, Jackson’s notion of mental entropy adds to Frederic Jameson’s often-quoted contention that,

[...] in postmodern culture, “culture” has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process. (1984: ix)

In agreement with Jameson’s critical diagnosis, along the postmodern period some American fiction writers frequently denounced the process of both cultural and individual commodification by deploying metafictional strategies to warn readers that any semiotic representation, including official historical records, is already fictional and that fiction may become a powerful instrument to unveil rhetorical traps.³³ Postmodern writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Coover, Toni Morrison, E. L. Doctorow or Bharati Mukherjee together with Pynchon and DeLillo warned their readers of the necessity to become conscious of the mediating role language and other semiotic codes exert to build our understanding of the world and, eventually, define our position and relevance in society. By the end of the century, the new technologies had confirmed McLuhan’s early understanding of the human being as nothing better than an electrode in the process of global communication, a notion that exposed our commodified condition and explained the increasing power the mass media had acquired to create and modify ideologies.

Accordingly, by the end of the 1980s Pynchon was ready to incorporate again in his peculiar iconography, this time in a more explicit manner, the figure of the Eliotian living dead. In *Vineland* (1990) the invisible author describes a Californian cityscape already trapped by simulacra. There, in the epitomic but now simulated American Promised Land, characters DL and Takeshi will help to reestablish karmic balance to the Thanatoids, a peculiar breed of living dead whose characteristics allow the writer to denounce the bleak social conditions of contemporary America. Comically, readers are informed that the Vineland Thanatoid community shares a voracious urge to watch TV:

³ As critic Linda Hutcheon put it: “The self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction does indeed foreground many of the usually unacknowledged and naturalized implications of narrative representation” (35).

While waiting for the data necessary to pursue their needs and aims among the still-living, Thanatoids spent at least part of every waking hour with an eye on the Tube. “There’ll never be a Thanatoid sitcom,” [Thanatoid] Ortho Bob confidently predicted, “‘cause all they could show’d be scenes of Thanatoid watchin’ the Tube!” (170–71).

However, the real aim of this breed of living dead is not to watch TV eternally but to “advance into the condition of death” (171) because, as happens to the narrator of *The Waste Land*, Thanatoids are stuck in twilight, at the Eliotian “violet hour,” which impedes their cycle of life to follow its natural course. They are ghostly creatures who cannot sleep; some of them may be victims of crime but many among the Thanatoid community are also an iconic representation of the Vietnam veterans:

Ortho Bob came lurching over, looking as awful as the night he must have spent, wanting to talk some more about his case. He had been damaged in Vietnam, in more than one way, from the list of which he always carefully—though if might only have been superstitiously—excluded death [...] “Fuck the money, rilly,” Ortho Bob had stipulated, “just get me some revenge.” (174)

Thus, by resorting to living dead iconicity Pynchon’s irony mixes the traumatizing effects the Vietnam War had on the American collective imaginary (see Storey, 176–83) and the collective passivity, when not rejection, the veterans found when they returned home. Whether all Thanatoids have been actually killed or not remains an undecidable factor in the novel, but the collective trauma of Vietnam and the social response given to the returned veterans emerge in this living-dead icon as two of the main problems of the American 1980s. Thus, *Vineland* becomes a refuge for those worthless creatures, actual casualties or ghostly returned veterans who do not fit in the country’s economy.

Still in the 1980s, in a little tale about the masses’ conformist condition cyberpunk writers William Gibson and John Shirley collaborated in the creation of a condensed tale that also reads as the representation of commodified urban America as a living dead community. The indebtedness Gibson’s fiction has always shown to Pynchon’s literary universe has been sufficiently proven in a number of scholarly works and explicitly confirmed by the cyberpunk writer himself (McCaffery 138). Accordingly, Gibson and Shirley’s short-story “The Belonging Kind” (published in the collection *Burning Chrome*, 1986) recaptures the intertextual line that from Eliot’s *Hollow Men* passed on to Pynchon’s iconography of the living dead. The story features an unknown omniscient narrator

who follows the protagonist, a man named Coretti, himself somebody who follows obsessively a mysterious girl from bar to bar in a big city, in a detective quest that emulates previous Pynchonian uses of the motif in his early fiction while also echoing the second part of *The Waste Land* in its en-abymic denounce of the social lack of communication. The protagonist of the cyberpunk story is paradoxically described as a teacher of linguistics who is unable to communicate with people outside the classroom. He is a divorcee who “didn’t go to many parties. He went to a lot of bars” (44). Coretti is repeatedly described as somebody desperately seeking somebody else to share his feelings. But he is ill-fitted for the purpose; he doesn’t know how to dress or how to talk to a girl, and his ex-wife thinks that “he didn’t look as though he belonged anywhere in the city” (44). When he is finally capable of addressing the girl in a bar, she replies by imitating his own tone and insecure voice. But she is not a mocking mimic. She is one of the belonging kind, the narrator meaning with this that she fits perfectly in any environment because externally she can transform her emotionless self when she needs to. The creature is totally chameleonic, she changes her dress and hair in a matter of microseconds to fit and belong wherever she goes. In other words, the girl is portrayed as a beautiful and apparently harmless hollow woman, a new type of living dead with no apparent will or consciousness of her own.

