

Zombies and IR: A Critical Reading

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The zombie genre is quickly becoming a feature of International Relations (IR) classrooms and pedagogical toolkits as scholars enthusiastically embrace the undead as a vehicle for teaching the discipline. This article offers a cautionary note on a generally positive move to embrace the use of zombieism in IR. It shows how an uncritical use of a zombie apocalypse as a vehicle for teaching IR can reinforce existing divisions in the field, essentialise country positions, crowd out heterodox approaches, reinforce gender stereotypes and dehumanise people. To guard against these problems, the article shows how Zombie IR can be better used to think critically and normatively about world politics.

Keywords: zombies; popular culture; international relations; pedagogy; active learning

Introduction

The past decade has seen International Relations enthusiastically embrace popular culture as a classroom resource. George Orwell's *1984* has long had traction as metaphor for a meta-regional dystopia (see Hall, 2008); and other works in the genre have shown utility as pedagogical devices (Bradbury, 1951, 1954; Zamyatin, 1924). Stanley Kubric's 1964 satire *Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* is a familiar feature of IR classrooms and has been used to parody mutually assured destruction, illustrate the absurdity of nuclear deterrence and critically examine the dominant US cultural paradigm during the Cold War (Engert and Spencer, 2009; Maland, 1979; Weber, 2001). Yet, it is more recent works that have really captured our imaginations and become familiar classroom aids. *24* offers a populist back-story to a 'ticking bomb' scenario (Weed et al., 2008). The *Harry Potter* series has spawned an edited collection exploring conceptual aspects of IR (Nexon and Neumann, 2006). *West Wing* has found favour in teaching foreign policy (Beavers, 2002). *Game of Thrones* has ignited analysts' imaginations for its pseudo-realist depictions of a nasty, short and brutish world, and generated rejoinders pointing to the hidden ethics underpinning the narrative (Rosenburg, 2011; Drezner, 2011a; Carpenter, 2012; see also Jacoby, 2012). *The Hunger Games* has been a subject of interest among philosophers (Dunn and Michaud, 2012). The evolutionary myth in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spinoff *Angel* have been used as entry points for theorising identity and in/security in the everyday (Rowley and Weldes, 2012).¹ Others have drawn from Middle Earth and the main characters in the *Lord of the Rings* to illustrate and critique the 'great debates' of IR theory and 'waves' of feminist theory (Ruane

and James, 2012). And science fiction more generally has been used to explore the intersection between popular culture and world politics (Weldes, 1999, 2003; see also Dixit, 2012).

These examples notwithstanding, few popular cultural artefacts have captured IR classroom attention quite like the zombie genre. Quickly emerging as an IR zeitgeist, the transnational challenge that an outbreak of the undead poses is very much akin to the threats of the 'here and now' – terrorism, climate change, infectious disease – and allows students to imagine the kind of policy action and responses that particular IR approaches might take. Needless to say, the use of a zombie apocalypse as a public education tool by the US Office for Public Health Preparedness and Response Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has lent the genre additional credibility.²

Zombies have captured our professional imagination, in part, because of the ease with which key popular texts in the genre lend themselves to intellectual use (see Nexon, 2011; Payne, 2011) – Max Brooks' *World War Z*, for instance, is written as a pseudo 'ethnography' of the zombie wars – and, in part, because much of the heavy lifting has been done by one of Zombie IR's earliest proponents, Daniel Drezner. Drezner's blog post on zombies went about as 'viral' as one could imagine a contribution to IR theory. His *Foreign Policy* essay took the idea outside of the academy to a new audience. And his book (Drezner, 2011b) has been – again in IR terms – a runaway success. Other works too have made important contributions. For instance, Robert Blanton's (2013) guide to bringing zombies into the classroom and, slightly earlier, Derek Hall's (2011) zombie capitalism have been at the forefront of advancing zombie pedagogy.

Given the current interest in zombies, and the way the subject matter lends itself to IR, it seems only prudent to take an IR of the undead seriously in the classroom. There are, however, reasons to suggest that we should proceed with some caution and reflect on the purposes and consequences of using a zombie threat to animate our students. Our purpose in this article is to raise two broad questions that we believe are worth reflecting upon if we are to fully realise the utility of an IR of the undead as a pedagogical device. These questions are: first, what are the purposes of using zombieism as a teaching resource; and second, what are the pedagogical consequences of deploying zombie scenarios in the classroom?

