Analogy in Ruins: Populism, Transgression, and the Zombie

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The zombie has become a metaphor for everything. From 'zombie economics' to 'zombie technology,' from 'zombie cars' to 'zombie liberalism,' the zombie has become a voracious analogy that appears across a variety platforms, fields, and cultural locations and, perhaps more importantly, it is one that crosses the discursive boundaries that delimit those networks of meaning. At the level of form, content, and genre, the zombie proliferates and the zombie analogy appears everywhere. This essay explores the zombie-as-analogy to better understand the dynamics of contagion, to the proliferation of sameness, and looks to what the zombie can teach us about media populism in the twenty-first century. This is best illustrated in a recent iteration of the zombie as outbreak narrative, the film *World War Z*, which stages the zombie as a crisis on a global scale and the cause of a breakdown of the nation-state as we know it. The zombie has always been a monster that figures the populace, as well as a kind of populism, and through a delineation of the semiotic mechanisms of analogy, this essay refines a vision of the zombie as a populist monster that enacts the way that populism operates across contemporary media and discourse.

As a cultural form, the zombie has been remarkably persistent and mutable. It has appeared across a wide range of media platforms, genres, and eras from the first time it shambled across the silver screen in 1932 to its more recent and virulent incarnations in the present day. To understand the zombie's persistence in the American cultural imagination is to understand that the contradictions that gave rise to the zombie have never been resolved.[1] As a cultural metaphor or analogy, the zombie is too productive and is prone to overcoming or overrunning the limits that contain them, whether those boundaries are the boarded-up windows and doors of a house or mall, or whether they are the metatextual borders that delimit a genre or medium. As a cultural form, the zombie exists in excess of these limits.[2] Over the years, the zombie has been a figure of monstrous labor, a symbol for rampant consumerism, and an analog for the conditions of a global pandemic; in each case the zombie emerges as a powerful metaphor that captures the public imagination. The zombie remains through it all. Indeed, the zombie has been 'over' for nearly a century and yet continues to haunt the modern imaginary. As an undead monster the zombie continues to return long past the time it should have disappeared, which reflects a kind of 'undeadness' at the level of cultural form and not merely in the content of its own mythology. In every iteration the zombie works as a metaphor for a cultural crisis that is temporally bounded: from race, slavery, and colonial capitalism; to consumerism, contamination, and post-Fordist political economy; to over/population, contagion, virality. The zombie illustrates the excessive dimension of analogy itself and reveals something significant about the interconnections between transgression, sameness, and populism. The zombie is an analogy that has gone into hypertrophy, meaning that the zombie as a cultural form is over-nourished and overgrown; the linguistic roots of analogy having to do with proportionality and a symmetry of form. The zombie is a hypertrophy of analogy, meaning that it is an analogy that exceeds its own formal boundaries and definitions. With this notion of semiotic border-crossing in mind, this article focuses on the role of analogy, transgression, and contagion in the workings of the zombie as a cultural form. This study of the zombie-as-analogy also opens a way towards a different understanding of media populism, as more than a mirror of political populism, but as a problem unique to the representation, reproduction, and proliferation of sameness in mass media and culture.

It would be easy to let this line of thinking around media populism, analogy, and the zombie become focused on the politics of identity, and to simply become a history of those ideas within the context of mediation and populist political movements. However, my goals here are different. The aim of this article is to take a more formalist approach so as to better understand the cultural and semiotic mechanisms by which populism grows and spreads, metastasizing across the borders of political formations and cultural production alike. This reading of analogy within identarian politics may appear to flatten out the differences between right-leaning and left-leaning identity politics, or seem to avoid expanding on the usefulness of those identity-based claims that can be understood as a kind of 'strategic essentialism' (Danius, 1993: 35). By emphasizing analogy over identity, this article hopes to shed light upon the underlying mechanisms at work in any political claim based more on identity and sameness than position and difference. In turn, this suggests that any politics based in identity shares an important formal similarity, even if those positions differ in context and function.

As a cultural form, the zombie exhibits a remarkable diversity in the range and scope of its many appearances across popular media and culture. In whatever form, the zombie always brings with it a history of race and racialization and even if one particular incarnation of the monster seems to elide race and ethnicity, the roots of the zombie mythos in the plantations of the Americas remain.[3] We cannot elide the racial history of the zombie, nor should we. But a question remains that can be seen as parallel to this history: how and why the zombie, in its many forms, continues to appear and serve as an important analogy to a kind of populist politics? The zombie has always been a proletarian monster. As a monster, the zombie falls on the side of the masses, not just in number but in spirit. While it would be a mistake to place every iteration of the zombie on the side of the 'people,' nevertheless, the zombie typically reflects the body politic at its worst. Unlike the aristocratic vampire or the royal mummy, the zombie is better than no one. A laboring body, dressed in rags, decomposing, and hungry, the zombie seems to starkly embody the anti-elite stance of a political populism; and, indeed, the zombie seems to suggest the most dangerous elements of populism: a ravenous mob, operating with one mind and a singular purpose. In her book on democracy and public opinion, Nadia Urbinati suggests that populism is a disfiguration of democracy, meaning that

populism represents a version of the democratic spirit that has been de-formed and, thus, made unrecognizable to modern political theory (Urbinati, 2014: 11). Populism is a mutation in democracy and the zombie appears to reflect this disfiguration.

