Civilization of the Living Dead: The Zombie as Mirror of American Self-Destruction

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Introduction: Research Objective

The meme of the zombie has existed within United States popular culture for approximately eighty years. During this period the zombie has appeared in three distinctive forms. It first appears in the film *White Zombie* (1932) – which is set in the context of Haitian society and voodoo – as a passive, mind-controlled puppet of a Haitian voodoo master. George Romero reinvents the zombie in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) as the reanimated corpse of a former U.S. citizen, a “living dead” monster that is instinctually driven to kill and cannibalize humans. This second form is modified by *28 Days Later* (2002) in which the zombie is presented as a hyper-aggressive and fast-moving killing machine, the product of a bio-weaponry virus that has been accidentally released upon the world. The characteristics and narratives of the zombie have therefore changed in significant ways over the course of U.S. history. But in each of these forms it has been a monster that reflects the self-destructive nature of human behavior and social institutions within the system of U.S. capitalism.

Although the zombie has been a part of U.S. popular culture since the Great Depression, it has recently proliferated to an unprecedented degree, in its third incarnation, in the post-September 11th era (Bishop 2010). Steven Wells (2006) notes that popular culture has witnessed a zombie “renaissance.” Hollywood has produced several zombie films over the last decade, including *Zombieland* (2009), the *Resident Evil* series (2002 -), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and *28 Days Later* (2002). This trend promises to accelerate, as there are plans to release several zombie films in the next few years. The spread of the cinematic zombie has not been restricted to Hollywood. Independent filmmaker George Romero – who created the
second or “post-modern” zombie with his Night of the Living Dead (1968), and thereby inspired and set the mould for the deluge of zombie culture that has followed – has also recently continued his Living Dead series. After a twenty-year break from the original trilogy,¹ Romero has returned to his creation with gusto in Land of the Dead (2005), Diary of the Dead (2008), and Survival of the Dead (2009), calling upon the zombie once again to examine societal changes and social problems, such as class, immigration and militarism.

Zombies have left few, if any, cultural genres untouched, appearing in comics (Dead World and Dead Eye Open), video game franchises (Resident Evil, Left4Dead, and Dead Rising) and best-sellers like The Zombie Survival Guide and Pride and Prejudice and Zombies. Fans of the zombie have begun hard-rock bands such as the Zombeatles and have literally taken to the street, wearing costume and makeup, during “zombie walks.”

Scholars are also paying greater attention to the zombie. The recent appearance of Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy (Greene and Mohammad 2010) – and the placement of “zombies” before “vampires” within the title of this work – is a telling sign of the growing interest in, and collective need for, fathoming the meaning and significance of the zombie. What lies beneath the surface of a zombified popular culture?

As of yet the exploration of this question has been centered within the disciplines of cultural studies and film studies. There have been several histories of the cinematic zombie (Dendle 2001; Kay 2008; Russell 2008; Flint 2009; Bishop 2010); histories of the zombie within popular culture in general (McIntosh and Leverette 2008; Flint 2009; Flint 2009;)

¹ Night of the Living Dead (1968), Dawn of the Dead (1978), and Day of the Dead (1985) constituted the original trilogy.
Bishop 2010; Greene and Mohammad 2010); and in-depth accounts and readings of the films of Romero in particular (Gagne 1987; Maurizi 2004; Paffenroth 2006; Bishop 2010). This literature has begun to remedy the neglect of the zombie – in comparison to figures like the golem, the mummy, and the vampire – within the study of horror and the monster (Dendle 2001).

Despite this outpouring of research, there has yet to be an holistic account of the zombie that integrates and explains its history and evolution. An holistic account is based upon three methodological principles. First, any phenomenon is an interdependent and interactive part of a larger context.² The zombie is a cultural product of U.S. capitalism, and it therefore must be understood in terms of the latter. The logic of the zombie is connected to the logic of capital as it has manifested within U.S. society. Second, the logic of a phenomenon is revealed and develops over time. The zombie has co-evolved with U.S. capitalism over the course of history. Thus the zombie must be interpreted in terms of its own history and logic, as well as in terms of the history and logic of U.S. capitalism. Third, dialectics is required to integrate the history and logic of a phenomenon. Contradiction drives the development of a phenomenon over time, and dialectical methodology is based upon this principle. Capitalist society is driven by the contradiction between capital and labor, and the zombie must be interpreted in light of this contradiction. The contradiction between capital and labor creates three levels of capitalist self-destruction: destruction of the worker, destruction of society, and destruction of capital. The zombie and its narratives reflect these three levels of

² As Hegel puts it in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “the true is the whole.”
destruction, and the overall process of societal self-destruction of which the three levels are manifestations.