Our worry is that zombies are being used merely as a means of teaching students about existing theories of IR rather than as a vehicle for developing critical and normative thinking. If this is the case, not only are we letting slip an engaging way of teaching students about the contours and problems of world politics, we risk underscoring existing divergences in the IR canon that obfuscate our capacity to engage with each other. A second, and related problem, is that by limiting our use of zombies to teaching students how existing approaches would respond to an outbreak of the undead we avoid getting them to push forward thinking about how to solve the most pressing global problems and to come up with alternative ways of organising the world. We see a third danger in the use of an IR of the undead that essentialises country positions, reinforces gender stereotypes and dehumanises people in ways that limit the possibilities for cooperation and legitimises certain forms of violence and attitudes towards adversaries in conflict. Ultimately, we believe that zombieism – particularly if engaged with 'actively' (i.e. through role-play, scenario and problem-solving exercises) – is an important tool in our pedagogical armoury. Yet, it is not one that we are utilising fully. Thus, we explain why we believe the answers to the questions we set out above are currently insufficient, present the potential dangers of this insufficiency and offer a way forward that may be more fruitful in making better use of this popular cultural resource.

The article unfolds as follows. To begin, we illustrate a measure of the popularity of the zombie genre and explain why it has gained purchase in IR. We go on to explore the purposes of bringing zombies into the classroom before considering the consequences of using zombies in the ways that we currently do. We discuss the dangers of essentialisation, ‘othering,’ gender stereotyping and marginalisation that lurk in the background. We also point to avenues for further development, focusing on the value that an IR of the undead can have. In the final section we offer our concluding comments.

Popular culture, zombies and IR

There has been a profusion of popular cultural references in and adaptations to IR classrooms in the past decade. Novels, films, video games and social media have all become ubiquitous features of pedagogical toolkits and are used as representations of and/or metaphors for the economic, social and political world. Few have, however, captured the popular imagination and the IR classroom quite like the undead.

The zombie genre, as it appears in IR classrooms, owes more to classical horror fantasy constructions of the undead than those prevalent in, among others, Haitian folklore (though they are not unrelated; see Saunders, 2012). In this articulation, zombies are understood as the product of ‘mad’ scientific experiments – as with H. P. Lovecraft’s (1922) tale of Herbert West and his efforts to operate ‘the organic machinery of mankind by calculated chemical action after the failure of natural processes’ – through fusions of the idea of ‘spores’ or ‘germs’ infecting, killing and then re-animating human and animal populations manifest in both zombie and vampire literature (see, e.g. Matheson, 1954) to the dissemination of the zombie plague via magic, bites, spores, saliva, scratches, touch, poison and sexual contact (Beamer, 2010).

Whatever the variant, a number of characteristics hold constant. Zombies are corpses, raised from the dead, ravenous to consume living human flesh. They are normally conceived as insentient and bereft of emotion, self-recognition and consciousness (with Marion (2011) being a notable exception). They amble relentlessly – the unremitting march of the undead to all corners of the globe with the exception of the polar regions as Brooks (2006) portrays it – rotting and consuming life, apparently unaware of their past lives and relationships. Zombieism is a contagion, an infectious disease that is spread in innumerable ways, but most often through bites (the mouth being important as a source of pleasure and consequence in the dichotomous presentation of kiss and bite in zombie and other horror novels). Zombies engender mass panic, social dislocation and collapse, conflict, terror and catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions.

The traction of zombies in popular imaginations is not new and has waxed and waned across time. The contemporary, apocalyptic zombie was born and popularised in George Romero’s original *Living Dead* film series trilogy released in 1968, 1978 and 1985, with three subsequent films being released in 2005, 2007 and 2009. Yet, H.G. Wells (1933) used something akin to a zombie plague to help him develop his argument for world government in *The Shape of Things to Come*. Matheson’s (1954) *I am Legend* did likewise in what is ostensibly a vampire novel but which has more in common with zombie survivalism than the works of Bram Stoker, Anne Rice or Laurel K. Hamilton. As Matheson (1954, p. 117) wrote: ‘It was the germ that was the villain. The germ that hid behind obscuring veils of legend and superstition, spreading its scourge while people cringed before their own fears.’ More recently, video games

such as *Call of Duty*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Dead Rising*, *The Walking Dead* and *Plants vs Zombies* have become favoured outlets for zombiemanía while satirical zombie movies such as *Shaun of the Dead* have brought comic relief to the genre.