While the term 'media populism' usually refers to the mediated representations of political populism, Benjamin Krämer points out that its meaning runs deeper still when he argues that, '[m]edia are the devices par excellence to exert symbolic power via the representation of society' (2014: 49). Media populism is so powerful because it represents societies to themselves, but as a prescriptive representation: showing a uniformity of vision where a plurality actually exists. While media populism typically functions by representations of a skewed uniformity, the zombie analog to this populism functions as its shadow; showing off a symptomatic and anxious fantasy of the populace, under populism, at its worst. This line of thinking relies as much on media formations as it does on political formations, while fully acknowledging that one exists always in relation to the other. This argument works towards an understanding of the zombie as a hypertrophy of analogy across politics, population, and representation through a reading of the monster's evolutionary trajectory giving special attention to the film *World War Z* (Marc Foster, 2013), which serves as a nexus point for these concerns as well as a formal delineation of these ideas through the use of complex modeling and animation software to render zombies *en masse*.

A Little History of the Zombie

The zombie first appeared in the plantations and colonies of the new world, a result of the forced admixture of cultures, practices, and experiences of the peoples involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It rose out of the fertile ground of colonial capitalism from an amalgam of west-African religious practices, traces of indigenous spirituality, and the imposed religious structures of Catholicism. Out of this volatile context, the zombie was originally a figure that signified the slave. The zombie has always been a distinctly embodied monster, whose mind and spirit have been stripped away to leave only the flesh. As a body without a mind, the first iterations of the zombie existed solely as a laboring body and a physical force. These first zombies that were brought to international attention appeared in the writings of William Seabrook and Zora Neale

Hurston. Seabrook claimed to have encountered zombies laboring in the fields of corporate sugar plantations and doing menial and mindless tasks (1929: 93). Hurston even photographed an individual who was diagnosed as a zombie and whose actions and demeanor belied hard and abusive labor (1938: 179). In these early instances of the zombie it was not the devouring monster that commonly appears today, but simply a body, put to work, under the control of a master who manipulates it by magical means. From these early examples, it seems clear that the zombie emerged from the plantation cultures of colonial Haiti as a monstrous version of the slave, one that even death could not set free. To become a zombie was a fate worse than death: it was a half-life of endless labor. The zombie's mindless drudgery made it an analog to the slaves of the colonial period in the Caribbean, whose origins coincide with the traumas and anxieties of the time. As Robin Wood has pointed out, the monsters of an era often reveal the deep-seated tensions that structure a particular time and place, and this is certainly true of the zombie (1986: 76-77).

As an enduring cultural form, the zombie's continuing significance in American mass culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is symptomatic of the fact that the structuring conditions that first gave rise to the zombie have never been truly resolved. The devastating inequalities of race within the context of colonial capitalism may have changed and transformed over time, and even improved since the trans-Atlantic slave trade, however the conditions of these race-based inequalities such as rapacious global trade, the extraction of value from the labor of the body, and the valorization of industry and production over all other values continue to this day. The zombie emerged from these conditions and continues to haunt global capitalism. It remains because the zombie still reflects the ongoing tensions and anxieties produced by a political economy that has grown exponentially, as Western globalization has become the dominant paradigm. Within the zombie's own evolutionary trajectory, it is possible to see how closely the zombie has been connected to notions of race, labor, and value under capitalism, even if the ratios of these amalgamations have changed over time and in relation to changing social conditions.

The origins of the zombie in the Caribbean have been well-documented, but it is worth considering them nonetheless because those origins continue to structure the zombie's

appearances, up to and including some of the monster's most recent iterations. In turn, this reveals something important about the continued significance of the zombie within the American popular imagination as one of the most productive and populous monsters in the cinematic canon. Representations of the zombie change over time; from a monster that appeared either singly or in small groups, to a monster that has become almost synonymous with the horde or mass. The scale of the zombie has grown over time, now regularly reaching apocalyptic proportions. In almost all of its most recent iterations, the zombie works like a global pandemic, as illustrated in the 2013 blockbuster *World War Z*. This film is not the exemplar here because it is particularly good, either as a Hollywood blockbuster, an outbreak narrative, or as a part of the zombie genre. Rather, the film is symptomatic of all categories: *World War Z* is a film that is largely formulaic and features clichéd aspects of the zombie movie and the outbreak narrative, which helps to illustrate the links between analogy, transgression, and contagion on the one hand - border crossing at every scale and every level - and the connections that the zombie has as a cultural form to both popular media and a notion of political populism on the other.

