

## Commentary:

# Neoliberal Nightmares or Fear of Terrorism? A response to Japhy Wilson's article.

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### Abstract

Political scientists are increasingly interested in popular culture. Notably, films appear as reflections of social and political developments as well as mirrors of common ideologies and fears. In his article 'Neoliberal Nightmares', Japhy Wilson (2015) brings forward the argument that the increasing popularity of gothic themes like the zombie apocalypse, could be interpreted as a reaction towards the financial crises of 2008; according to his article, neoliberalism died but is risen from its grave, scary as it was and hungry for the consumption of human flesh. This is a popular view on the current zombie hype and it is convincing at first. In contrast to Wilson's view, this article highlights another interpretation of this hype: Zombies are the projection of international terrorism. Therefore this article argues that we are much more scared by things, which take our system into question than by the system itself. In doing so, this article argues, contrary to Wilson's interpretation, that the zombies hype is part of a social and political anxiety from terrorism and not the anxiety due to the capitalist system. It will be also argued that fear is a recurrent topic in popular culture. 'Zombies' are an expression in a long tradition of fearful (international) events – like 9/11 – but also refer to the age of bio-political control.

Keywords: Zombies, popular culture, terrorism, bio-politics

### Introduction

'Winter is coming' is a phrase from the popular HBO series *Game of Thrones* (since 2011). In 2013, prior to the Australian federal election, Tony Abbott had been photoshopped into the Iron Throne of Westeros with the same phrase next to him. These pictures are often directly linked to people's emotions and fears about current political events. The same is true for movies and TV series. *World War Z* (2013) or the *The Walking Dead* (since 2010) are examples for the growing zombie hype of the last years. Journal and book publications in International Relations (IR) and notably in Security Studies have already reacted toward this hype in popular media (Macleod 2014). Daniel W. Drezner's book about *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (2011) is one of the most quoted works in this context. How zombies can add to teaching IR, has already been widely discussed in various journals (see for e.g. Blanton 2013; Horn, Rubin and Schouenborg 2015). This development is accompanied by a more general orientation of teaching IR towards analysing subjects of popular media within the scope of seminars (see for e.g. Hamenstädt 2014; Swimelar 2013, Weber 2009). More generally however, films have been analysed by IR and Security Studies for years (see for e.g. Shapiro 1999 and 2009; Weber 2006) and since movie theaters exist, philosophers have been drawing attention towards this medium (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969/2006). When talking about popular culture, it is worth mentioning that music has also been analysed (Franke and Schiltz 2013; Modeste

2012), but in direct comparison with musical scores, movies, TV series and films appear as a “richer source” for scientific analysis.

The beauty of films, documentaries, and TV series is that they allow us to bring distant events directly to us and there is a multitude of opportunities to approach popular media as a ‘case’ or as ‘data’ for our analysis (Neumann and Nexon 2006). Browsing through this material that has been published throughout the last decades, it seems to be obvious that popular media is like a mirror for fears and the darkest hollows of our social being; they voice what is mostly unspoken in our society. Of course it is not surprising that horror movies scare the audience with what people already fear. But it is interesting that the perception of what is scary and what is not is changing over time; horror movies from the 1930s appear as a bad joke today, and that’s not only from a technical standpoint. So why is the perception of horror changing over time? The hypothesis of this article is that social and political risk scenarios are changing and this is mirrored – among other things – in movies and TV series. At this point the article agrees with Japhy Wilson’s interpretation of the zombie movie hype. But this article aims to offer an alternative interpretation of zombie movies, not as “the latest twist in the labyrinthine gothic nightmare of the neoliberal project” (Wilson 2015: 81), but as an expression of fear against (international) terrorism. It has to be emphasized that there is not much sense in trying to find a mono-causal link between political events and (new) trends and hypes in popular media. Therefore this article must be read not only as a work in contrast to Wilson’s interpretation, but much more as a collection of supplementary notes towards this view. Therefore this article focuses on the threat of terrorism and the current trends in popular media and will therefore add to the discussion a supplementary interpretation of gothic nightmares in the media.