That said, zombie films have experienced something of a ‘boomlet’³ in recent years. Gross earnings from the genre were almost US\$2 billion in the first decade of the new millennium, with annual revenue estimated to be US\$5 billion per annum;⁴ 2013 alone saw the release of 51 zombie-themed films, including Bollywood’s first zombie movie *Rise of the Zombies*. However, the zombie boomlet has not been confined to the big screen. The publication of novels such as *Warm Bodies* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* continue to capture the literary imagination of readers worldwide, while comic books such as *Marvel Zombies* titillate the young and younger at heart. And zombies have debuted on prime time television in the popular AMC series *Walking Dead* and the less successful comedy pilot *Zombieland*.

The purpose and consequence of Zombie IR

Zombies lend themselves well to the study of IR because they represent massive catastrophes spread through contagious infections that draw students into thinking about the most pressing global, social, political, cultural and economic issues of our time in ways that do not require too great a stretch of the imagination: the spread of disease, mass migration, restricted access to clean drinking water, poverty, food insecurity, environmental degradation, social dislocation and violence in all its manifestations. Like other plagues, zombie threats transcend borders and challenge conventional constructions of social, spiritual, territorial and national boundaries in much the same way as many contemporary threats (Coker, 2013; Saunders, 2012). Thus far, however, zombies have been deployed in IR to teach the canon – the key concepts, paradigms and dilemmas that make up the discipline – through the application of core theoretical approaches to a zombie (post)-apocalypse. Seldom have they been used as a vehicle to critically engage with, or move beyond, that canon.

Drezner (2011b) opened the door for the integration of zombies into IR classrooms with his *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. Marketed as an introductory text and recommended alongside existing course readings (see Nexon, 2011), this witty and popular book introduces undergraduate students to the dominant and conventional paradigms in IR by reflecting on the responses of national governments, international organisations and non-state actors to the zombie apocalypse from the point of view of different theoretical perspectives. Blanton (2013) has sought to take forward the use of zombies by drawing from Brooks’ *World War Z*, proposing specific teaching tools that can be adapted to its themes such as discussion guides and role-playing exercises. Coker (2013) draws from *WWZ* to reflect on what zombies can tell us about contemporary conflict and the global war on terror, and the transnational cross-border security problems they engender. Derek Hall (2011) uses zombies – as depicted in the films *28 Days* and *Wild Zero* – as allegories for national forms of capitalism that have an impact upon the global political economy, to argue that ‘zombie capitalism’ can help us better understand the dynamics of national resilience under conditions of globalisation. While Saunders (2012) argues that zombie outbreaks, understood as metaphors for illicit globalisation, can be examined through poststructural lenses to help students understand the politics of borderlands.

Although each of these applications has a utility, so far they have tended to limit the use of zombies to teaching what existing IR theory might tell us about an outbreak of the undead and/or demonstrating the key features of particular theoretical traditions. Zombies have rarely

been used to get students to think critically about the value and limits of these traditions. In our view, while zombies currently constructed show good prospects as pedagogical tools for enhancing the learning experiences of students in IR, we should proceed with caution. Two problems present themselves here. Used as an introduction to IR, Drezner's book is incomplete (it is, despite its marketing, more disciplinary satire than comprehensive text). Of the traditional canon, it concentrates mainly on realism and liberalism, albeit he acknowledges the shortcomings in conventional approaches to IR and their 'eroding analytical leverage over the security problems of the twenty-first century' (Drezner, 2011b, p. 112). Other approaches – notably Marxism and feminism – are dismissed out of hand with an 'amusing' aside,⁵ and the remainder of the book comprises approaches that do not normally make it into IR textbooks. Indeed, Drezner spends considerable space detailing domestic- and individual-level variables that may be at play in the development of responses to the global pandemic of zombieism. While domestic-level variables may matter for Zombie IR, Drezner's exclusive focus on American domestic politics crowds out other IR approaches and the political realities of most people living elsewhere in the world.