The absence of such an holistic account is understandable for four reasons. First, although the zombie has recently received more scholarly attention, there are still fewer accounts of it in comparison to other monsters. Second, the majority of the existing works are historical or empirical and do not integrate the history and logic of the zombie; even fewer begin the work of integrating the history and logic of the zombie with the history and logic of capital. Third, a phenomenon can only be understood once it has been observed and studied. The zombie reemerged into popular consciousness only a few years ago. The current “zombie renaissance” is an important part of the history and logic of the zombie, but we are still within its temporal framework. Fourth, dialectics is a critical methodology that challenges the given social order and thus does not find as much institutional and ideological support as other methodologies. As Marx (1995) noted, the dominant ideas of an age are the ideas of the ruling class. The ruling class under capitalism is the capitalist class, and the latter, generally speaking, assumes the point of view that is required by the logic of capital. The point of view of capital – which is found in capitalist ideology – celebrates the given order and does not examine the self-destructive contradictions of the capitalist system. Dialectics dissolves the static and triumphant image of society that is found in capitalist ideology. It does this by revealing how the contradiction between capital and labor creates poverty, death and destruction for the many, and exorbitant profits for the few. It is thus not a popular method, and this impacts all forms of scholarship, including the study of the zombie.
Interpretations of the zombie have therefore been limited by its relative neglect within the study of the monster and horror, an emphasis on its empirical and historical nature to the detriment of its philosophical dimensions, the proximity of its recent reemergence, and the lack of an holistic and dialectical account. Despite these limits of the literature, scholars of the zombie have performed the historical and analytical work such that the raw materials are now available for a more rigorous and comprehensive interpretation.

The aim of this dissertation is to explain the meaning and significance of the zombie within the history and society of the United States. Why does the zombie appear in 1932, and why does it reappear, in modified fashion, in 1968 and 2002? What explains the changes in the zombie form that take place in 1968 and 2002? Of what significance is the unprecedented, viral proliferation of the zombie across nearly every form of popular culture in the post-September 11th period? As the monster of the United States, what historical and philosophical truths does the zombie reflect to U.S. audiences about their socio-economic system and capitalism in general?

This project will explore these questions, and remedy the lack of an holistic account of the zombie, by using dialectics to weave together the history of the zombie, the history of U.S. society, and the logic of capitalism, while arguing that the zombie is a mirror of U.S. self-destruction.
Theoretical Framework and Substantive Focus

The History of the Zombie

The zombie is unique within the pantheon of monsters for its New World origins and for the fact that, unlike other monsters such as Frankenstein or Dracula, it has no literary roots in Gothic fiction (Russell 2008; Bishop 2010). With the publication of the book *The Magic Island* in 1929, and the release of the film *White Zombie* in 1932, the zombie leapt from its folkloric roots in Haitian voodoo directly into U.S. popular culture, foregoing the evolutionary trajectory of its fellow monsters. Russell thus claims that “the zombie is the most modern of monsters” (2008, 7).

The zombie originates in the history of Haitian slave labor and colonialism. Although no individual or work is solely responsible for bringing accounts of this history to the U.S. (McIntosh 2008; Bishop 2010), scholars agree that William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* inspired great interest amongst artists and the general public (Dendle 2001; Kay 2008; Russell 2008; McIntosh 2008; Bishop 2010). This book narrated the author’s experiences with Haitian life and culture, including a reported encounter with “real” zombies working as slave labor in fields.

Haitian practitioners of voodoo claim that zombification is possible and fear that they or their relatives may be turned into slave laborers by *bokors*, evil practitioners of voodoo (Seabrook 1929; Davis 1985; Davis 1988; McIntosh 2008; Bishop 2010). Harvard ethnobiologist Wade Davis (1985; 1988) claims that zombification is real and that he has interviewed two Haitians who were once zombies. He offers a pharmacological explanation of the phenomenon: secret voodoo societies have special knowledge of a drug mixture that induces a death-like state in the human, and of another
mixture that resuscitates the human once he or she has been buried. The resuscitated individual, lacking an individual will, is an ideal slave laborer. Bishop (2010) argues that, regardless of whether actual zombification is possible or not, the zombie is part of an ideological apparatus within Haitian society, one that disciplines and control Haitians through their fear of zombification. Thus the history and logic of the zombie, at its point of origin, is intimately connected to the political and economic issues of freedom, slavery, power and control.

The zombie makes its appearance in Hollywood cinema in the 1932 film *White Zombie*. *White Zombie* is set in Haiti within the context of colonialism, slavery and voodoo. The majority of the zombies in this film are Haitians who work as slave labor within the mill of a voodoo master, but the plot revolves around a white American woman who becomes the “white zombie” of the film’s title. She is invited by a wealthy French banker to conduct her marriage ceremony on his Haitian plantation. She is to be wedded to her fiancé, an American who works at a bank in Port-au-Prince. The French banker desires the woman for himself, and eventually turns to the evil voodoo priest for assistance. The voodoo master helps the French banker turn the woman into a zombie so that the French banker may possess her. The voodoo master eventually takes control of them both. The fiancé (the American banker), with the help of a white doctor who lives in Haiti, defeats the voodoo master and rescues the women and the French banker.