Where *World War Z* stands out is in its special effects, particularly in the way that its digitally rendered masses and crowds of zombies move on screen. These algorithmically generated zombies move swiftly and unnaturally in two ways at once: first, the unnatural movements of the undead in *World War Z* are done deliberately in order to emphasize the strangeness and contamination of the bodies. Limbs twist and jerk, the eyes cloud over, and teeth are bared, chittering, as the body 'turns,' marking its passage from life, to death, to undeath. The film highlights the violence of contagion made especially apparent in the zombie's bite which represents the primary vector by which the pathogen is transmitted. Second, the unnatural movements of the zombie are generated structurally through the programs and algorithms that govern their actions both singularly and *en masse*. Individually the zombie's movements are orchestrated algorithmically, each with its own set of drives, rules, and physical constraints.[4] These zombies are imagined primarily as a path of transmission as they regularly hurl themselves at their victims, at times appearing to fly into the frame from off screen, without the restrictions of self-preservation. Taken as a mass, the zombies of the film descend into the uncanny valley,

moving as swarms, flocks, and flows that were generated algorithmically through digital computation and computer-generated special effects. This, in turn, illustrates the formal connections between the zombie and analogy through its ultimate abstraction into information.

Beginning in the late twentieth-century, the zombie seems to take on the form of a monstrous totality. The zombie saturates and transforms the population and seems, in turn, to embody a logic of general equivalence that is borne out through its body politic. Put another way, the zombie spreads its condition throughout a population in ways that structurally echo the totalizing logic of both Western globalization (*World War Z*'s title signals this as an implicit concern) and digital media. As Friedrich Kittler points out, the emergence of optical fiber networks signals a kind of general equivalency among media platforms as all previous forms of media technology become subsumed into the digital. He writes, 'Inside the computers themselves everything becomes a number: quantity without image, sound, or voice. And once optical fiber networks turn formerly distinct data flows into a standardized series of digitized numbers, any medium can be translated into any other. With numbers, everything goes. Modulation, transformation, synchronization; delay, storage, transposition; scrambling, scanning, mapping - a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium' (Kittler, 1999: 1-2). This notion of 'total media,' which rests upon a 'digital base', echoes other theorists of the digital who have pointed out the all-consuming nature of digital mediation.[5] The digital 'erases the very concept of medium' because it becomes all media. The distinction between sound and vision, not to mention the material conditions of differing technological platforms, are erased within the general equivalence of information through digital encoding, memory, and representation.

Wendy Chun provocatively asserts that 'Information is "undead"', that it is 'neither alive nor dead, neither quite present or absent' (Chun, 2011: 133). The character of undeadness, here, stands for a state of being that is not one thing or another, but somewhere in-between, existing in an intermediate zone that bridges the gulf of difference between two states of being. Chun makes the provocative claim that information is "undead" because it occupies this space of ambiguity and is generated out of this encounter between

differences. Chun argues that information work within a logic of general equivalence, creating the uncanny conditions of being everywhere and nowhere at once. Following Kittler, Chun points out that the universalizing tendencies of information shares a formal analogy to the commodity form and through the work of Thomas Keenan, Chun constellates information, analogy, and commodity. In turn, Keenan argues that the heart of the commodity is the equivalence made possible through abstraction: 'The matter at issue is the appearance of something as something else, the rhetorical structure of simile or metaphor… semblance, shine, simulation, or dissimulation. In societies where the capitalist mode of production prevails, something economic shows itself by hiding itself, by announcing itself as something else or in another form' (Keenan, 1997: 104). Here, the as functions to bridge the gap between two distinct objects. Chun rests her assertion that information is 'undead' on the structural and formal similarities between information and commodification. This, in turn, suggests that the structural connection between commodification and equivalence also reveals something important about the category shared by both information and zombies: undeadness.

Keenan notes the challenge that commensurability poses to Marx's theory of exchange. For Marx, exchange posed a theoretical difficulty because it focused too much on the essential qualities of the objects themselves, rather than the mediating influence of labor. This is why (to use Marx's example) Aristotle was never able to fully understand the dynamics of value and exchange because he lacked a modern understanding of exchange as a transaction of time and labor (i.e., value) rather than the material objects involved (Keenan, 1997: 117). Marx argued that, 'The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion' (Marx, 1976: 152).[6] But for Keenan, this takes a sharp turn in the sentence that follows, 'This however becomes possible only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities' (Marx, 1976: 162). As Keenan points out, Marx turns a traditional humanism on its head by suggesting that it is not the arrival of enlightenment humanism

that makes a theory of universal exchange possible but, rather, that '[h]umanity itself only arrives with the domination of the commodity form, which makes it possible' (Keenan, 1997: 118). Thus, human equality and human equivalence share a similar point of origin in the commodity form; it is the general equivalence of labor, understood as a commodity, that gives rise to the modern conception of humanity as a set of universal conditions. To quote Keenan once again, 'Humanity as such, empty and abstract, alike and equal, is indistinguishable from the commodity' (Keenan, 1997: 118).

For an initial connection between the zombie and this universalizing or totalizing logic of equivalence that is ushered in by the commodity form, one need look only to the slave - a version of the human reduced to the status of a commodity in which equality is replaced by equivalence. The zombie represents an ontological and political status that rises out of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and early, colonial capitalism. A monstrous analog of the rapacious commodification not just of the individual but entire populations. Thus, the zombie bears within it a fundamental connection to the population and to populism as well. An initial reading of the zombie as a populist figure might suggest a link to the popularity of the zombie genre as a whole, which has waxed and waned over the course of the last ninety years. The zombie has been a continuous presence as a movie monster in the horror genre, but more than this, the zombie is a populist monster insofar as it represents a politics from below and reflects the concerns of a lived, everyday experience. Since the late 1960s, the zombie has generally shown up *en masse*, appearing in groups, crowds, masses, and waves suggesting that even on this surface level, the zombie represents a disfigured version of the populace and an uncannily mediated vision of populism.