These problems are also evident elsewhere in the burgeoning zombie literature. Blanton (2013, pp. 10–11), for instance, details the way second-level bureaucratic and organisational processes can be adapted to develop strategies, weapons and tactics for killing zombies. Yet, in following Drezner's lead he fails to consider the significance of domestic-level variables beyond US borders. Privileging the American domestic political experience serves to legitimise American ways of thinking and doing, obfuscating critical reflection on US foreign policy and on world order more generally

Second, the existing Zombie IR literature deals only with the responses to a zombie apocalypse that those cherry-picked theoretical approaches suggest, rather than what an outbreak of the undead tells us about the limitations of IR theory and what other possibilities might exist not only for a different way of addressing an outbreak of zombieism, but also for alternative ways of thinking about IR and world order. While Drezner did not intend his book to be theoretically iconoclastic, it nonetheless remains the case that the lack of a further probing of IR theory in a book that captures the zeitgeist so well misses an opportunity to get students engaged in the task of pushing forward an intellectual canon that has remained static for too long. A forthcoming second edition promises to address some of these shortcomings.

Atomisation

A literature is emerging that argues that IR has become too fragmented a discipline (see, e.g. Smith, 2008; Wæver, 2013) and one that has left behind interdisciplinary or grand theoretical debate. In one version of this argument, in the last 30 years the discipline is portrayed as having experienced a strong profusion of approaches in which, paradigmatically, specific knowledge has been advanced, but the lack of serious debate across approaches has stunted the cumulative advancement in IR's theoretical canon (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014). A second version of this argument posits that IR is increasingly eschewing grand theoretical debate for simple hypotheses testing in an intellectual turn that has seen formal method triumph over theory building (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013). In a third version, IR's preoccupation with 'isms' has got in the way of understanding 'things that matter' (Lake, 2011, p. 471).

IR's theoretical and methodological fragmentation is reflected not only in *what* we teach, but also in the *way* we teach it. Weiss and Wilkinson (2014) argue that one consequence of the divide and profusion they observe in the discipline is that the classroom instruction of IR has moved away from a common canon towards an approach that typically starts from a favoured theoretical and methodological position. Exceptions of course exist, but it is not uncommon for North American universities to eschew teaching poststructural and postcolonial approaches, especially at the undergraduate level, for a focus on broadly realist and constructivist approaches with an emphasis on rationalist and reflectivist methodologies. The converse can also be said of the way IR is taught in British and Australian universities, where critical and poststructural approaches are more likely to be taught to students at all levels while eschewing mainstream theories and formal methods (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014, pp. 21–22). The effect of these practices is to make cross-disciplinary engagement difficult. One consequence is that we fail to address common disciplinary questions and, in so doing, ill-equip ourselves as a field of study for thinking about ways of working together to make the world a better place.

The use of zombies in IR classrooms thus far runs the risk of perpetuating these tendencies. As we note above, Drezner's introduction of zombies to IR is a welcome move. However, its problem is that it simply illustrates what one approach or another might have to say about an outbreak of the undead. Blanton (2013), Hall (2011) and Saunders (2012) undertake to do the same, albeit from different standpoints. Used in this way, Zombie IR merely shows differences between selected units in a narrowly presented theoretical canon. And it does so precisely because, as we illustrate above (and as Drezner and Blanton, among others, acknowledge), zombieism does not lend itself easily to all approaches.

Our worry is, however, a little more particular than the use of a limited theoretical range in dealing with zombies in the classroom. It is the overwhelming preference for just one approach: realism. Blanton (2013, p. 12), for example, claims the existential nature of the zombie threat makes it most amenable to realist problem solving. Although he encourages students to experiment with different lenses to deal with an outbreak of the undead, by his own admission he struggles to find applicability in *WWZ* for feminist and constructivist approaches to IR (Blanton (2013, pp. 3, 7–8). As we note above, Marxist and reflectivist approaches such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism and critical feminism are all absent in Drezner's zombie canon. Moreover, Drezner offers up a rationalist treatment of constructivism that provides little more than the idea that, '[z]ombies threaten the powerful human norm of not devouring each other for sustenance or pleasure – and therefore arouse greater security concerns as a result' (Drezner 2011b, p. 68).

It would be too bold to suggest that a reconstructed Zombie IR has the potential to bridge the atomisation of the discipline to which Weiss and Wilkinson (2014), among others, point. However, it is our view that by imagining the devastation that results from a zombie apocalypse we are presented with an opportunity to engage in a critical and cross-disciplinary conversation with our students about how to build a different – and potentially better – world. Instead of asking how one or another mainstream IR theory might respond to a zombie threat, a more preferable approach might be to devise problem- or question-driven scenarios that encourage students to devise and reflect upon solutions as well as on the value of existing theoretical approaches. For example, scenarios could be constructed in which students are asked to decide how scarce water resources could be distributed or how to deal with disease contagion, and to consider all of the related ethical implications. Rather

than making the post-apocalypse world fit predominant theories, such an approach invites students to reflect on how their proposed solutions interact with as well as challenge prevailing wisdom.