The zombie, themes and setting of *White Zombie* established the parameters for a series of Hollywood films over the next two decades (Dendle 2001). This first wave of zombie cinema combined the elements of a robotic zombie, a voodoo master, a foreign and exotic setting like Haiti, and the themes of mind-control, sexual possession, and
racial difference. These films deployed racist stereotypes and were, generally speaking, insensitive and unsophisticated in their depictions of other cultures. They manifested white fears of black rebellion and of the subjugation of white women at the hands of black men (Bishop 2010).

George Romero is widely recognized as the creator of the monster that most scholars and fans associate with the term “zombie.” The zombie that he creates in Night of the Living Dead (1968) is a human corpse that returns from the dead to kill and consume living humans. This film thrilled and scared audiences – and alarmed conservative commentators – because of its graphic depictions of cannibalism (Gagne 1987; Maurizi 2004; Paffenroth 2006; Bishop 2010). In the words of film critic Roger Ebert (1970), “you could actually see what they were eating.” Romero did more than reinvent the zombie as a cannibal that is back from the dead; he also established what Bishop (2010) terms the “zombie invasion narrative,” in which humans must retreat and defend themselves in the face of a rapid zombie outbreak.

Night of the Living Dead (1968) is set in the United States, in rural Pennsylvania, at the beginning of the zombie outbreak. The main characters temporarily evade the growing horde of zombies by taking refuge in an isolated farmhouse, but once inside they endanger themselves with constant bickering and the threat or use of violence in order to win arguments. The zombies eventually invade the house and consume the remaining characters, except one. The black male protagonist, who has locked himself in the basement, survives the night, only to be shot in the head by a group of white men who have taken it upon themselves to restore law and order, and who have (apparently) mistaken him for a zombie.
Night marks a critical evolution in the mirroring function of the zombie. White Zombie reflected the physical and mental destruction of the worker within capitalism, a system that has variously employed real slaves and wage slaves. The loss of autonomy and life within an inhumane system of production is a feature that was shared by actual slaves in the United States and Haiti, as well as wage slaves within the industrial capitalism of the Great Depression. Furthermore, the themes and setting of White Zombie are connected to a real history of U.S. colonialism. From 1915 to 1934, U.S. marines occupied Haiti to further the geopolitical interests of the United States. While occupying Haiti, “U.S. forces declared it a public duty for each and every Haitian to be subject to unpaid labor on a chain gang, enforced by armed guards who were permitted to shoot anyone who refused to participate” (Kay 2008, 2-3). White Zombie thus reflects crucial aspects of U.S. capitalism – the destruction and exploitation of the worker, colonialism, and sexual and racial domination – but it does not examine these themes as they appear within U.S. society, and it does not do so in a critical manner. Romero alters the zombie – its characteristics, setting, and narrative – such that it accomplishes both of these tasks.

In Night – which is set in the United States, and written and directed by Romero, an artist who is conscious and critical of his society – the zombie begins to perform its role as a mirror of U.S. self-destruction in a more focused manner than it did in White Zombie. This film presents a critical allegory of U.S. society by reflecting prominent

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3 As Bishop (2010) points out, U.S. workers, alienated and controlled by industrial capitalism at the time of the Great Depression, would have resonated with the image of the zombie that appeared in White Zombie. The scientific management of time and movement under Taylorism, and the assembly line techniques of Fordism, reduced the worker to a cog within the appendage of the machinery of capital. U.S. capitalism at this point had become a rationalized and planned system that required the worker to develop a mechanical “second nature” (Gramsci 1978).
social problems of the moment, including the use of violence and aggression to solve problems, racial conflict, the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family, and the institutionalized cannibalism of capitalism. These themes were central to the external and internal dimensions of U.S. capitalism, but their critical examination was resisted by the established social order.

Maurizi (2004) argues that the graphic depictions of cannibalism in Romero’s work reflect the repressed truth of the alienation, cannibalism and brutality of capitalism. He notes that the alienation of labor is a process of actual mortification in which the substance of workers is channeled into commodities. Workers are robbed of their species-being – their potential as creative, conscious and self-directed humans – by the machinery of capital. Marx compares capital to a vampire that expands as it sucks the life of the worker (1992). Capital sucks the living labor of the worker, transforming living labor into the dead labor that constitutes the machinic and financial body of capital. The body of capital then takes on a “life” of its own, growing in size and in its ability to dominate the life of individuals and society. This alienation of the worker is connected to a form of mediated cannibalism: the worker pours his or her life into a commodity that is then consumed by other humans.