In doing so, this article attempts to argue against the interpretation of zombies as braindead but still living global capitalism (Wilson 2005: 78). Therefore the first section of this article takes a closer look at the phenomenon of gothic themes and outlines the distinction between vampires and zombies. Popular movies and TV series are a great source for analysing some attitude towards political changes – at the national and global level. In the second section, we will argue that one of the triggers of the current zombie hype is the anxiety for terrorism. This section will offer an alternative interpretation of the growing popularity of zombies and lead over to the third section, in which it will be argued, from a historical background, popular culture has always dealt with different risk scenarios. However, section three also discusses the meaning of the camp in the third session of *The Walking Dead* from the viewpoint of a bio-political understanding of new threats towards the human body as we can find them in the works of G. Agamben. We argue, in line with the hypothesis of this article, that the dialectic interplay between freedom and security in modern, (neo-) liberal societies is another key factor of understanding the zombie hype as a reaction towards the new bio-political tendencies and risks in our society. In the conclusion we will sum up the key arguments of this article.

### **Neoliberal Zombies: Only one part of the equation**

Gothic literature and movies popularised vampires and zombies in the last couple of years once again. However, vampires and zombies have some things in common but there are great differences between them: Vampires are displayed as human beings with feelings, and often with a touch of erotic tension – like in *Twilight* (2008) or the classical *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). Vampires are undead, but it is specific for them that they can live infinitely. Therefore, vampires have to suck the blood of other humans, so that they can stay young and live on. In contrast, zombies do not have the desire for blood, just for killing. Zombies do not live forever; they are already dead. So when it comes to discussing human labour, in a sense Karl Marx described the capitalist system as a vampire.

The machine always needs the blood of the living human being; the labour that is essentially in every commodity. The working day – chapter eight of *Capital* (MEW 1867/1969) – is therefore one of the most discussed notions in Marx's work (e.g. Müller and Neusüß 1970). In this context the film *Metropolis* (1927) is of special importance, and there are various interpretations of the film starting from Marx's notion of time in the process of production. How humans are 'consumed' by the machine was also humorously treated in Charles Chaplin's classic *Modern Times* (1936). However, we have to keep in mind that vampires and zombies are different: As long as we presume that the behaviour of capitalists is not target-oriented towards profit, we can assume that zombies are a symbol of the capitalist system. But as soon as we reject this idea as contradictory to our reality, we see the difference between zombies and things that are going on in the capitalist system. The zombie appears to be a relict of capitalism, where everything has to be faster, more efficient, more profitable etc.

However, sometimes it is hard to apply approaches based on ideas of historical materialism to popular culture. One of the best-known books in this context is Cynthia Weber's *International relations theory, A critical introduction* (2009). Weber tries to explain the central myth behind the Empire-theory of Hardt and Negri with the help of the movie *Memento* (2000). In doing so – this would be my argument in contrast to Weber's chapter on Neo-Marxism – she is mixing up the empire and the multitude, when she tries to connect the protagonists in *Memento* to Hardt's and Negri's theory (Hamenstädt 2015). As a second short example: after the second part of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (2013), many students who are interested in critical analysis of movies, have come to me in pursuit of analysing Smaug from the background of existing critical literature about capitalism. But what has Smaug to do with capitalism? My answer is: not much at all. The capitalist invests his or her money to gain profit but no one is just collecting or diving into money, like Scrooge McDuck.

So in general, we have to be aware of different possibilities of interpreting movies. But foremost we have to be aware of the small differences between what we would like to explain, and what we really could show with an analogy between movies and the real world.