Essentialisation

Not only does the emphasis on mainstream IR theories and conventional security concerns in the extant zombie literature mean that heterodox approaches have so far been excluded, the way zombieism has been used essentialises certain traditions and country positions. As Blanton (2013, p. 5) puts it:

WWZ [*World War Z*] is a book of counterfactual history, the ways in which states respond to the zombie threat is very much in line with their existing characteristics. ... China brutally represses news of the outbreak and virtually collapses, Russia practices similar brutality and becomes a religious/nationalist state, Israel becomes a zombie-free garrison state, Japan finds itself overrun with zombies and evacuates its entire population and North Korea goes (literally) underground.

This essentialisation is not, however, confined to the negative presentation of certain countries and traditions. It is also at work in the reverse – that is, in celebrating the personalities and characters of the victors – in key zombie tomes from which scholars draw. Brooks' (2006) recounting of the Zombie Wars is, for example, ultimately a celebration of the triumph of the United States, its government and its value system. Despite early failures such as the Battle of Yonkers and the hysteria that follows the official acknowledgment of the zombie pandemic, the US is portrayed as the victorious messiah. Sound policy making eventually comes to the fore and secures the West Coast Safe Zone, new and effective technologies to combat zombies are developed, the US economy is restructured for wartime production and, beginning with the Battle of Hope and ending with Road to New York, the US is reclaimed from the zombies. Moreover, other countries' mimicry of America policies and values is portrayed as the source of their resilience after the Zombie Wars. For instance, Cuba's emergence as a victor and post-apocalypse financial heavyweight was due, in large part, to the repatriation of Cuban Americans and the adoption of capitalism and democracy.

Yet, while the celebration of a 'domestic' triumph over the zombie outbreak is, at one level, understandable – American audiences are Brooks' target market – and certainly does not amount to the jingoism evident in the film version, the regurgitation of stylised and subjective country positions (of either the US or of other states) is not unproblematic. Indeed, essentialising country positions in this way is similar to trying to teach students about the inner workings of the UN and world diplomacy through caricatured activities such as replicating *en masse* UN committees or simply concentrating on the General Assembly in Model United Nations simulations based on what we *imagine* it is that countries always – and will continue to – do. Rather, we should be asking students to use their knowledge of what passes for debate in and around the world organisation as a platform for thinking about new, alternative and better ways of organizing relations among whatever collectives we imagine are the primary political units of analysis. Better still, we should be asking our students to disrupt existing conceptions for alternative scenarios, perhaps such as what would happen if a corporation were to join the UN – as Iain Banks (1999) does in his book *The Business*. So, what Zombie IR should also be teaching us is how to use global threats as the basis for constructing new world orders rather than as a medium that distils theoretical claims or reifies country positions.

The consequences of using Zombie IR in the way we currently do is akin to what Steve Smith (2004) referred to in his 2003 International Studies Association (ISA) presidential address as 'singing our world into existence', ensuring that it is complicit in the atomisation of the discipline and the constitution of impossibilities, limits, perceptions and exclusions in international politics. Plugging and playing Zombie IR in post-apocalyptic scenarios solidifies existing ways of thinking and doing. It privileges one set of theoretical and ontological assumptions and narrows the scope for critical reflection on how we can dismantle existing power relations and redress resultant social dislocations and asymmetries. It also eschews an attempt to engage in genuine dialogue between competing approaches (something our students need to be better at than we have proven to be) adding cement to our already atomised activities and reinforcing IR's fragmentation. And it creates several pedagogical pitfalls we should aim to avoid or overcome in future iterations of Zombie IR – to which we now turn.

Otherring

Another problem with rote-reading Zombie IR is that it can lead students toward behavioural practices that privilege conflict over cooperation. Zombie IR all-too-often replicates lifeboat earth scenarios (Schmidt, 1978) wherein individual survivalism trumps all other concerns, including ethics and complex dimensions of human security. Thus, because zombies lack sentience, higher order thinking and decision-making abilities, there is no possibility of compromise, negotiation or empathy. As Drezner (2013) gleefully declares: 'Zombies are the perfect metaphor for these threats. As with pandemics and financial crises, they are not open to negotiation. As with terrorism in all its forms, even a small outbreak has the potential to wreak massive carnage.' As a result, the only available response to a zombie attack or pandemic is to willfully, blindly and often joyfully kill them.

