

Waking the Undead

New Vampire Cinema

By Ken Gelder

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Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human

Edited by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro

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Reviewed by Lydia Saleh Rofail

UNDEAD MONSTERS SUCH AS VAMPIRES AND ZOMBIES HAVE LONG HELD A MORBID fascination as evidenced in an array of literary, cinematic and popular contexts throughout the ages. Whether signifying anxieties about predation and consumption, apocalyptic demise or the possibility of survival beyond death, these creatures draw our attention and play out aspects of our current condition. The vampire haunts our imaginations with notions of blood contamination, sexual transgression, indulgence and decadence. The eternally fascinating vampire embodies the dialectics of beauty and monstrosity, fear and passion, immortality and death. In *New Vampire Cinema*, Ken Gelder extends his earlier work in *Reading the Vampire* (1994), resurrecting this undead phantasm in a cogent exploration of cinematic vampire films from 1992 until 2010.

Gelder's goal is not to offer a compendium of every vampire film created, rather his methodology is 'reasonably' close analysis of over forty selected vampire films. Gelder's key argument is that vampire films imagine their own demise which is an important part of how they recreate themselves. In other words, the vampires productively re-produce their own inauthenticity through the re-creation of the vampire genre. Gelder explores this conundrum of how and why vampire films re-create generic conventions or 'what these films do and why they seem to do it over and over' (v). Hence for Gelder, the vampire film 'is always derivative, paying a kind of perpetual tribute or homage to itself ... condemned at the same time to re-make and recycle, to copy, to plagiarise, to cite and re-cite' (vi). There is a deliberate gesturing, in many vampire films, to ur-texts such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922).

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In his first chapter, 'Inauthentic Vampires', Gelder argues for the symbiotic relationships between vampires and cinema, 'vampires are, and always have been, cinematic creatures, brought to life by cinema and made modern and redundant by it' (ix). The ancient 'vampires are ushered into the modern world by ... cinema itself, the cinematic apparatus' (ix). Gelder identifies this as the 'cinematographic moment' (ix), a recurring feature in all the examined films, a case in point is the seduction of Mina in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) which, set in 1897, literally takes place behind an early London cinema.

In 'Our Vampires, Our Neighbours' Gelder further articulates his argument about what makes vampire films distinctive and what makes them recognisable, or self-reflexively cinematic as a genre. He broadens his scope to explore international vampire films such as *Frostbitten* (Sweden, 2006), *Let the Right One In* (Sweden, 2008) in tandem with its American remake *Let Me In* (2010), *Night Watch* (Russia, 2004) and *Day Watch* (Russia, 2006). These films cite earlier vampire films while paradoxically striving to create a different kind of vampire film. This is particularly the case in *Let the Right One In*, which is unique because of its focus on children evinced in the 'preternatural aspects of the child actors' and the 'delicate intensity of their relationship' (38). This film, as well as *Let Me In*, elucidates one of the main themes in this book: the paradoxical nature of the vampire as a figure that problematizes notions of intimacy and 'neighbourliness' as against distance and remoteness. How can we be friendly or neighbourly with a vampire, a creature that simultaneously unsettles, drains or even disempowers?

'Citational Vampires', the book's third and most compelling chapter, exemplifies what is essentially Gelder's transnational exploration of vampire cinema. The strength of this section rests not only in Gelder's astute and detailed analysis but also in the connections made between a selection of relatively obscure international films: *Irma Vep* (France, 1996), *Vampire Hunter D: Blood Lust* (Japan, 2000) *Blood: The Last Vampire* (Japan, 2009) and *Thirst* (Korea, 2009). The central argument about the vampire film as re-generating itself through 'citation' is here explored, developed and problematized within a transnational context. How do these films 'interrogate one's assumptions about cultural and geographical distance, and difference'? (51). This chapter questions notions of vampire cinema as national or political allegory in a world where most films are globally distributed by American production companies.

'Vampires in the Americas' again demonstrates how vampire films strive to be unique within a largely identifiable genre. Gelder poses the question 'of what might count as American' in this wide exploration that covers different cinemas from 'low budget New York-based arthouse' to 'various lowbrow Mexican-American' or 'Tex Mex' (viii). Perhaps Gelder's finest observation in this vast and

detailed chapter is the novel way in which the popularly successful *Twilight* films put their modern American vampires into close proximity with indigenous werewolves. By the time we arrive at the final chapter, 'Diminishing Vampires', Gelder argues how the vampire film imagines its own demise and reproduces its own redundancy through self-citation. Paradoxically however, he concludes by stating that vampire films will continue to do what they have always done—that is, negotiate their own 'possible but precarious futures' (123).

If the vampire film stages its own diminishing status, the current zombie fascination infiltrates popular culture on many levels, whether through zombie computer games, *The Walking Dead* television series, or films such as Marc Foster's *World War Z* (2013). *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, edited by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, is a collection of thirteen insightful and theoretically innovative essays. The approach is interdisciplinary, transnational and transhistorical as the zombie is examined in twentieth and twenty-first century cinematic, literary, theoretical, artistic, virtual and multimedia contexts. The study details the 'zombie evolution' and how, amongst other types of evolution, it has 'crashed the boundaries of narrative and stepped into real life' moving from 'screen to street' (1). The engagement is cogent and deeply analytical. This compendium is separated into three distinct sections, which mirror the three notions of the evolving or 'rising' zombie, a creature that straddles the divide between life and death. The first is the 'classic mindless corpse', the second 'the relentless instinct-driven newly dead' and the third is the 'millennial voracious and fast-moving predator' (2).

