

My Zombie, Myself: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead

Chuck Klosterman

The zombie is a relatively recent monster: a creation that is not alive, is not particularly intelligent, and simply seeks to eat the brains of humans. In the process, it can reproduce itself. In this article that originally appeared in the *New York Times*, Chuck Klosterman argues that the zombie is a metaphor for our modern, task-filled world, in which the problems we face seem to multiply faster than we can solve them. Thus, zombies neatly encapsulate our fears and anxieties about modern life. Klosterman is a popular writer of nonfiction, including *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* (2003) and *I Wear the Black Hat* (2013). He has also written two novels, *Downtown Owl* (2008) and *The Visible Man* (2011).

Zombies are a value stock. They are wordless and oozing and brain dead, but they're an ever-expanding market with no glass ceiling. Zombies are a target-rich environment, literally and figuratively. The more you fill them with bullets, the more interesting they become. Roughly 5.3 million people watched the first episode of *The Walking Dead* on AMC, a stunning 83 percent more than the 2.9 million who watched the Season 4 premiere of *Mad Men*. This means there are at least 2.4 million cable-ready Americans who might prefer watching Christina Hendricks if she were an animated corpse.

Statistically and aesthetically that dissonance^o seems perverse. But it probably shouldn't. Mainstream interest in zombies has steadily risen over the past 40 years. Zombies are a commodity that has advanced slowly and without major evolution, much like the staggering creatures George Romero popularized in the 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. What makes that measured amplification curious is the inherent limitations of the zombie itself: You can't add much depth to a creature who can't talk, doesn't think and whose only motive is the consumption of flesh. You can't humanize a zombie, unless you make it less zombie-esque. There are slow zombies, and there are fast zombies—that's pretty much the spectrum of zombie diversity. It's not that zombies are changing to fit the world's condition; it's that the condition of the world seems more like a zombie offensive. Something about zombies is becoming more intriguing to us. And I think I know what that something is.

dissonance: inconsistency between the beliefs one holds and one's actions.

Zombies are just so easy to kill.

When we think critically about monsters, we tend to classify them as personifications of what we fear. Frankenstein's monster illustrated our trepidation about untethered science; Godzilla was spawned from the fear of the atomic age; werewolves feed into an instinctual panic over predation and man's detachment from nature. Vampires and zombies share an imbedded anxiety about disease. It's easy to project a symbolic relationship between vampirism and AIDS (or vampirism and the loss of purity). From a creative standpoint these fear projections are narrative linchpins; they turn creatures into ideas, and that's the point.

But what if the audience infers an entirely different metaphor?

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What if contemporary people are less interested in seeing depictions of their unconscious fears and more attracted to allegories of how their day-to-day existence feels? That would explain why so many people watched the first episode of *The Walking Dead*: They knew they would be able to relate to it.

A lot of modern life is exactly like slaughtering zombies.

If there's one thing we all understand about zombie killing, it's that the act is uncomplicated: you blast

one in the brain from point-blank range (preferably with a shotgun). That's Step 1. Step 2 is doing the same thing to the next zombie that takes its place. Step 3 is identical to Step 2, and Step 4 isn't any different from Step 3. Repeat this process until (a) you perish, or (b) you run out of zombies. That's really the only viable strategy.

Every zombie war is a war of attrition. It's always a numbers game. And it's more repetitive than complex. In other words, zombie killing is philosophically similar to reading and deleting 400 work e-mails on a Monday morning or filling out paperwork that only generates more paperwork, or following Twitter gossip out of obligation, or performing tedious tasks in which the only true risk is being consumed by avalanche. The principal downside to any zombie attack is that the zombies will never stop coming; the principal downside to life is that you will never be finished with whatever it is you do.

The Internet reminds us of this every day.

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Here's a passage from a youngish writer named Alice Gregory, taken from a recent essay on Gary Shteyngart's dystopic novel *Super Sad True Love Story* in the literary journal *n+1*: "It's hard not to think 'death drive' every time I go on the Internet," she writes. "Opening Safari is an

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Andrew Lincoln as Rick Grimes in the zombie television series *The Walking Dead*.
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actively destructive decision. I am asking that consciousness be taken away from me."

Ms. Gregory's self-directed fear is thematically similar to how the zombie brain is described by Max Brooks, author of the fictional oral history *World War Z* and its accompanying self-help manual, *The Zombie Survival Guide*: "Imagine a computer programmed to execute one function. This function cannot be paused, modified or erased. No new data can be stored. No new commands can be installed. This computer will perform that one function, over and over, until its power source eventually shuts down."

This is our collective fear projection: that we will be consumed. Zombies are like the Internet and the media and every conversation we don't want to have. All of it comes at us endlessly (and thoughtlessly), and—if we surrender—we will be overtaken and absorbed. Yet this war is manageable, if not necessarily winnable. As long as we keep deleting whatever's directly in front of us, we survive. We live to eliminate the zombies of tomorrow. We are able to remain human, at least for the time being. Our enemy is relentless and colossal, but also uncreative and stupid.

Battling zombies is like battling anything . . . or everything.