In the words of Ernesto Laclau, populism has often been a 'stumbling block' for political theory. Laclau suggests that, at the heart of the problem of populism, is the problem of an attempted totalization of the political experience of social agents (Laclau, 2005: loc 113). Populism is a homogenizing force within political discourse, yet it remains difficult to define because the concept is so mutable. The political theorists Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have pointed out that the term is often claimed by both the right and left wing of the political spectrum and in each instance the term can be used as either a badge of honor or a political insult (2017: 2-3).

Elsewhere, Mudde has argued that populism poses such a challenge to define because the term rests upon a series of contested definitions, most centrally 'the people' (2004: 543). Following Laclau's insights into the relationship between populism and totality, it is possible to periodize the zombie into three approximate eras; the *zombie-as-slave*, the *zombie-as-mass*, and most recently the *zombie-as-population*.

In each major era of the zombie's evolution, it provides a monstrous and sometimes parodic reflection of this attempt to totalize the political experience of a people. To suggest that the zombie is an inherently populist monster is to simultaneously say that this is a version of the populace at its worst: acephalic, exchangeable, and all consuming. To avoid the previous failures of political theory to properly account for populism, Laclau argues that it is essential to reckon with the problem of totality directly, and goes on to point out that in order to 'grasp that totality conceptually, we have to grasp its limits - that is to say, we have to differentiate it from something *other* than itself' (Laclau, 2005: loc 113). To summarize, Laclau suggests that the problem of populism leads to the problem of sameness and difference, which, in turn, highlights the significance of analogy, contagion, and transgression as important aspects of any notion of populism whether it appears in media or politics.

The claim that a connection exists between the zombie and populism is not to say that every instance of the zombie's appearances across media represent a populist politics. Early in its evolution, the zombie appeared as a slave, an unthinking corpse that moved according to a master's will. As discussed above, the zombie appeared this way in the first written accounts of the monster in travelogue and ethnography through to its first depiction on screen in Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* from 1932. At this early stage, the zombie generally appeared as a single body or in small groups, working in the background of some field, plantation, or factory. In this early iteration, the zombie was inevitably a raced body, typically black or brown, but occasionally white as in the case of *White Zombie*, in which a white woman's zombification was the central crisis around which the film's narrative turned. The *zombie-as-slave* was the most common representation of the zombie until George A. Romero fundamentally changed the cultural form of the zombie. Broad periodization necessarily loses some of the granular detail of the zombie movies that appeared between the first decade of the zombie's appearance

in mass culture and Romero's transformation of the genre in the 1960s. The intervening period represents a relative lull in the zombie movies in which the monster is typically linked to communism and the effects of atomic energy run amok and this turn away from the gothic roots of the zombie towards more modern fears meant that '[t]his shift threatened to return the zombie to the cultural graveyard once and for all' (Russell, 2014: 44).

Romero made *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968 and in this iteration, the zombie no longer served as an analog to the slave but instead to the masses. Here, the plight of the individual was diffused into a larger public. No longer under the supernatural yoke of a master, Romero's film features zombies from all walks of life and it is clear that in this version of the monster, *anyone* could become a zombie. In this new form, the zombie was uncontrolled and uncontrollable and after '68, the zombie became more like a force of nature. In *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies appeared in larger and larger numbers and were indiscriminate in their voracious consumption. Romero produced a trilogy of films: *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, *Dawn of the Dead* in 1978, and *Day of the Dead* in 1985 and each film showed a world increasingly overrun by the undead. As Steven Shaviro points out, Romero's new vision of the zombie was both 'violently apocalyptic' and 'at the same time, they remain disconcertingly close to the habitual surfaces and mundane realities of everyday life. Business as usually bizarrely coexists with extremes of tension and hysteria, in a world on the verge of vertiginous destruction' (Shaviro, 1993: 83). In Romero's 'living-dead' trilogy, the *zombie-as-slave* fully transitions into the *zombie-as-mass*, reflecting not only a shift in the target of the zombie's analogous relation, but a fundamental change in its relation to the commodity as well.

Romero's zombies fully illustrate the significance of Keenan's insights into the commodity form. The *zombie-as-slave* illustrates a version of the human-as-commodity. The slave's status as a commodity to be bought and sold may have prefigured certain elements in wage labor, but it functioned in direct contrast to a universal notion of the human. The *zombie-as-mass*, on the other hand, seems to illustrate a general equivalence among bodies where, to become a zombie was to be reduced and flattened out into a general and monstrous equivalence. Old or young, rich or poor, men or women, black or white; the zombies of Romero's films were entirely

interchangeable since all zombies were equally dangerous and the death of one zombie simply meant its replacement by another.

