

INTRODUCTION ... TO THE UNDEAD

There are many natural sources of fear in world politics—terrorist attacks, lethal pandemics, natural disasters, climate change, financial panic, nuclear proliferation, ethnic conflict, global cyberwarfare, and so forth. Surveying the cultural zeitgeist, however, it is striking how an unnatural problem has become one of the fastest-growing concerns in international relations. I speak, of course, of zombies.

Whether they are called ghouls, deadites, posthumans, stenchies, deadheads, the mobile deceased, or the differently animated, the specter of the living dead represents an important puzzle to scholars of international relations and the theories we use to understand the world. What would different theories of international politics predict would happen if the dead began to rise from the grave and feast upon the living? How valid—or how rotten—are these predictions?

Serious readers might dismiss these questions as fanciful, but concerns about flesh-eating ghouls are manifestly evident in popular culture. Whether one looks at films, songs, games, or books, the genre is

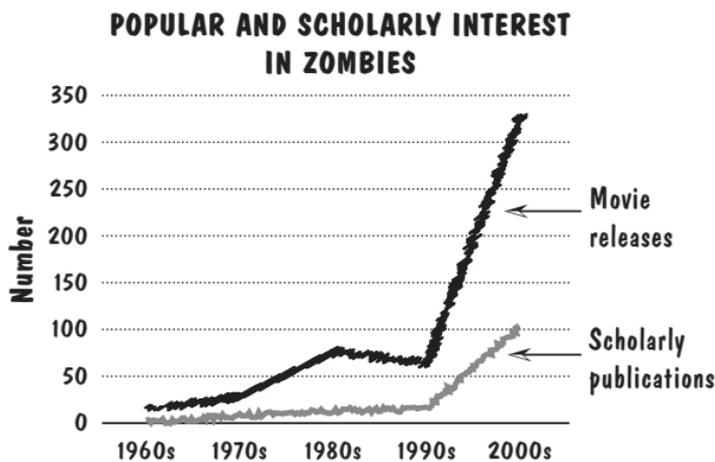


Figure 1. Popular and scholarly interest in zombies.

Sources: Wikipedia, Web of Science.

clearly on the rise. As figure 1 shows, the release of zombie films has spiked since the dawn of the new millennium; according to conservative estimates, more than one-third of all zombie films were released in the past decade.¹ Figure 2 suggests that these estimates might be understated. According to one recent analysis, zombies became the most important source of postapocalyptic cinema during the last decade.*

Nor is this interest limited to celluloid. A series of zombie video games, including the *Resident Evil* and

*Phelan 2009. Zombies are clearly a global cinematic phenomenon. Beyond the United States, there have been Australian, British, Chinese, Czech, German, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, and Norwegian zombie flicks. See Russell 2005 for an exhaustive filmography.

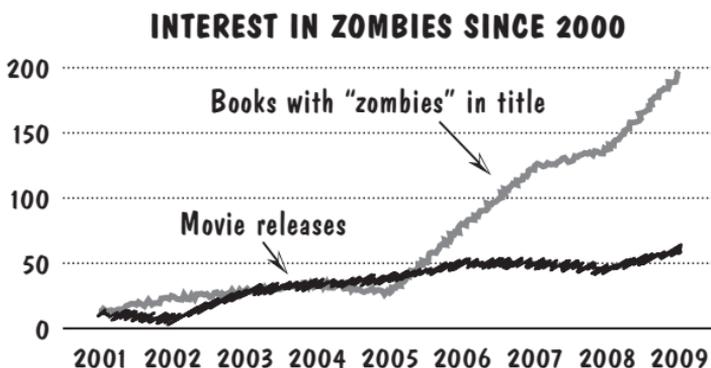


Figure 2. Interest in zombies since 2000.

Sources: Amazon.com, Wikipedia.

Left 4 Dead franchises, was the precursor for the renaissance of zombie cinema. The undead are now on television shows, such as Comedy Central's *Ugly Americans* and AMC's *The Walking Dead*. Over the past decade, zombies have also seeped onto the written page. The popular literature ranges from how-to survival manuals,² to children's books,³ to revisionist early Victorian fiction.⁴ Comic book series such as *The Walking Dead* and *Marvel Zombies* have spread rapidly over the past five years. One book editor gleefully told *USA Today* that "in the world of traditional horror, nothing is more popular right now than zombies. The living dead are here to stay."⁵ A cursory scan of newspaper databases shows a steady increase in post-human mentions over the past decade (see figure 3). Clearly, the living dead have lurched from marginal to mainstream.