Later, Coretti follows her along different streets, witnessing how she changes into different social types, the rich or the poor; into different ages, the young or the old; always fitting. She goes from bar to bar with a boyfriend who simply has to open a pocket into his flesh to extract from it perfect money with which to pay for the huge amount of drinks they never stop consuming. Eventually, the narrator informs readers that Coretti has realized that they “were the kind you see in bars who seem to have grown there, who seem genuinely at home there. Not drunks, but human fixtures. Functions of the bar. The belonging kind” (49). Days later the protagonist follows the couple of belonging types till they enter the hotel where coincidentally Coretti also lives. In one of its rooms he finds, perching, a dozen or so of the belonging kind: they have turned into creatures with “membranes, third eyelids that reflected the faint shades of neon from the window” (54); as evoked by the neon lights, all humanity has vanished from them. They are mere reflectors of the artificial cityscapes that (post)humans have been inhabiting since their entrance in Baudrillard’s third stage of the simulacrum (*Simulacra* 6).

Coretti's shock when he sees the perching beings may recall the one suffered by the protagonists of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) when they realize that their town is being taken by extraterrestrial impersonators. In the case of Siegel's film, it is easy to read the grips of anticommunist fear, but it should be noticed that in the film the extraterrestrials seemingly lack emotions, as also happens to the creatures Coretti discovers perching so close to his own home. Surprise also sprouts from Gibson and Shiner's tale when irreversibly Coretti becomes attracted to the belonging kind: despite their lack of feelings these creatures also are—like zombies, vampires and other versions of the living dead—contagious. Symbolically, the protagonist renounces his Christian religion, makes his own fleshy money to pay for his rent, follows the girl again, drinks like she does, and stops feeling drunk. The time comes when he even mimics the bartender's voice and tone. He sounds then, as the narrator ironically concludes his tale, like "a real human being." The ideological invasion in this cyberpunk tale is not symbolized by any spores carrying the communist creed in them. Gibson and Shiner's postmodernist story warns readers about the proliferation of the passive non-thinkers, the hollow men and women of contemporary culture turned into commodified slaves of the capitalist cycle of production-consumption, who only toil to see the product of their efforts turned into money that can be exchanged then for new clothes or addictive drugs. The new hollow being is represented by a breed of living dead that never stop to think about the empty inhuman ways the system uses to keep them trapped.

Distancing itself from mass culture products, "The Belonging Kind" leaves readers to ponder about the reasons why Coretti, despite his fear, decides to join the passive chameleonic creatures and stops thinking by himself. Although this tale does not follow the typical patterns and dystopic futuristic settings of cyberpunk fiction, it is a cyberpunk product in the sense that it shows deep concerns about the increasing process of human commodification in the age of hyper-technology. The realization that our times have brought forth a new posthuman being is one of the main features of cyberpunk, as is its warning about the effects that the new technologies have on our cybernetic-oriented identities. The new technologies lure humans into new forms of existence that propitiate, again, the kingdom of the passive living dead.

In her study on the fantastic, Rosemary Jackson interprets bodily transgressions and the trespassing of fleshly limits as cultural symbols that hide a mental drive to expand the self into the other: the individual self, she suggests, tries

to go beyond its borders because of entropic demands that she associates to Freud's death wish and to Lacan's notion of lack (Chapter 3). In line with her interpretation, iconic figures such as the living dead would exert their popular attraction because of their lack of will and consciousness but also because of their sense of collective belonging, of being mysteriously, even if unconsciously, connected to an unknown order whose commands they have to follow. Thus, the condition of the stupefied or dumb creatures might be read as sign of a collective mental entropic state that impedes our realization of being individuals while symbolically foreshadowing bleak possibilities for the future, in a world where the status quo is defined and controlled by allegedly unknown rulers who are very conscious of the simple ways needed to manipulate the masses.

4. Stage Three. Back To Primitive States of Surrogation: The Mediated Posthuman Slave

By the turn of the millennium and following the sociological effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it seemed that the emotionless community represented by living dead and, more specifically, zombie iconicity had become part of a cultural process that aimed now at the denunciation of the impervious state of commodification that technologically-advanced societies had reached. Eliot's *Hollow Men* had turned into passive artificially prosthetic beings. At the time cultural criticism had already defined as "posthuman" the new paradigm which focused on the trespassing of limits between human and machine, physical and virtual reality, providing artists with the opportunity to use iconic representations of the living dead to warn against the threats of the new technological era. But along the process, the first years of the third millennium also meant the iconic reevaluation of an old symbol that foresaw the importance that notions of dumbness and lack of consciousness will have in our near future: the surrogate.