Because of the Twilight series it's easy to manufacture an argument in which zombies are merely replacing vampires as the monster of the moment, a designation that is supposed to matter for metaphorical, non-monstrous reasons. But that kind of thinking is deceptive. The recent five-year spike in vampire interest is only about the multiplatform success of Twilight, a brand that isn't about vampirism anyway. It's mostly about nostalgia for teenage chastity, the attractiveness of its film cast and the fact that contemporary fiction consumers tend to prefer long serialized novels that can be read rapidly. But this has still created a domino effect. The 2008 Swedish vampire film *Let the Right One In* was fantastic, but it probably wouldn't have been remade in the United States if Twilight had never existed. *The Gates* was an overt attempt by ABC to tap into the housebound, preteen Twilight audience; HBO's *True Blood* is a camp reaction to Robert Pattinson's flat earnestness.

The difference with zombies, of course, is that it's possible to like a specific vampire temporarily, which isn't really an option with the undead. Characters like Mr. Pattison's Edward Cullen in Twilight and Anne Rice's Lestat de Lioncourt, and even boring old Count Dracula can be multidimensional and erotic; it's possible to learn why they are and who they once were. Vampire love can be singular. Zombie love, however, is always communal. If you dig zombies, you dig the entire zombie concept. It's never personal. You're interested in what zombies signify, you like the way they move, and you understand what's required to stop them. And this is a reassuring attraction, because those aspects don't really shift. They've become shared archetypal knowledge.

A few days before Halloween I was in upstate New York with three other people, and we somehow ended up at the Barn of Terror, outside a town called Lake Katrine. Entering the barn was mildly disturbing, although probably not as scary as going into an actual abandoned barn that didn't charge \$20 and doesn't own its own domain name. Regardless, the best part was when we exited the terror barn and were promptly herded onto a school bus, which took us to a cornfield about a quarter of a mile away. The field was filled with amateur actors, some playing military personnel and others that they called the infected. We were told to run through the moonlit corn maze if we wanted to live; as we ran, armed soldiers yelled contradictory instructions while hissing zombies emerged from the corny darkness. It was designed to be fun, and it was. But just before we immersed ourselves in the corn, one of my companions sardonically critiqued the reality of our predicament.

"I know this is supposed to be scary," he said. "But I'm pretty confident about my ability to deal with a zombie apocalypse. I feel strangely informed about what to do in this kind of scenario."

I could not disagree. At this point who isn't? We all know how this goes: If you awake from a coma, and you don't immediately see a member of the hospital staff, assume a zombie takeover has transpired during your incapacitation. Don't travel at night and keep your drapes closed. Don't let zombies spit on you. If you knock a zombie down, direct a second bullet into its brain stem. But above all, do not assume that the war is over, because it never is. The zombies you kill today will merely be replaced by the zombies of tomorrow. But you can do this, my friend. It's disenchanted, but it's not difficult. Keep your finger on the trigger. Continue the termination. Don't stop believing. Don't stop deleting. Return your voice mails and nod your agreements. This is the zombies' world, and we just live in it. But we can live better.

Understanding the Text

1. What are the inherent limitations of zombies, according to Klosterman? In what way do those limitations make zombies different from other monsters, such as vampires?
2. Klosterman writes, "When we think critically about monsters, we tend to classify them as personifications of what we fear" (par. 4). What are those fears, and how does Klosterman connect them to specific monsters?
3. Klosterman quotes Alice Gregory as stating, "Opening Safari is an actively destructive decision. I am asking that consciousness be taken away from me" (par. 11). What is Safari, and what does she mean by this?

Reflection and Response

4. Analyze the difference between the zombie as a monster and the vampire. What different fears do they represent, and how are those fears to be combated? What does the presence of the zombie in popular imagination say about people's anxieties about modern life?
5. One metaphor that Klosterman uses is the computer, and in particular the Internet. Examine how zombies can be seen as a metaphor for the Internet. Based on your experience with the Internet, do you think this is an apt metaphor? Explain, using specific types of Web sites or other Internet functions to illustrate and support your answer.
6. Klosterman poses a key question in paragraph 6: "What if contemporary people are less interested in seeing depictions of their unconscious fears and more attracted to allegories of how their day-to-day existence feels?" If we are attracted to the zombie as an allegory for a boring daily existence filled with repetitive, seemingly meaningless tasks, do these tasks prove more persistent and resilient than zombies? After all, Klosterman argues, "zombies are just so easy to kill" (par. 3), but real-life tasks often are not. Give examples from everyday life to support your position.

Making Connections

7. Read Matt Kaplan's "Cursed by a Bite" (p. 164). Pay particular attention to Kaplan's argument about the origin of the myth of zombies. How does the argument that zombies may have existed on plantations in the Caribbean connect to contemporary society? Cite both Klosterman's and Kaplan's articles in your response.
8. Klosterman references several movie and television versions of the zombie myth: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *World War Z* (2013), and *The Walking Dead* (AMC). View at least one of these and argue whether his metaphor of zombies as incarnations of our daily challenges (e.g., "reading and deleting 400 work e-mails," par. 9) seems correct or not. Develop your response with specific examples from both Klosterman's essay and the movie or television version of the zombie myth you viewed.