The zombies of the living-dead trilogy were also the first to be contagious. In all three of Romero's films, the zombie's bite would produce more zombies through a rapid process of infection, death, and resurrection. While the origins of the zombies in Romero's films remain deliberately vague (a reference to radiation from a returning space probe signals a space-age anxiety, but this explanation appears to be a throwaway line), the danger of zombies was made both quotidian and concrete: the bite of a zombie will make more zombies. The film historian Jamie Russell puts it this way, '[b]efore *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies had been content to scare, strangle or bludgeon their victims. Romero upped the ante by giving them a taste for warm, human flesh' (2014:65). This shift in representation signals an analogous shift in political economy that takes place simultaneously: the zombie's turn towards cannibalism takes place at the same time that an explicit critique of consumerism appears in Romero's trilogy. Romero's zombies become a metaphor for the all-consuming masses and the shift from an economic discourse that prioritizes production to one equally focused on consumption at a time when global economies were transitioning to a post-Fordist system driven by fast-moving changes to the consumer market.

While the zombie may change over time, the core principles that gave rise to the zombie continue to be an influential presence in more contemporary iterations of contemporary media and culture. Again, Shaviro astutely highlights the new political stakes of the zombie from the living-dead trilogy when he claims, 'Romero's zombies seem almost natural in a society in which the material comforts of the middle class coexist with the repressive conformism, mind-numbing media manipulation, and the more blatant violence of poverty, sexism, racism, and militarism' (2014: 83). Race, labor, and value continue to be key structuring elements of the zombie even if the specific ways that these elements play out in zombie media change depending on the era. For example, race is clearly an important part of the early iterations of the zombie and yet even as the zombie-as-slave changed into the zombie-as-mass, race continued to play out in Romero's films, which tended to feature strong, black protagonists a time when that

was uncommon at best. Even though race is rarely called out by name in these films, it plays a vital role. For example, at the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, the black protagonist, Ben, survives the zombie siege of a farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania only to be shot by the sheriff's posse, who mistake him for a zombie. This ending robs the film of a happy ending in which the protagonist carries the day, setting the stage for a political cynicism that would become common in zombie movies going forward, but it is also a clear commentary on race relations in the U.S. at the time, in which regular police violence against the black community rendered black life as less-than-human in the eyes of the law and essentially fungible with the zombies in the film.

The most recent iterations of the zombie continue to harbor these constitutive elements, although representations of the zombie shift in scale in two opposing ways. Since the 1990s, the zombie has exploded as a popular media form across cinema, television, and video games. Recalling Kittler's insight into the totalizing tendencies of the digital, it should also be noted that the zombie's resurgence came about alongside the digital revolution across media. In fact, the zombie's resurgence in popularity in the 1990s can be traced back to games like *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996), where newer, faster zombies quickly spread across both genre and platform and took conceptual root in films like *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002).[7] The first scalar shift of the zombie-as-population is upwards. This new wave of zombies took Romero's characterization of the zombie as a monster of the masses to its logical conclusion.

Taking the pandemic as its model, the zombie plague became frequently represented as a national or global phenomenon. At the same time, the cause of the zombie epidemic scaled downwards to the cellular level; viruses, themselves neither entirely alive nor dead, become the ubiquitous cause of the zombie outbreak across nearly all media. Zombies themselves were now "infected" and the danger posed by zombies became even more potent as contagion became one of the most recognizable signifiers of the genre.[8] Both scale and speed became key characteristics of the monster and even as the zombie crisis was magnified to reflect fears of a global pandemic. Zombies depicted at this level of scale, in large numbers, were created by computer generated effects and shown in computer generated crowds. Sometimes multiplied

into the thousands, the new zombie embodied the speed and virulence of viral contagion with fast-moving, hyper-violent bodies running amok across the screen.

The zombie has changed quite dramatically in both form and behavior, as it has evolved from a laboring corpse, to a ravenous monster, to a fast-moving viral infection; but in every iteration the zombie exhibits a transgressive, boundary-disrupting character. This may take the form of a metaphysical rupture of undeadness itself – being neither entirely alive nor dead, but somewhere in between – to more literal disruptions of the mise-en-scene as well as the bodies (of both zombie and victim) themselves, which are rendered porous at various levels of scale.

From Transgression to Analogy

Before turning directly to *World War Z* as a key example of the zombie-as-population on a global scale, and the significance of both digital effects and contagious relations to the zombie as a kind of populist analogy, it is worth considering the role of transgression as it plays out within the zombie as a cultural form. To transgress is to cross a real or symbolic boundary that marks the difference between two things or states of being; it divides one thing into two - the accepted from the prohibited, the normal from the pathological, the sacred from the profane. Thus, transgression always involves a limit. The zombie is a cultural form that has, from its outset, embodied a kind of transgression, it has represented the blurred boundaries between production and consumption, as well as the individual and the crowd, but at its root this relation to transgression has to do with its status as undead.