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Brooks describes the zombie threat thus:

The lack of rational thought has always scared me when it came to zombies, the idea that there is no middle ground, no room for negotiation. That has always terrified me. Of course that applies to terrorists, but it can also apply to a hurricane, or flu pandemic, or the potential earthquake. ... Any kind of mindless extremism scares me, and we're living in some pretty extreme times.⁶

Presented in this way, zombies are constructed as the constitutive 'other' (Neumann, 1996; Said, 1979), devoid of identity and unworthy of compassion or rights as (partially) living beings. This practice implies a hierarchy, making the 'other' lower or less important than the self. In conflict and survivalist scenarios, this is sometimes accomplished by invoking negative gender or racial stereotypes and by depicting enemies in popular discourse as animals or less-than-human to justify egregious acts of war such as rape, mass killings, torture, deportation, live experimentation and even genocide. Asking students to role-play the practice of 'othering' zombies, degrade adversaries and uncritically enact behaviours that have clear parallels in contemporary foreign policy has implications that are, thus far, largely ignored by proponents of Zombie IR. At best, this practice may serve to legitimise and reinforce hierarchies, particular forms of violence and attitudes towards anonymous adversaries or aliens in international conflicts, making students blindly complicit in the construction and reinforcement of a world order that is underscored by violence, hatred and intolerance. At worst, it may become self-fulfilling prophecy. As we send students out into the world to affect change we should be more reflexive about the tools and identities with which we arm them.

While he does not explicitly acknowledge these risks, Blanton (2013, p. 7) does allow the possibility that zombies' lack of sentience can be relaxed in scenarios to allow for discussions about the social construction of the undead. He suggests that a scenario akin to Castro's *Dead Like Me*, wherein humans emulate the behaviour of zombies to blend in and survive, may provide an entry point for thinking through the politics of identity. *Warm Bodies* (Marion, 2011) and its themes of love, memory, salvation and metamorphosis may serve a similar function, opening up space to think through zombieism as something that resides in all of us and calling into question what it means to be human. However, no serious unpacking and rethinking of identity and world order can take place as long as we only require students to regurgitate a limited theoretical register alongside narrow understandings of violence, conflict, gender and ethnicity.

Gender stereotyping

It is also prudent to consider the way Zombie IR, as it has been practiced to date, can reinforce gender stereotypes. With few exceptions, the zombie genre is largely marketed to men and boys under 25. Women are less enthused by zombies in the classroom than their male counterparts. Zombies' lack of sentience and emotional relationships as well as the gore and unmitigated violence that are central to the zombie genre may have the effect of side-lining or excluding women in pedagogical exercises that rely on popular culture artefacts to which they have difficulty relating. As Blanton (2013, p. 8) suggests, the integration of zombie satire may open up space for thinking through the gendered aspects of human-zombie relationships. The film *Fido*, which features an emotional relationship between a zombie dog and a human, complex family dynamics, and sex between zombies and humans, is one possible entry point for thinking through gendered identities under conditions of zombieism, but their connection to IR is tenuous at best. Sentience, sex and emotional attachments humanise zombies in several other films such as *Dead Alive*, *Cemetery Man*, *Day of the Dead* and *Warm Bodies*. Yet, while these films may shine light on themes that are conventionally understood to be appealing to women, they do little to assist in the dismantling of gendered stereotypes or patriarchal structures in IR. Indeed, such stereotypes and structures are widely considered to be part of the recipe for success in the genre.

Most popular cultural manifestations of zombieism feature male protagonists in leading, heroic roles while depicting female characters as marginalised, helpless, servile victims. Epitomised by Barbara in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* series, the quintessential woman in the zombie-verse is highly sexualised, fetishised and exploited. Strong, empowered female characters do make appearances, such as Selena in *28 Days Later* and Wichita in *Zombieland*, but they are each reduced to damsels in distress, dependent on their male counterparts for survival by the end of the films. A rare exception is *Resident Evil*'s protagonist, Alice, who destabilises gender representations by displaying a combination of violent, confident and highly sexualised agency.