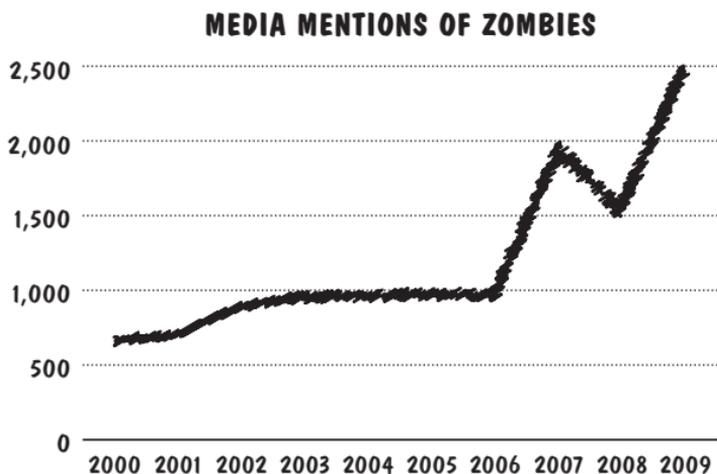


Figure 3. Media mentions of zombies. Source: Lexis-Nexis.

One could dismiss the zombie trend as merely feeding a mass public that craves the strange and bizarre. Such an explanation would be only skin-deep. Popular culture often provides a window into the subliminal or unstated fears of citizens, and zombies are no exception. Some cultural commentators argue that the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks are a primary cause for renewed interest in the living dead, and the numbers appear to back up this assertion (see figure 2).⁶ Certainly the subsequent anthrax attacks in the autumn of 2001 raised fears about bioterrorism and biosecurity.⁷ As Peter Dendle notes, “It is clear that the zombie holocausts vividly painted in movies and video games have tapped into a deep-seated anxiety about society.”⁸ Zombies have been an obvious

metaphor for medical maladies, mob rule, and Marxist dialectics.*

Some international relations scholars would posit that interest in zombies is an indirect attempt to get a cognitive grip on what former U.S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld famously referred to as the “unknown unknowns” in international security.⁹ Perhaps, however, there also exists a genuine but publicly unacknowledged fear of the dead rising from the grave and feasting upon the entrails of the living. Major universities and police departments have developed “mock” contingency plans for a zombie outbreak.¹⁰ An increasing number of college students are playing *Humans versus Zombies* on their campuses to relieve stress—or perhaps to prepare for the inevitable army of the undead.¹¹ *Outdoor Life* magazine has run a “Zombie Guns” feature, stressing that “the only way to take ’em out is with a head shot.”¹² Biosecurity is a new imperative among national governments.¹³ The government of Haiti has laws on the books to prevent the zombification of individuals.¹⁴

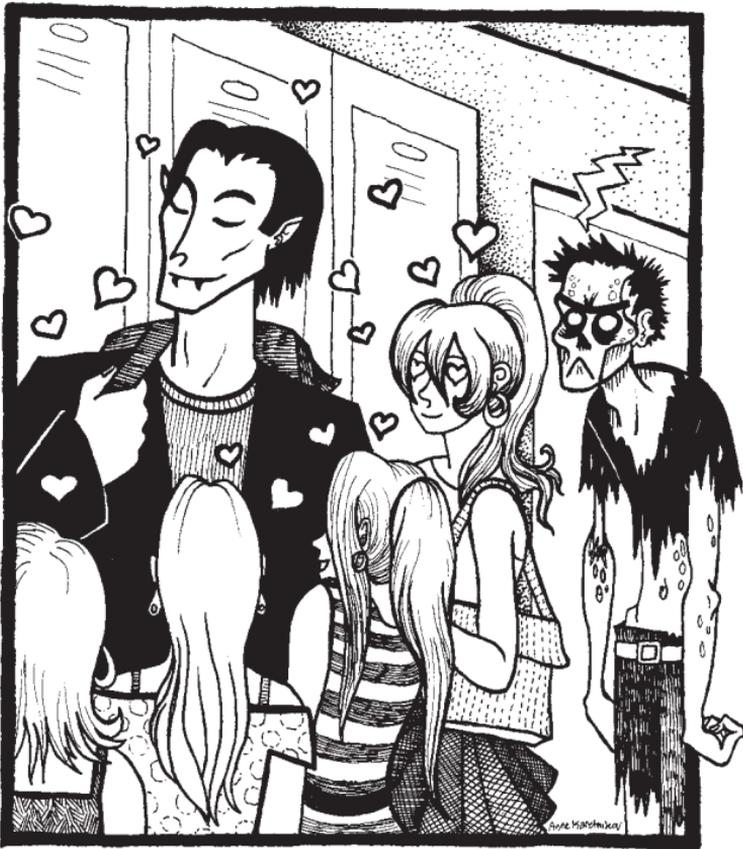
*In one of the more interesting interpretations, Grady Hendrix (2008) concludes that Juan Carlos Fresnadillo’s *28 Weeks Later* (2007) is “an effective metaphor for the unstoppable, global spread of Starbucks.” For more general discussions of how zombies are used as metaphors, see Aquilina and Hughes 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff 2002; Cooke 2009, chap. 7; Fay 2008; Harper 2002; Kay 2008; Lauro and Embry 2008; Newitz 2006; Paffenroth 2006; Russell 2005; and Webb and Byrnard 2008.