Transgression is typically framed within the context of prohibition or taboo. When an individual transgresses, they have acted in ways that society prohibits. But to focus on the prohibited action is to lose sight of the real issue at hand. Michel Foucault makes this point directly when he argues that any rigorous study of transgression should not consider the transgressive actions themselves, as they are inevitably tied to cultural context and historical specificity. Instead, any consideration of transgression should instead consider the limit. Foucault elaborates within the context of his thinking on sexuality:

> We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be exact, carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos; the limit of language, since it traces the line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence. Thus, it is not through sexuality that we communicate with the orderly and pleasingly profane world of animals; rather, sexuality is a fissure - not one which surrounds us as the basis of our isolation or individuality, but one which marks the limit within us and designates us as limit (Foucault, 1977: 30).

Foucault points out that the discourse surrounding sexuality is never simply about sexuality. Instead, sexuality functions as an analogy across multiple registers (consciousness, law, language) and in each case it serves simultaneously as the limit and the means by which that limit can be transgressed. Originally published in the journal *Critique* in 1963, in a special issue dedicated to the work of George Bataille, Foucault's writings on transgression precede his more famous work on the history of sexuality, but this early piece makes clear the significance of his later work on sex by framing it in terms of limitation and transgression.

When Foucault articulates the limit of language, he turns to analogy and this is illustrated in the way that sexuality represents a limit or boundary-line in three distinct instances. First, sexuality is the limit of consciousness because it is the code that unlocks the unconscious. Second, sexuality is the limit of the law because it provides the substance for taboo. But it is in the third instance that Foucault turns away from descriptive language and towards something else: he says that sexuality represents the limits of language 'since it traces the line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence' (1977: 30). This passage is highly evocative, bringing to mind waves lapping on a sandy beach, where a line of foam left behind marks the edges of the wave's passage. This passage is significant not only for the evocative quality of its prose and the delineation provided by its imagery, but because analogy provides the path towards understanding the limit itself.

Analogy is usually defined in relation to similarity or equivalence. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term

as an act of comparison, in which analogy works to find the similarities in 'two otherwise unlike things based on resemblance of a particular aspect' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Thus, analogy seems to emerge through a similarity or continuity of form. In rhetoric, analogy is typically defined as a 'figure of speech likened to simile or metaphor,' but James Measell is quick to point out that analogy is used across a variety of disciplines and its origins in classical rhetoric are even more inclusive (Measell, 1976: 34). In linguistics, analogy tends to be a principle of consistency, whereas the natural sciences use the term in ways connoting 'structural identity' and 'functional similarity' (Measell, 1976: 34). Nilli Diengott reveals a more mathematical definition of analogy, pointing out that one of the earliest formulations of the term 'was based on strict equivalence of ratios' (1985: 227).[9] Measell explains more about the evolution of the term, showing that the definition of analogy as 'equivalence between ratios, was broadened to include resemblances of ratios,' which was then expanded again to include inductive reasoning, before finally coming to signify both equivalence of ratio and 'direct resemblance' (1976: 36-37).

Analogy was an important concept for Foucault in his writings on transgression because, like transgression itself, analogy is all about the boundary. Analogy works to find similarity across differences and in this way, analogy also works as a kind of transgression, since it is always reaching across the line to find its like in the other. The line or limit is central to Foucault's understanding of transgression and this boundary takes on a spatial dimension to become the site of transgressive action. Foucault says that 'it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line that it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the line of the uncrossable' (1977: 34). Transgression takes place within the space of the line, according to Foucault, which opens up into a field in which the play of limits and transgressions can take place. Transgression crosses this line and re-crosses it 'incessantly,' suggesting that transgression works less like a breach and more like an oscillation that creates a phase space, in which all possible states are represented.

Undeadness is transgressive because it also crosses and re-crosses a fundamental boundary. To be undead is to be neither fully dead nor fully alive; it is to have crossed from life into death and back again. The prefix 'un-' in undead signifies this reversal in course: a return to life and a state of being that is neither entirely one or the other. It is a state of being always rendered in the negative. The undeadness of the zombie is what makes it a transgressive form of life, always marked by its passage and no longer fully belonging to one side or the other. As much as we might associate undead beings like zombies with death, the formal structure of the term *undeadness* places it more on the side of life. Undead bodies are animate and undeadness appears to be a condition that is analogous to life even if it is not quite alive. The undead occupy a 'zone of indistinction' that mirrors the oscillation of the transgressive line described by Foucault.[10] Perhaps this is why the zombie takes so naturally to analogy, and becomes such an easy vehicle for analogy, since they share the structural conditions of transgression. Like analogy and transgression, undeadness emphasizes the line of demarcation between two states and, even more significantly, the porous nature of that line.

Alexander Galloway describes the function of analogy as a kind of opening and in doing so he draws out the connection between analogy and the analog, saying, 'the word "analog" is something of a doorway because it opens up and indicates a pathway forward' (2017). This definition is reminiscent of Foucault's description of transgression, at least insofar as it suggests the opening of a space or a passage. Galloway offers his own etymology of the term, showing how its origins in ancient Greek highlight some of its most salient features. As Galloway points out, the term *Logos* is fairly common in Greek as a term meaning speech, discourse, or ratio, but the prefix '*Ana*-' is not a direct negation as in the case of '*A*-' (2017). Rather, Galloway argues that '[t]he *ana*- in analog does not negate *logos*, nor present its contrapositive form, but in fact produces a different relationship, a kind of parallel or implicative relation' (2017). For Galloway, the etymological root of the term is especially important as it shows the shared roots of both analogy and analog, particularly as it relates to the discourse of media studies.