As Blanton (2013, p. 8) points out, gender stereotypes prevail in *World War Z* where fertile Russian women are coercively impregnated as part of a breeding programme designed to repopulate the country. Unlike the *Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985) – a dystopian novel that also explores the theme of female subjugation through forced breeding – *WWZ* and the application of mainstream IR theory to the events in the book offer no insight into the various means through which they exercise agency or resistance. The depiction of a female air force pilot who finds herself in peril when she crashes her plane into zombie-infested territory is

more complex. While she is tough and competent enough to survive on her own for several days, her sanity is called into question by the female voices in her head, her imaginary radio and the unidentified stranger who provides guidance. Male helicopter pilots ultimately rescue her. Indeed, it seems that truly capable female characters in zombie films are most likely to be found in satires like *Shaun of the Dead*. In short, the zombie genre celebrates ‘masculine’ behaviours – aggression, control, action – and tends to deny women’s agency and reinforces stereotypes of subordination, sexualisation and objectification. Thus far, these are themes and practices left unexplored by Zombie IR.

To date, Zombie IR is also ontologically blind to the practice of gender-based violence in the genre and to the security issues encountered by women and children more generally in their everyday lives. Shepherd (2013) makes a robust and compelling case for the need to critically examine popular representations of gender and violence. She claims we should ‘read popular culture with a view to exploring what such artefacts can tell us about how we (are expected to) make sense of gender’ (Shepherd, 2013, p. 5). Popular culture often constructs gendered bodies and their violent reproduction and representations of sexuality in ways that have constitutive impacts on global politics. Part of our role as teachers should be to provide students with the tools and the initiative to unpack these representations and to think about the impact they have on world order. Plugging mainstream IR into scripted zombie scenarios does not allow for this. Rather, it works to further entrench the marginalisation of gender in the study of IR and reinforce the intellectual silos that have come to define its character. Moreover, by ignoring gender-based violence, we are unable to think seriously about how to improve the lives and conditions of a great proportion of the world’s people or push the boundaries of possible actions and accepted modes of being.

Thinking beyond metaphors

Finally, questions need to be asked, and answers provided, about the value of including popular cultural metaphors in our pedagogical toolkits more generally. Metaphors may well be useful intellectual constructs for helping students imagine complex and abstract concepts (Marks, 2011) but, as Grayson et al. (2009, pp. 156–157) suggest, ‘we need to investigate the political possibilities and limits of politics that are produced and/or shaped by popular culture. This requires extending beyond identifying allegories and metaphors that take world politics and popular culture as static structural givens.’ In other words, we need to adapt Zombie IR to learning in ways that encourage students to think about the constitutive relationship between popular culture and IR. Students should be reflecting critically on how the zombie genre and participation in zombie scenarios shapes and makes political possibilities and limits. We must also beware of overextending popular cultural metaphors. If we use too many in our classrooms, we risk not providing students with sufficient opportunity to learn about the very real but under-discussed threats that are confronting us and that require immediate attention: enduring poverty, growing inequality, infectious disease, climate change and so on. In our rush to excite students, we need to make sure we do not restrict our capacity to lead them into real world terrain that needs our urgent attention.

A way forward

For all of our worries, an IR of the undead *can* enable us to think about better, more progressive world orders, mindful of the need to guard against problematic social construc-

tions of gender and race among others. We must resist using it as a vessel for simply and uncritically pouring old wine into new bottles. It should engage student imaginations not only because it helps us explain how we currently view the world, but also how we can think differently conceptually, theoretically, socially and world order-wise. Our purpose in this section is to offer some preliminary thoughts on how we might deploy zombies in IR classrooms more critically and productively. Our aim is not to provide a definitive guide, but rather to offer some points for discussion precisely because we see the potential of a Zombie IR to inspire students in progressive and world order changing ways.

Rather than asking students to apply IR theory to combat threats during a zombie apocalypse, one pathway to realising the potential of an IR of the undead is to construct scenarios wherein students are asked to build alternative world orders in a post-apocalypse society. We ought to think through with our students how humans *should* react and rebuild their societies, institutions and structures of governance in the wake of a zombie apocalypse in order to realise a better world. In this way we can move beyond simply illustrating existing theories and practices of international politics to generating new ideas, visions, theories and possibilities.

Asking students to imagine alternative world orders has obvious appeal and involves an important dialectic exercise. On the one hand, it asks what world do we want to inhabit and how can we construct a place in which we would willingly live. On the other hand, it involves an implicit social critique, ethical argument and rejection of oppressive elements of prevailing world order and begs us to ask what are the obstacles to social, economic and political change and how can they be overcome. In this respect, Zombie IR can be an analytic, as well as an emancipatory, project.