The barbarity of U.S. capitalism was also manifested in the Vietnam War, a conflict that the U.S. entered in order to suppress a popular revolutionary uprising, and to protect its access to valuable raw materials like rubber. *Night* was released at the time of the Tet Offensive. The connection between the Vietnam War and the work of Romero became even more concrete in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Tom Savini – who did the Gore effects for Romero in *Dawn* – gained his knowledge of mortification from his
experience in Vietnam, where his job was to investigate and document crash sites, and other scenes of death and destruction, for the military. In the words of Maurizi (2004), “Romero takes his gore directly from the interstices of Western Civilization. He simply puts it back in its place, at the heart of the empire, where it is systematically deleted.”

The theme of familial dissolution is graphically represented in Night in a scene near the end of the film in which the daughter – who has died due to a zombie bite, and is now reanimated in zombie form – feasts upon and kills her father, and then kills her mother (Maurizi 2004). The theme of racial conflict appears in vivid fashion in the closing moments of the film. In a series of still camera shots, the dead body of the black protagonist is shown with a hook in it, being dragged across the ground by the white men who had shot him in the head (Paffenroth 2006).

The next critical transition for the zombie came in 2002 in Danny Boyle’s 28 Days Later (2002). The zombie of this film is heavily indebted to Romero’s generic rules in that it is a cannibal that appears within an apocalyptic scenario. Social institutions have completely collapsed, and society is overrun with aggressive monsters that consume the flesh of living humans. However, the zombie of this film is not a reanimated corpse, but a human that has been infected by the “Rage Virus.” Developed and accidentally released from an animal laboratory, this blood-born neurological virus results in the almost instantaneous transformation of the human into a hyper-aggressive murderer and cannibal with no recollection of his or her former identity. The fast-moving and virally produced zombie of 28 Days Later also appeared in the 2004 remake of Dawn of the Dead (2004), and has since become a staple of zombie cinema.
28 Days Later is set in a post-apocalyptic London in which there are few humans who have not been infected. The four protagonists pick up a message that is being broadcast by a group of soldiers who have established an outpost in the countryside. The film follows these characters as they exit the devastated city and eventually locate the military base. On the surface, the base appears to provide the security and safety that is absent in the outside world: it has food and running water; the soldiers have guns and ammunition; and the surrounding fields are wired with explosives and an alarm system. However, the three remaining protagonists – two of whom are women – face a new set of problems once they have settled into the base. The military commander has promised his “boys” that they can sleep with the women in order to restart civilization and provide hope for the future. The protagonists are eventually able to escape unharmed after one of them facilitates a zombie infestation of the compound.

The 28 Days Later series (2002-), the Resident Evil series (2002-), and the remake of Dawn of the Dead (2004) captured the historical moment by presenting images of contagion and societal chaos and collapse (Paffenroth 2006; Bishop 2010), and by exploring the dangers of the military-industrial-scientific complex and the associated practices of fascistic militarism.

28 Days Later was crucial for the evolution of the zombie because it developed the theme of virus, which is also central to contemporary capitalism. Capital has always been virus-like in that “it must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” as “it creates a world after its own image” (Marx 1997a). But the viral nature of capital only becomes a full-blown contagion in the contemporary age of fictitious capital, derivatives, and zombie banks.
The Logic of the Zombie

*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) reinvents the zombie by combining four elements. First, the zombie of *Night* is a “living dead” monster, a human corpse that has been reanimated and now functions at the most basic biological level. The zombie of *White Zombie* is a human that exists in a trance-like state, the robotic puppet of a voodoo master. The zombie of *Night* is “alive” in that it moves and feeds; it is “dead” in that it lacks the more complex physiological and mental functions that define the human species. This zombie does not digest and derive nutrients from the flesh it consumes, and it does not think or reason. Second, the zombie of *Night*, unlike the previous one, is a cannibal. The sole motivation of Romero’s zombie is the desire to feed upon living humans. Third, the second zombie is a monster of the apocalypse, as it brings widespread violence and the rapid breakdown of civilization (Pagano 2008). Fourth, the zombie is now a viral phenomenon: it appears as a destructive horde that grows in an exponential manner, consuming and replicating without limit. Romero’s zombie is thus a monster that has been set free from the external control of a voodoo master, and that is now the slave of a virulent and infectious cannibalism. The uncontrolled and mindless drive to cannibalism, apocalyptic scenarios, mass appearance, and viral nature of the second zombie form distinguish it from its predecessor as well as other “living dead” monsters like the vampire.

*28 Days Later* modifies Romero’s zombie in three significant ways. First, the zombie is now a fast-moving creature. The two previous zombies moved slowly, whereas the most recent zombie runs in pursuit of its prey. Second, the latest zombie is enraged and hyper-aggressive, appearing to suffer from a frenzied bloodlust. The first
zombie is a passive puppet; the second is an aggressive killer and cannibal; the third is aggressive to the point of visible self-destruction, as its frenzied bloodlust results in the unsustainable use of energy and the vomiting of blood. Third, the viral nature of the zombie is more fully and explicitly developed. The latest zombie is the product of an infectious virus, and it moves, consumes and replicates with a rapidity and destructiveness that mirrors the behavior of the latter.