Framed in this way, the relationship between analogy and analog is significant for my argument as well since it helps to illustrate the implicative connection that Galloway brings to

light. As Galloway unpacks the notion of the analog, he cites the work of Brian Massumi, who has provided one of the most enduring definitions of what it means to be analog:

> The analog is a *process*, self-referenced to its own variations. It resembles nothing outside itself. A topological image center literally makes the virtual appear, in felt thought. It is more apparitional than empirical. Sensation, always on arrival a transformative feeling of the outside, a feeling of thought, is the being of the analog. It is matter in analog mode. This is the analog in a sense close to the technical meaning, as a continuously variable impulse or momentum that can cross from one qualitatively different medium into another. Like electricity into sound waves. Or heat into pain. Or light waves into vision. Or vision into imagination. Or noise in the ear into music in the heart. *Or outside coming in*. Variable continuity across the qualitatively different: continuity of transformation (Massumi, 2002: 135).

The most important feature of the analog, according to Massumi, is continuity across difference. Contrasted to the digital, which operates in discrete units, the analog creates continuity across matter and media. As with a vinyl record, where sound waves are inscribed into the plastic disc in a direct and isomorphic fashion, the quality of being analog is the characteristic of creating the same form across different materials and allowing circuits of meaning or signification to traverse the boundary between one form and another. Analogy grows out of the same etymological ground, creating conceptual continuity across quality and difference. It is the means by which sameness reproduces itself on either side of a line in an act that bears a striking resemblance to transgression.

As Foucault describes it, transgression is always about the limit, the line of distinction that separates the accepted from the taboo. Transgression is the act of overcoming that limit, of rendering the prohibition impotent and diminishing the symbolic value of the limit itself by showing paths of continuity that threaten to extend and grow without end. Foucault speaks directly to this aspect of transgression when he says, 'the limit opens violently onto the limitless, finds itself suddenly carried away by the content it had rejected and fulfilled by this alien plenitude which invades it to the core of its being (1977: 34). Foucault argues that transgression opens the floodgates of sameness, calling into question the nature of limitation itself. He goes on to say,

'[t]ransgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its immanent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes' (Foucault, 1977: 34).

This passage recalls Keenan's understanding of the human as a modern category that only becomes a universal category after the adoption of the commodity form as a totalizing category. If transgression forces the limit to find in itself the very thing that it excludes then the zombie, as transgression's analog, represents the excluded portion of the enlightenment vision of humanity: grossly embodied, without reason, and ultimately destructive as a force that grows and consumes without limit. To sum up, this reading of the zombie illustrates three acts of crossing: transgression, analogy, and contagion. Each one sets up a different approach to a formally similar set of dynamics, allowing for a conceptual triangulation to take place that helps to brings these ideas into further relief. Transgression emphasizes the absolute symbolic difference between the accepted and the taboo even though, at the same time, transgression reveals the fragility of this dividing line. In contrast, analogy emphasizes the similarity, both formal and functional, between the two sides of the line that indicates a path or an opening towards continuity - a place to ford the dividing line of difference. Contagion, the final act of crossing, imagines how sameness replicates itself across difference, taking advantage of the pathways that are opened up by the other two.

World War Z

As a cultural form, the zombie itself evolves across these three territories: transgression, contagion, and analogy. The zombie's early iterations map onto transgression, which emphasizes the inherent transgressiveness of being undead. This transgression against the fundamental order of things left the zombie essentially out of place, a destitute being and a remainder, illustrating what is left when you take the humanity out of the human and representing the shadow of modern values by embodying equivalence, not equality. Starting in the 1960s, the zombie became contagious and the conditions of its undeadness began to spread to other bodies, thus spreading sameness throughout the masses. This mid-century zombie became a homogenizing force across culture, rendering all of society a

ruin through the proliferation of a symbolically acephalic state of ravenous consumerism. Films like *World War Z* show these ideas taken to their logical conclusion, imagining the zombie as a global phenomenon that expands along the lines of a pandemic in which zombies themselves overrun every boundary line that they encounter.

The zombies in *World War Z*, representing the most frequent iteration of the zombie in the twenty-first century, work as a kind of metastases of analogy; a force that always overcomes and transgresses the limits that enclose them. Representing a contagious force of viral over-production, these zombies generate neither living nor dead labor, but *undead labor*, a metastatic growth that breaks down the distinction between inside and outside - and in so doing overcomes distinction itself in favor of a generalized equivalence and monstrous sameness. Because of its totalizing logic, this is a crisis that inevitably reaches global proportions as it does in *World War Z*.