For Christie and Lauro, the zombie's function is twofold, firstly as 'a fictive monster on which we stamp our society's latest fears' and secondly as a prototype on which the authors have applied modes and methods of reading (2). In other words, the zombie has evolved with the fictional narratives and yet *transforms* the way in which we read these very narratives. What is hinted at here is 'the possibility that the zombie is post-human, and illustrates that we are already living in the period of the post-zombie' invoking the possibility of the zombie becoming an icon for whatever it means to be 'post-human' (2).

The first section 'And the Dead Shall Rise' traces the journey of the zombie from its early incarnation in Haiti and the African diasporas, to its emergence in American popular culture, early radio shows and films such as *White Zombie* (1932) and George Romero's classic, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). This section explores how the figure of the zombie invites oppositional categorisations of 'us' and 'them' and the following sections explore how zombies proceed to transgress boundaries by blurring these oppositions. Chera Kee's essay offers an excellent introduction to this study entitled "'They are not men ... they are dead bodies!'" From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again', in which she examines how a

racialized and anxious western colonial discourse projected its fear of difference onto the African Other. In “‘We are the mirror of your fears’: Haitian Identity and Zombification’, Frank Degoul draws on primary research in the area of zombification to illustrate the effects of racialized colonial discourse on Haitian identity. Kevin Boon explores how the zombie takes on the characteristics we recognise in contemporary American horror films.

The second section, ‘And the Dead Shall Walk’, looks at the manifestation of what we might recognise as the classic horror movie zombie which emerged in the period between 1950 and 1970. In this section the zombie is ‘no longer the benign sleepwalker or the organic puppet of a voodoo master’, but rather ‘a force of nature that moves under its own autonomy, propelled forward by its own instinctual needs’ (61). This contrasts sharply with Gelder’s approach which is not about the autonomy of the vampire, but rather, is concerned with the productive inauthenticity of the cinematic vampire. In ‘A Dead New World: Richard Matheson and the Modern Zombie’ Deborah Christie explores the roots of the modern zombie in a vampire story, no less, through a comparison of Richard Matheson’s novel *I am Legend* (1954) with Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*. Although *I am Legend* is a typical vampire story because ‘its cyclical focus [is] on both destruction and regeneration’ (61) there is a notable (yet understandable) failure by the novel’s protagonist Richard Neville, the last surviving human, to recognise the ‘post-human’ societal evolution comprised of vampires. This central theme of impending apocalypse, renewal and regeneration is carried through into this section and the next. Nick Muntean argues for the zombie as a prescient apocalyptic metaphor for modern technological society. In ‘Nuclear Death and Radical Hope in *Dawn of the Dead* and *On the Beach*’, Muntean introduces the idea of the ‘trauma zombie’, an entity so disrupted (possibly by a collapse of ideology or social order) that s/he is ‘unable to maintain a coherent identity and thus enter a muted, dazed state of being not unlike that of the traditional zombie’ (82). This zombie hence ‘becomes both victim and perpetrator of its own affliction’ (82). Muntean believes that this trauma zombie manifestation is a way to articulate threatening and incomprehensible social realities that reside in the collective consciousness. One example is the paradoxical conundrum of society’s technological advancement—it may aid social progress, but simultaneously it may increase society’s capacity to destroy itself.

In the final section, ‘And the Dead Shall Inherit the Earth’, we encounter ‘fresh zombie iterations catering to the audience of a globally connected, technological world’ (159). The essays here focus on new media, which re-invent the zombie for the new millennium, and argue for how the lens of the cinematographer or artist may turn on the zombie audience. These essays utilise this concept to highlight philosophical questions about ‘how the zombie is uniquely situated to

articulate questions about life mirroring art, and death mirroring life' (159). Lynn Pifer's essay 'Slacker Bites Back: *Shaun of the Dead* Finds New Life for Deadbeats', is a parable for Generation X 'slackers'; a revision of the zombie myths, with its hero Shaun being 'an ironic defender of slacker values rather than the next zombie slayer' (163). In the end, however, the monsters are merely 'domesticated and assimilated into modern life' (172). Elson Bond and Margo Collins detect this new-millennium zombie in various books and films, such as *The Zombie Survival Guide: Recorded Attacks* and Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* among others. In these very recent texts, 'a malaise that is not simply post-human but also post-zombie seems to have set in' for an audience bored with rehashed zombie narratives (160).

Better off Dead offers a rich examination of zombies and zombie phenomenon. One of its weaknesses, however, is that it shies away from any philosophical discussions, particularly in regards to the idea of post-humanity. Regardless, its strengths lie in how it challenges the classical image of the half-dead, shuffling zombie. From its roots in seventeenth century Haiti to the present technological age, the zombie is situated in Christie and Lauro's collection as a figure that engenders fresh manifestations and new readings. The book is a valuable and detailed study for those interested in zombie studies, monster theory and the evolution of the zombie over time.

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