The history and logic of the zombie must be situated within the context of the history and logic of U.S. capitalism, as the former is a product of the latter.

_The History and Logic of U.S. Capitalism_

Our thesis is that the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark utopia. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness.

-Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation

The zombie first appears during the Great Depression. It evolves and finds a new level of popularity during the social unrest and systemic crisis of the late 1960s, and then again during the War on Terror of the Bush Administration. These are periods of great social, political and economic conflict and destruction, internal repression of dissent, warfare abroad, and crisis in capital. During these times of crisis, the U.S. government has supported the freedom of capital at home and abroad, and has taken action to prevent the self-destruction of the capitalist system.

The conflict between capital and labor has produced destitution and destruction for the working class throughout the 20th century. It has also produced moments of great
destruction of society and social institutions, especially during financial crises and times of war. The U.S. government has acted to modify and regulate the capitalist system during such moments of self-destructive crises. But these regulatory actions have been taken in order to stabilize and preserve the capitalist system, to prevent the self-destructive logic of capital from creating a full-blown apocalypse, not to improve the lives of workers and citizens, or to transform the destructive contradictions. This pattern of government behavior is seen at the origins of the modern capitalist state, during the “Progressive Period.”

During this period the administration of Teddy Roosevelt acted to regulate the trusts. His “trust busting” has been celebrated as a defense of small businesses and citizens in the face of the concentrated power of business conglomerates. However, “his action against the trusts was to induce them to accept government regulation, in order to prevent destruction” (Zinn 1999, 351). Roosevelt viewed government regulation of business as conservative in that it helped to stabilize the capitalist system and prevent revolution (Zinn 1999). The actions of the government during the New Deal followed the same preservative and stabilizing logic. New Deal programs modified, not transformed, the capitalist order in order to avert destruction (Parenti 2008). A similar pattern is present in the late 1960s: civil rights legislation was passed to prevent the potentially radical consequences of the grassroots movements of blacks and other oppressed minorities at the bottom of the socio-economic system (Zinn 1999).

In its first incarnation, during the Great Depression, the zombie mirrors the alienation of the worker and aspects of U.S. colonialism in Haiti. Government and business begin to merge in intimate ways at this time to form the modern corporate state.
This merger is required by the self-destructive logic of capital: it occurs in order to prevent capital from devouring its host society, so that capital may continue to feed and grow without killing its host. The following decades would see the development of a “revolving door” between the worlds of business and government, giving capital more freedom to vent its destructive tendencies in ways that did not lead to implosion: a permanent war economy; imperialist warfare; derivatives and other forms of deceptive financial manipulation. The revolving door has since become an “archway” (Klein 2007), as U.S. capitalism has entered a more frenzied state of financial and military activity. Indeed, government has been the subject of a “hostile takeover” by corporations, as the flow of corporate cash determines the outcome of elections and the nature of legislation and government activity (Sirota 2006). The U.S. capitalist system continues to be structured in a way that facilitates capital’s mindless feeding upon its societal host without destroying the latter. As a consequence, government rarely responds in substantive ways to the needs of the poor and the working class.

A distinctive feature of U.S. capitalism in the 20th century is the establishment of a permanent war economy and a corresponding industrial war machine. The war machine was particularly active during each of three periods in question, in World War II, Vietnam, and Iraq and Afghanistan. This has given the U.S. corporate state both a means to avert financial crises and implosion – through the stimulation of the economy via wartime production – and a means to enormous domestic and global destruction of life and the environment. The recession that began in 1914 was overcome by the financial stimulation provided by war production for the allies. J.P. Morgan and Company profited greatly by lending to the allies, as industrialists were enlisted to build
armaments (Zinn 1999). A similar wartime pattern has played out throughout U.S. history. The Great Depression was overcome not by New Deal reforms but by war production for World War II (Parenti 2008). Financial crises in the 1960s and in recent years were averted, in part, through escalated military spending. Figures like Dick Cheney continue the tradition of Morgan, profiting from the death and destruction of the war machine, while simultaneously offering the capitalist system a dysfunctional form of stimulation and crisis aversion. The U.S. now spends such a great portion of its resources on commodities that are dedicated to death, destruction and torture that McMurtry (1999) has argued for the existence of a “death economy.” Thus in order to overcome self-destruction U.S. capitalism has developed a war machine and repressive capacity that have been used to invade and devastate a host of countries around the world, as well as to quell internal dissent.