### **Terrorists as Zombies**

Each zombie movie or TV series with zombies has to start with the virus – often with flashbacks of the narrator, who introduces the audience to the post-apocalyptic scenario. The zombie virus is quite different from other forms of "human health disasters". Stephen King's *The Stand* (1994) – not the best movie, but based on a classical Stephen King story – is a good example of the idea of the virus: Scientists at a military base working on a new biological super weapon. People are exposed to the virus outside of the research laboratory by accident; that is how the story begins. In movies like *I Am Legend* (2007) or *The Omega Man* (1971), the origin of the virus is less clear or the virus is already inside of all human beings – what is the *The Walking Dead*-version of the virus. The zombie stories therefore are less clear in the start and in the end as well; they are much more open and undefined in case of death of the infected people. According to the killing of the zombies, there are often very precise: large numbers of zombie hordes are often slaughtered by the survivors. So the infection is the death of the real human being – so that is the point, where the undead are reduced to the status of things. The necessity of butchering these creatures – of course, often with the most unusual and inappropriate weapons – is mostly proven with highest accuracy, in sharp contrast to the origins of the epidemic catastrophe.

We would like to argue that the turn from a human being to an undead creature reflects the experience of (global) terrorism. The terrorist virus is like a 'sleeper agent'; it could be your next-door

neighbour or even your beloved wife who turns into a zombie/terrorist. This transformation, into a zombie or a terrorist, turns people you know into enemies. And because of the simple fact that the enemy wants you dead, you have to kill him first. We might see a bit of anticipation in this account of how the 'society' has to deal with its enemies. The 'necessary treatment' of the enemy could be read as an individualized and emotionalized version of the reasoning of Guantanamo, and as a hated necessity to protect 'our freedom'. To return to popular media again, the TV series *24* (from 2001 to 2010) constantly presented the necessity of torture as a way of achieving objectives. We can observe a huge dispute regarding the use of torture in the series; some even speak of the "Jack Bauer effect" (Hill 2009). The same might be true for the zombie killing: we know that everything happens in a total fictive scenario, but by getting used to it; we 'learn' that torture and killing is 'legitimate' when dealing with our enemies. This becomes even more risky, while the TV series plays also with other fears and concerns many people have in modern societies: *24* represents in its structure the often-announced feeling about an acceleration of time (Rosa 2005). Like James Joyce's classic novel *Ulysses*, the story is told in real time. This does not leave us with an indefinable feeling of "something is strange" – like the idea of time in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) – on the contrary, it brings us the story closer. However, other TV series like *Homeland* (since 2011) are also located in the "War against Terror"-scenario, which speaks of the ubiquity and currentness of the topic. The key point to this discussion of popular media is that in the slipstream of the zombie/terrorist nexus, political solutions aside, the moral consensus of the societies are constantly presented as a necessity. But as political scientists, we might talk about a form of "reason of state" here. So, popular media opens a window for the audience, where besides the need for a moral discussion about the new challenges of terrorism, violence has taken on to increasingly brutal forms and is displayed as a form of political solution towards these challenges.

Well explained in those movies and TV series is the realist approach in our society: as soon as the structure of our society scatters, men turn themselves into wolves and we all fall back into primitive, small group societies. TV series like the *The Walking Dead* are based on violence and 'charismatic' male leadership. Zombie movies and TV series are not only reminding us of what we have learned in our early stage career as students about realism in IR, they rather give a specific answer to how societies look like after states have failed. This might remind us of the prologue from Susan Strange's *States and Markets* (1988) – "Some Desert Island Tales" – in which Strange offers a fantastic opener to different theories in IPE. Zombies' apocalypses in popular media are doing the opposite by closing any possible debate and by showing just one possible scenario of what would happen after the breakdown of our society.