We can, for instance, draw insight from feminist literature for thinking through the problematic social constructions of identity present in contemporary Zombie IR (Crawford, 2003). Feminists have long been engaged in imagining how we might better organise local and global governance in ways that are egalitarian and emancipatory and which explicitly deconstruct gendered power relations (see, e.g. Gearhart, 1979; Gilman, 1915; Lessing, 1980; Piercy, 1976). Perhaps most illuminating for our purposes are those that treat gender as unstable and mutable. For example, Ursula Le Guin's (1969) *The Left Hand of Darkness* invites us to consider the consequences of sexless androgyny or 'ambisexuality'. In this world, inhabitants have sexual urges only once a month during a 'kemmer' period and 'do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter' (Le Guin, 1969, p. 91). Instead, male and female physiology is randomly assigned depending on the chemistry between partners. One may be a childbearing mother to some and father to others, thereby collapsing notions of 'otherness' and revealing gender as a social construction. Society is thus better able to share burden and privilege equally among people. Similarly, in a world inhabited by zombies, 'otherness' is always dynamic and unstable. One can never be certain whether they or their families will become infected. Indeed, in some contemporary depictions (such as the *Walking Dead*) all humans carry the zombie pathogen and – except in the case of head trauma – will automatically re-animate as a zombie after death. In designing a post-apocalypse world order students should be mindful of the instability of one's identity and role in society and encouraged to confront the question 'what if the "other" is me?'

Herein lies the real value of Zombie IR. We can construct zombie scenarios in our classrooms that put students in situations akin to Rawls' (1971) original position. Without knowing how the burdens and privileges of social order will ultimately fall, students are encouraged to approach the post-apocalypse world with compassion, empathy, humility and hope for all.

Yet, ultimately the potential of Zombie IR rests with an imaginative reconstruction of world order and global institutions that prioritise goals such as peace, egalitarianism and social justice in the wake of a zombie apocalypse. Engaging students in conversations and exercises about making the world a better place plants the seeds of change. It changes our discourse and expands the range of possibilities before us, pushing beyond the boundaries of prevailing wisdom. If treated in this way, Zombie IR has the potential to empower students to engage in meaningful global social transformation.

The use of an IR of the undead for thinking about the problems of world order requires one final elaboration. As we note above, H.G. Wells wrote *The Shape of Things to Come* as a prophetic warning about where the world was going. For Wells, the inevitable consequence of the imagined catastrophes of which he foretells – which for him were even more devastating than the chemical warfare of the First World War – was the establishment of a world state. It matters not that Wells advocated a world state; this is not our argument. What matters is that he used a pseudo-zombie apocalypse in tandem with other dystopias as a platform for thinking about how the world *could* look. The way we use the zombie story in IR could and should be used to say something profound about the world we do and ought to live in. Getting students to engage in this kind of thinking at an early stage rather than encouraging habits that repeat static behaviours – as Model United Nations and other such simulations do – is precisely what we should be aiming for in our classroom engagements. If we are to teach our students anything, then surely we must not only teach them to think in known theoretical forms, but also to move beyond those forms and to think about alternative possibilities. Yet we have been doing precisely what the very zombies we are using are doing: walking without thinking in the hope that we might fall upon a chance encounter. IR needs to change and wake up to the real possibilities of a zombie horde.

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Notes

- 1 See also *Slayage: The Journal of the Joss Whedon Studies Association*, an interdisciplinary journal dedicated to the study of Buffy the Vampire Slayer: <http://slayageonline.com> [Accessed 29 July 2014].

- 2 <http://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2011/05/preparedness-101-zombie-apocalypse/> [Accessed 29 July 2014].
- 3 We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this apt description of the current wave of interest in zombies.
- 4 http://www.imdb.com/search/title?keywords=zombie&sort=moviemeter,asc&title_type=feature&year=2013,2013 [Accessed 29 July 2014]; <http://247wallst.com/investing/2011/10/25/zombies-worth-over-5-billion-to-economy/2/> [Accessed 29 July 2014].
- 5 As Drezner (2011, p. 17) puts it: ‘Space constrains prevent a fuller discussion of how some theories – such as Marxism and feminism – would cope with flesh eating ghouls. ... To be blunt, this project is explicitly prohuman, whereas Marxists and feminists would likely sympathize more with zombies. To Marxists, the undead symbolize the oppressed proletariat. Unless the zombies were all undead white males, feminists would likely welcome the posthuman smashing of existing patriarchal structures.’
- 6 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2006/10/03/DI2006100300686.html> [Accessed 29 July 2014].

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