Capital itself experienced a self-destructive crisis during the Great Depression. This was connected to the ratio between constant capital (forms of dead labor like machines) and variable capital (living labor). This ratio was not economically sustainable; capital was too concentrated in the former. According to Marxian political economy, profit is the result of the capitalist taking the difference between the value that the worker produces and the value that the worker is paid in wages. Marx refers to the difference between these two values as surplus value. Profit is surplus value that has been sucked from the worker in the production process. As the proportion of constant capital grows in relation to living labor, the rate of profit tends to fall as there is less living labor from which to extract a profit (Marx 1992). During the Great Depression, capitalism experienced a much lower rate of profit than it had at the turn of the 20th
century. This put greater pressure on capitalists to reduce wages in order to generate a profit, thereby reducing the quantity of goods that workers were able to purchase, and further exacerbating the economic and political crises of the time (Harman 2009).

In 1968, the U.S. government took itself off the gold standard, and finally disconnected itself from the latter in 1971. This was connected to the fact that the U.S. financial system was becoming more speculative. Capital as a whole was becoming increasingly fictitious. Fictitious capital is money that has no relation to actual value. It provides a means of avoiding the ultimate collapse of the capitalist system in that profits and losses may be manipulated in the temporal dimension. But it is a sign that capital is running out of food (the surplus value that is created by living labor), and that it is engaging in a frenzied pursuit of the remaining food supply (Goldner 2002). Brown (2008) argues that this frenzied pursuit of value through financial manipulation is reaching its mathematical limits, as the nominal value of all derivatives exceeds by several times the total global GDP. That is, fictitious capital – like wartime spending, internal repression, and reform – provides a solution to the self-destruction of capitalism, but it is a solution that has limits. The contradiction between dead labor and living labor will at some point force another modification in the system, or it will result in some form of self-destruction of society.

The death and destruction endemic to the capitalist system has been amplified within what McMurtry (1999) calls the “cancer stage of capitalism.” In this stage, capital functions like an aggressive “money-cancer” that proliferates or metastasizes in unregulated fashion, and with alarming rapidity, across the human and environmental life systems that it colonizes, dominates and, increasingly, kills. The biological cancer and
virus violently hijack the reproductive processes of the cellular community, such that formerly living cells become “living dead” copies of, and sites of production for, the cancerous or viral program. The metabolic sequences of capital have likewise mutated, such that M-M’ has replaced M-C-M’ as the driving process of global capitalism.

The production of actual commodities (C) has increasingly been replaced by the creation of fictitious capital like derivatives. Capital that is fictitious is speculative money, money chasing money, without any stable and rational connection to the underlying economic system. Derivatives “exist” in a temporal and financial dimension that is abstracted from the real economy (M-C-M’). They produce little or nothing of value for workers and citizens, while cannibalizing the financial system and draining the resources of society, as demonstrated, for instance, during the sub-prime mortgage crisis.

The self-cannibalization of the financial system that results from the contradiction between capital and labor has intensified in recent years. In 2009, financial analysts began using the term “zombie bank” to describe the largest American financial houses like J.P. Morgan Chase and Citibank, institutions that hold the majority of derivatives within the United States. According to David Sirota (2010), these “reanimated” institutions are “cannibalizing the economy,” while “zombie executives” run Wall Street according to outmoded “zombie ideologies.” Henry Giroux (2010) has claimed that America is dominated by a “zombie politics” that valorizes a mindless and insensitive hyper-individualism and lust for profit, and that violently rejects the public sphere and any notions of care for the less privileged members of society.
Interpretations of the Zombie

The zombie has been interpreted as a cultural commodity, as a monster that reveals repressed truth to the collective, in terms of the instinctual self-destruction of the repressed worker and citizen of capitalist society, and as a reflection of the alienation and cannibalism of the capitalist system.

The simplest explanation of the “zombie renaissance” is economic. Supply responds to demand within the cultural marketplace: the zombie is proliferating because people desire to consume the cultural commodities in which it appears (Bishop 2010). Although this economic explanation is certainly part of the picture, it does not address the reasons for the change in desire amongst the populace. Such an explanation is ultimately a simplification of a complex collective phenomenon. As Maurizi (2004) has argued, “the very existence of this market witnesses the persistence of a collective desire to experience monstrosity.” A satisfactory interpretation of the zombie must account for the psychic life and cultural role of the zombie. What lies beneath this collective desire to experience monstrosity?

The zombie is a particular monster and therefore participates in the general category of monstrosity. But what is a monster? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “monster” is derived from the Latin monstrum, meaning “divine portent or warning.” The word has also been traced to the verb monstrare, which means to show, display or demonstrate (Gelder 2000; Russell 2005). Etymologically, the monster is a frightening revelation, a warning, a de-monstration of new knowledge to the audience before whom it appears. The monster reveals collective anxieties and fears associated with change, death and destruction, perennial concerns whose specific contents have
shifted and evolved over the course of history (Bishop 2010). This demonstration simultaneously provokes and helps people process horrific aspects of society that have been repressed and ignored, but that require immediate attention.