6 INTRODUCTION

No great power has done the same in public—but one can only speculate what these governments are doing in private.

One must be wary of overstating the case—after all, flesh-eating ghouls are not the only paranormal phenomenon to spark popular interest. Over the past decade, aliens, ghosts, vampires, wizards, witches, and hobbits were also on the tip of everyone’s tongue. For some, the specter of zombies pales in comparison to other paranormal creatures. The disdain of cultural elites has abetted this perspective by placing zombies in the derivative, low rent part of the paranormal spectrum—a shuffling, stumbling creature that desires only braaaaiiiiiinnnnnnns. Twenty-five years ago, James Twitchell concluded, “the zombie is an utter cretin, a vampire with a lobotomy.”¹⁵ Despite the zombie renaissance in popular culture, they are still considered disreputable. Paul Waldmann observed in 2009 that “in truth, zombies should be boring . . . what’s remarkable is that a villain with such little complexity has thrived for so long.”¹⁶ In 2010, the Academy Awards presented a three-minute homage to horror cinema, and only a millisecond was devoted to any zombie film—far less than that Chucky doll. No zombie has the appeal of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter or the Twilight series’ Edward Cullen.

From a public policy perspective, however, zombies merit greater interest than other paranormal



Zombies, in contrast to vampires, do not thrive in high schools.

phenomenon. In contrast to vampires or demons, scientists and doctors acknowledge that some variation of a zombie could exist in our physical world.* Zombies

*Berlinski 2009; Davis 1985, 1988; Efthimiou and Gandhi 2007; Koch and Crick 2001; Littlewood and Douyon 1997. In the main, these possibilities adhere closely to the traditional Haitian notion of the zombie as a human revived via voodoo and devoid of free will, rather than the flesh-eating ghouls that started with George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).

possess a patina of plausibility that vampires, ghosts, witches, demons, or wizards lack; the creation of a zombie does not necessarily require a supernatural act. Indeed, this plausibility of zombies can be seen in expert surveys. A recent poll of professional philosophers showed that more than 58 percent of philosophers believed that zombies could exist on some level. In contrast, fewer than 15 percent of the same respondents were prepared to believe in God.* Given the raft of religion and theology departments in the academy, it seems churlish for scholars to neglect the question of reanimated corpses snacking on human flesh.

The traditional narrative of the zombie canon also looks different from stories about other paranormal beings. Zombie stories end in one of two ways—the elimination/subjugation of all zombies, or the eradication of humanity from the face of the earth.¹⁷ If popular culture is to be believed, the peaceful coexistence of ghouls and humans is a remote possibility. Such extreme all-or-nothing outcomes are less com-

*Data from the PhilPapers Survey of 3,226 professional philosophers and others carried out in November 2009 (<http://philpapers.org/surveys/>). The philosophical definition of *zombie* (a being identical to humans in every way except lacking in consciousness) is somewhat different from the vernacular meaning (a reanimated corpse intent on eating human flesh). There is some conceptual overlap between the two meanings, however. As David Chalmers (1996, 96) puts it, “all is dark inside” for both categories of zombies.

mon in the vampire or wizard literatures. There are far fewer narratives of vampires trying to take over the world.¹⁸ Instead, creatures of the night are frequently co-opted into existing power structures. Indeed, recent literary tropes suggest that vampires or wizards can peacefully coexist with ordinary teens in many of the world's high schools, provided they are sufficiently hunky.¹⁹ Zombies, not so much. If it is true that "popular culture *makes* world politics what it currently *is*," then the international relations community needs to digest the problem posed by flesh-eating ghouls in a more urgent manner.²⁰