### **A Culture of Fear**

Almost Every product of our society can refer to politics. Even audio plays for little children represent a specific understanding of our society; audio plays are a micro cosmos in themselves, a simplified version of our daily life. It is very interesting to see what is left out in these simplified and 'fictive' worlds, and what is highlighted like e.g. the representation of politicians. However, these are simplified worlds for children and they have no interest in educational research for a long time (Strohmeier 2005). But it is no surprise, that during the last years, most attention has been drawn to the development of large dramatic narrations. Series like *Star Trek* or *Battlestar Galactica* (Kiersey and Neumann 2013) attracted the attention of researchers and it is also interesting to observe how the conception of the enemy has changed over time in *Star Trek* or in *James Bond* movies as well (Laucht 2013; Price 2004). A growing intellectual interest in the new HBO drama series can be observed, as the new standard for high quality TV (Dellwing and Harbusch 2015). The story is often told over 50 to 100 hours. We can follow the development of a character over years; TV series shifted from short

story narration to the huge dramas, which are like novels from Dostojewski. Series like *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), telling a story that takes the audience from sympathy for the protagonist to the sphere of hate. Like the good old Alfred Hitchcock movies, they play with our inner fears and imaginations (Elsaesser and Hagener 2011). These series also deal with the institutional downfalls of western democracies, like HBOs *The Wire* (Deylami and Havercroft 2014; Wheeler 2014), and therefore are explicitly political.

In the early writings of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno had been already concerned about popular media – most prominent in their essay about the ‘culture industry’ in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1969/2006). But for Adorno, films like *King Kong* (1933) have been always placeholders for political fears, like the rise of the totalitarian states of that era (Martin 2013, 39). In their essay about the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno describe Scrooge McDuck as a symbol of violence in our modern society (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969/2006, 147) and how humiliating it is that we can laugh about it. TV formats like *Star Trek* started in the 1960s and we can see the development of different enemies, like the Borgs or the typical science fiction scenario, to reflect on fears about the cold war. The enemy comes out of space and appears as dangerous also because of the difficulties of communication – the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 is the political equivalent with the same patterns.

Nowadays, the enemy seems to be already within us. The fear of terrorism and the notion of the virus are somehow related; the virus that can turn everyone into an enemy addresses many fears in our society. Some of these fears are the individualisation of the subject, the idea of the lone fighter/survivor or the way moral boundaries being taken into question. But we also have to take a look at the political reaction towards the fear of terrorism: body scanners at airports are one of the most discussed changes during the last years – Giorgio Agamben speaks of bio-political tattooing in this context, and that captures the new procedure quite well. Also the notion of the camp (Agamben 2002) could be found in the third session of *The Walking Dead*. In that session, the survivors look at themselves inside a prison, something close to what is in Agamben’s sense a ‘camp’. Analysing gated communities or the protection of Europe’s outer borders may be the next step for linking the zombie hype with inner fears in our society. For sure, further research of popular media should also take computer games into account. For example the games *Left 4 Dead* (released in 2008) is a shooting game with a story that reminds us of a movie. Computer games like *L4D* or *Dead Island* (released in 2011) play an important role in the perception of cultural trend and also in social fears and anxieties.

## **Conclusion**

Popular culture becomes more and more an object of social science research. However, although movies and TV series discuss explicit political subjects – sometimes they do it implicitly. There is a growing discussion and literature about the analysis of media through the last years. There is also an increasing popularity of gothic themes like vampires or zombies. Currently, a lot of researchers have reacted towards the ‘zombie apocalypse hype’. This article argued that this hype could be understood as a reaction towards the growing danger of terrorism. From this viewpoint, the interpretation of growing popularity for gothic themes might not be primarily rooted in perception of the current economic crisis. In contrast – or in addition – to this interpretation, the fear of terrorism should also be considered. Looking back at prior interpretations of trends in popular media, the reception of fear is of special importance. Therefore this article argues that zombies present a form of bio-political fear: the virus can turn everybody into your enemy, and the political reactions towards these fears are draconian. Zombie movies and TV series also represent a specific (theoretical) worldview towards these topics: charismatic leadership of small groups, pragmatism of the survivors,

practical constraints, which take common moral beliefs about the society into question etc. This implicit assumption about the human nature and how we might live together without a state wielding power over us is the real treasure case for the interpretation of popular movies and TV series. We get used to the violence against possible enemies and the discussion of different ways to approach political challenge can turn into the claim for necessities. That is the great danger we have to observe as political scientists.

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