As Maurizi (2004) has argued, the existence of the horror genre attests to the popular desire to experience the repressed, horrific truth of capitalist reality. This desire manifests itself within the audience as the sado-masochistic urge to subject the self to depictions of brutality. The zombie, especially in the hands of Romero, is a critical product of this desire for truth. Capitalist ideology paints a distorted picture of the world, one that ignores the violence and cannibalism of the capitalist system. Romero’s zombie punctures the illusions and distortions of capitalist ideology, and reveals the brutality of the capitalist system, through symbolic depictions of depravity, as depicted, for instance, in scenes of cannibalism.

Bishop (2010) argues that the zombie must be doing the cultural and psychological work of revelation at the moment or it would not be appearing to such a great extent (Bishop 2010). Indeed, it has proliferated at moments of crisis when America is experiencing the heightened degrees of uncertainty, fear and misery that are associated with the self-destruction of civilization. The zombie appears when the American people are in greatest need of a warning that excessive manifestations of death and destruction cannot continue indefinitely.

Simon Clark (2006) has interpreted Romero’s zombie in terms of instinctual self-destruction. According to Freud (1989), the human has two primary instincts: Eros, or the life instinct, and Thanatos, or the death instinct. Eros operates by integrating objects at increasing levels of organization and complexity. Thanatos is gratified by the
destruction of objects, by returning them to an inorganic state of existence. This
destructive impulse can either be directed towards an object in the external world, or it
can be directed back towards the self. Frued points to the vast and pointless destruction
of World War I as empirical evidence for the existence of the death instinct as expressed
in the external world.

Marcuse accepts the existence of these two instincts, but he argues that the way in
which they are expressed depends upon the nature of the civilization within which they
are expressed. Capitalist civilization unleashes the death instinct upon the world as a
result of the repression of alienated labor. Alienated labor requires the de-sexualization
of existence for the worker; Eros is weakened, its aim is inhibited, as it creates capitalist
civilization. Marcuse explains that “life is the fusion of Eros and death instinct; in this
fusion, Eros has subdued its hostile partner” (1955, 83). But alienated labor weakens
Eros and thereby causes an instinctual de-fusion of Eros and Thanatos, such that Eros no
longer reigns in the destructive impulses of Thanatos. Capitalism thus unleashes the
death instinct upon itself. The logic of capital results in an instinctual dynamic of self-
destruction, the inner motor of the war machine and other social and political institutions
that create death and destruction in the world. And Clark argues that Romero is able to
visually represent this instinctual dynamic in the figure of the zombie. Romero depicts
the zombie as a motorized death instinct – within the context of the repressive constraints
of capitalist civilization – and explores what happens when that instinct is unleashed.

The zombie has also been interpreted in a sociological manner, as a monster that
reflects the destructive and problematic behaviors, social relations and institutions of
society. The problematic features of capitalist society that the zombie and its narratives
have reflected include violence, alienation, and cannibalism. These interpretations were discussed within the “history of the zombie” section of this proposal.

**Gaps in the Literature**

When the zombie is examined within an integrative framework – in terms of its history and logic and the history and logic of U.S. capitalism, two gaps in the literature come into view. First, there is no study that correlates the evolution of the zombie form with the evolution and logic of American capitalism. Second, although there has been considerable analysis of Romero’s zombie, there has yet to be an in-depth account of the contemporary zombie that shows how the logic of the biological virus connects the symbolic themes and cultural production of the zombie with the nature of contemporary capital. The fast-moving and hyper-aggressive zombie is a significant change in the generic rules established by Romero. These changes in the zombie form reflect changes in American society and global capitalism, including developments related to fictitious capital, zombie banks, and the death economy. I will fill in this gap by showing how the latest zombie is a product and reflection of contemporary U.S. capitalism.

**Statement of the Argument**

The argument of this dissertation is that the zombie is a mirror that reflects U.S. self-destruction as it evolves over time, and that this self-destruction is rooted in the self-destructive logic of capital.

The destruction that the zombie reflects operates on three levels: the destruction of the worker and citizen, the destruction of society, and the destruction of capital. This
destruction manifests itself instinctually, socially, politically, economically and militarily. Since the individual self of the worker and citizen is connected to and manifested within the social institutions and processes of society, the destruction of the individual self is also the destruction of society (or a part of it), and vice versa. The destruction that is reflected by the zombie is the self-destruction of society because the individual, social institutions and processes, and capital are interconnected elements of the same whole. To speak of destruction at the individual level, or in terms of economics or politics, is analytically necessary, but not ultimately accurate. Destruction does impact certain individuals or groups or processes more than others at certain points in time – and it is therefore necessary to highlight these differences in how destruction manifests itself – but it is ultimately a phenomenon that permeates the entire society. Therefore the destruction that the zombie mirrors is U.S. self-destruction.