As stated above, according to James Frazer rituals of deadly surrogation were frequent among ancient cultures; kings and priests redefined vegetation ceremonies by surrogating their power to slaves or prisoners, who became the actual victims in the ritualistic sacrifices that were expected to facilitate the continuation of the life cycle. At the beginning of the 21st Century, the notion of

surrogation is frequently associated to the idea of hiring a womb with the purpose of procreation but there are other important implications to the term. Although many viewers of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) basically understood the film as a denunciation of the excesses of colonialism, ecological problems being at the root of the moral in the story, the film takes its title from a cybernetic virtual surrogate, a recent meaning of the term "avatar" that many people already knew when the film was released. Cameron had translated into film a notion that links the ontologies of physical life and cyberspace at a time in which the culture of cybernetic surrogation was becoming already translucent, a feature so common in our posthuman lives that it was felt to be almost a natural given. However, from an ethical angle physical or virtual surrogation means a taking over; somebody possesses and takes control of another living creature. And, what is a surrogate but a living dead entity physically possessed by the will of another being?

In fact, cybernetic surrogation already had a short but condensed history by the time Cameron released his film, a history linked to the literary thread targeted in this paper. It featured as one of the most intuitive ideas in William Gibson's path-breaking novel *Neuromancer* (1984). There, Gibson used the expression "To leave the meat behind" in a McLuhanian reference to the process by which his hackers switch themselves into the computer and enter cyberspace, in this way leaving their flesh (meat) behind and letting the mind ride free in the web. But in his novel Gibson also foresaw the dystopic and commercial possibility of riding cyberspace—which he termed *the matrix*—to occupy somebody else's emotions. The process, which he called *SimStim* or *Simulated Stimulation* (*Neuromancer* 55), featured soon in cyberpunk literature and also in films such as Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995). In these works the process of occupying somebody else's emotions is frequently linked to the notion of commodification: SimStim has a commercial use and it also becomes addictive. In an ultimate manifestation of McLuhan's theories, the user of this device extends her or his self by entering the consciousness of another self, thus expanding towards the other, feeling pleasure, or pain or both. It should be noticed, though, that in Cameron's film the act of entering the consciousness of another self, the avatar, is already accompanied by the more radical act of total occupation and displacement of the surrogate self. Where does stand the position then of an occupied dumb surrogate? Recent culture provides different options to answer the question, from the victims who do not realize they are being occupied to the avatars which are created artificially to live the lives of the subjects of their occupation. In the near future "real" people may

remain comfortably seated or lying in bed somewhere else, away from the dangers of the “real” world. Such is the approach taken in Cameron’s *Avatar* or in Jonathan Mostow’s film *Surrogates*, also released in 2009, where humanoid robots are used by actual people to interact in society, thus avoiding any direct confrontation with the effects of the passing of time in their actual bodies. The avatar results, then, in the hollow being at the total mercy of its/his/her owner and occupant but where does the owner’s freedom stand then?

In his novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013), Thomas Pynchon confirms his early dystopic predictions by portraying a society almost totally devoid of human energy and trapped in cyberspace, the most powerful controller of information and creator of simulation in present-day life. In the 21st Century, the Pynchonian living dead have turned into an almost barren symbol which lives a fully commodified status, a comic distortion of the traditional fear-inducing zombie that now also dwells in both the physical and the virtual worlds (*Bleeding Edge* 51–52). Maxine, the protagonist, thinks she sees some zombies in the street, now empty signs in a “reality” already saturated of simulacra. Even her friend Shawn—himself an old fashioned TV addict—warns her that the process of commodification also affects the formerly terrorizing creature—“Are we seen some wholesale return of the dead?” (339). Shawn’s views are complemented by a number of references to the commercialized representations of zombies when Halloween arrives and Manhattan residents spend “thousands in haunted-houses effects, black light and fog generators, arena sound, animatronic zombies as well as live actors working for insultingly less than scale” (369). In Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* the explosion of simulated reality has brought with it the ultimate warning: as anticipated by Eliot from the verses of *The Waste Land*, a collective lack of awareness still results, despite foreshadowing literary warnings, in the fusion of the wise and the dumb into one single entity, a reified belonging kind whose brains are mediated, when not actually trapped, by the illusory electric pulses of cyberspace, pulses that now go even beyond the emptiness of the surrogate to transform the whole reality into an ontological void.

Slaves of mass media and technology or readers dedicated to thinking about ways to liberate (what is left of) the human being, from the desolate pages of the greatest modernist poem literature has moved to a specific type of contemporary fiction that describes the imminent taking over of society by a community of nerds, of the new hollow men living their non-authentic lives in a non-real reality. These

new living dead extend their physical limitations with ever smaller and more powerful technological gadgets. From big computers to lap-tops, tablets or cell-phones, technological devices are the new magic spells that increasingly prove to be instruments to enslave both the wise and the dumb into the community of the damned cyber-creatures, where wisdom and numbness, violence and submissiveness still negotiate new states of being that do not seem to bring with them either happiness or freedom.

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