The self-destruction that the zombie mirrors varies over time. It appears in unique ways within moments of deep and intense systemic crisis in American history and global capitalism, namely in 1932, 1968 and 2002. *White Zombie, Night of the Living Dead* and *28 Days Later* are films that reflect the unique ways in which the general forms of capitalist self-destruction appear within the historical moments that they capture. In other words, the cultural evolution of the zombie is part of the societal evolution of United States. The zombie shows how U.S. self-destruction evolves over the course of history. The crisis points at which the zombie appears and evolves are points during which the self-destruction of the United States is both intensifying and changing.

The self-destruction demonstrated by the zombie is rooted in the life-negating logic of capitalism. The capitalist production process inverts the metabolism of the social
organism, transforming C-M-C into M-C-M’ (Marx 1992). Humanity and the world it inhabits are thereby reduced to so many instrumental means to the ends of an irrational capital accumulation process that variously dominates, destabilizes and destroys its living host.

In each of its iterations, the zombie has grown more aggressive and virulent, reflecting the intensification of the self-cannibalization and violence of the capitalist system as it approaches the point of apocalyptic breakdown. The zombie is therefore not only a mirror of U.S. self-destruction, but also warning of the need for a new social order that overcomes the self-destructive contradictions that ultimately produced it.

**Methodology**

The claims of this dissertation rest on the argument that there is a logical parallel between American capitalism and the zombie. The zombie is a product and part of capitalism, and it mirrors the system that produced it. We may thus read the reality of American capitalism through the zombie. But in order to most clearly and systematically see what the zombie reflects, a dialectical methodology is required.

In chapter 48 of the third volume of *Capital* (1992), Marx observes that if appearance and essence directly coincided, science would be superfluous. Hegelian-Marxist dialectics calls for the historical-empirical analysis of a phenomenon in order to grasp its inner logic (as opposed to the partial appearance of that logic), and the contradictory forces that mediate the unfolding of that logic in the world. Hegel and Marx disagree as to the location of the contradictions that drive the becoming of the world: Marx (1997a) roots them in the class conflict that surrounds the means and
relations of production, whereas Hegel (1977) situates them in the self-unfolding of
Spirit. However, they both understand the phenomena of life as aspects of an historical
and systemic whole; they agree that reality is contradictory, and that it is the
contradictions in reality that create dynamic evolutions and revolutions; and they both
view dialectics as the method that is required to penetrate and interconnect the
fragmentary appearances of phenomena in order to critically assess the relationship
between existence and essence.

The contradiction between capital and labor results in the self-destructive
relationship that society and the worker have with themselves. This contradiction
produces the three forms of destruction that are mirrored by the zombie: the destruction
of the worker, the destruction of society, and the destruction of capital. Capital expands
and replicates by consuming the working class. The consumption of workers by capital
entails various forms of physical and mental degradation and destruction of the former.
The destruction of the worker and the working class is also the destruction of social
relations and institutions. Barbarity takes the place of peaceful development as humans
are reduced to wage slaves and appendages of capital’s machinery. Workers are robbed
of their potential to be self-directed and self-conscious creators of a human world (Marx
1997b). Capital thus contradicts the species-being or essence of the worker, as well as
the health or essence of human society; and it does this during “normal” times. It also
self-destructs, cannibalizes itself – contradicts itself in a more violent and potentially
devastating way – in moments of crisis. The zombie reflects the contradiction of
humanity that is always present within capitalist society, as well as the more visceral
aspects of self-destruction that arise in those times of crisis. Indeed, it is in these crisis
moments that the zombie proliferates and evolves, as if the death and destruction in society were the nutrients for its cultural growth.

Following the trajectory of Hegel and Marx, I will first trace the historical-empirical appearance of the zombie in part one of this dissertation. In the second part I will analyze the logic of the zombie in relation to the logic of capital, showing how both have co-evolved over the course of U.S. history, and how the zombie has been a shifting reflector or demonstration of self-destruction. I will conclude by speculating on the future of the zombie and the U.S. capitalist system of which it is an integral component.

**Tentative Chapter Outline**

Introduction: The Self-Destructive Logic of Capitalism

Part 1: The History of the Zombie

Chapter 1: From Haiti, with Fear: The Emergence of the American Monster

Chapter 2: Evolution of the Zombie: From Mind-Controlled Slave to Enraged Cannibal

Part 2: The Philosophy of the Zombie

Chapter 3: The Romero Zombie as Critical Allegory

Chapter 4: The Contemporary Zombie

Chapter 5: The Zombie Stage of Capitalism

Part 3: Conclusion

Chapter 6: The Future of the Zombie
Preliminary Bibliography