World War Z was originally published as a novel by Max Brooks in 2006 as a follow up to his first popular zombie-themed book *The Zombie Survival Guide*, a genre-savvy compendium of advice gleaned from a lifetime of movie watching. The book, *World War Z*, translated the popular handbook style of *The Zombie Survival Guide* into a novel that took on the style of an 'oral history,' and in the guise of non-fiction, the book describes the outbreak narrative of the zombie apocalypse. The film adaptation came seven years later, after a notoriously difficult transition from book to screen (Masters: 2012). The film condenses the documentary non-fiction of the book into a more personalized narrative, giving a singular face to what was previously framed as a collective history. The transition to a classical Hollywood narrative makes the film lean heavily on tropes and clichés from the zombie genre; while Max Brooks was able to show off his extensive knowledge of the genre in his books, the film plays out in a series of formulaic scenes borrowed from other films. Fundamentally, *World War Z* is a generic amalgamation, bringing together the zombie movie and the outbreak narrative.

In her work on the significance of outbreak narratives, Priscilla Wald coins the phrase 'imagined immunities' to describe the role that contagion plays in reifying the symbolic borders necessary to a national identity (2008). Clearly referencing Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community,"

which suggests that national consciousness relies on a shared sense of unity and identity with a community of strangers, Wald argues that '[o]utbreak narratives make the act of imagining the community a central (rather than obscured) feature of its preservation' (2008: 53). Anderson's version of the imagined community was a largely unconscious feature of national identity but Wald points out that '[c]ommunicable diseases know no borders, and the global village is the biological scale on which all people and populations are connected' (2008: 53). The 'imagined immunities' that Wald describes bring into relief those symbolic boundaries that limn the community in one form or another. *World War Z* also shows off this aspect of the outbreak narrative as it reveals the zombie epidemic overrunning and spreading across national boundaries and quite literally breaking against and through the barriers, both real and symbolic, that are set up in opposition to it.

Contagion, which signals the growth of the same on either side of a boundary, is mirrored across the levels of the cell, the body, and the state in the film. Framed as a disease, the zombie pathogen in the film takes only ten seconds to recreate the conditions of undeadness within a new body. The speed of contagion is seen early in the film when the protagonist, Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt), witnesses the turning of a zombie as he counts to ten, giving both himself and the audience a clear idea of the speed at which the body becomes infected, dies, and returns to life. At the level of the body, the zombie's bite becomes the primary vector of transmission and the boundary-breaking that characterizes the major themes of this article are at their most literal: the violent rupturing of the skin that brings on a process of transformation in the violated body that turns it into a zombie.

At the level of the nation state, the zombie threatens to overcome the literal and symbolic boundaries that structure it. *World War Z*'s narrative centers on a United Nations operative attempting to piece together the epidemiology of the zombie outbreak while traveling from one crumbling nation state to another. Nowhere is this more visible than in the scenes that take place in Israel, where the city walls of Jerusalem have been newly reconstructed precisely to keep out thousands of zombies massing outside the city. But even these walls are breached, somewhat ironically, by the integration of refugees into the city's population. As refugees enter into Jerusalem, they begin to sing the praises of their saviors in a moment of explicit

cosmopolitanism. But it is this very display, broadcast through the camp's loudspeakers, that draws the zombies to the walls in such massive numbers that they swarm over the city walls, climbing over each other to eventually overrun the city.

As a combination of zombie and outbreak narrative, *World War Z* uses the epidemic as a model for both contagion and populism. Marc Guillaume brings this connection to light when he suggests that, '[i]f we rid the notion of epidemic of all its pathos, what remains is an abstract model or, more precisely, a series of models. Epi-demos: upon the people. Something spreads itself across the population, something which under normal circumstances would be external to it: a foreign element' (1985: 59). Guillaume's insights lead back to the notion of contagion as something that is unleashed upon the people. Contagion is fundamentally generative, which is a point of agreement between Guillaume and Wald who argues along similar lines, '[t]he outbreak narrative… animates the figures and maps the spaces of global modernity. It also accrues contradictions: the obsolescence and tenacity of borders, the attraction and threat of strangers, and especially the destructive and formative power of contagion' (Wald, 2008: 33).[11] Contagion reproduces sameness across borders and spreads throughout populations in ways that echo the totalizing logic of populism, albeit in a schematic form. However, this abstraction is important since both contagion and populism refer to a mechanism without specific content, but rather a program for the reproduction of the same through a kind of unification in the form of an imagined community/immunity.

The zombie embodies the force of analogy in three important but fragmented ways that are illustrated in *World War Z*. First, the zombie is made indistinct as the crowd and the digital multitude more specifically since the movements of the group have been algorithmically mapped out onto other forms and movements. Second, the crowd is understood as a wave. This appears as one of the most distinctive and interesting features of the zombies appearing in *World War Z*, which are generated and animated by the software platform 'ALICE,' which controls the actions of the zombies on screen both individually and as a collective. Third, the wave of zombies is rendered according to the logics inherent within the algorithms that produced them. Taken together, these three tiers of analogy suggest the force of analogy that has, itself, gone into hypertrophy. Each of these fragmentations and indistinctions will be explored in turn

because each one brings into clearer relief the fundamental connections between the zombie and populism by way of analogy run amok.

The individual made indistinct in the crowd can be understood as a baseline definition of populism itself. Rooted in the political formation of the crowd, populism renders the granular concerns of the individual indistinct and irrelevant in favor of a unified *volonté générale,* or general will. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser, populism rests upon a unitary understanding of a people. However, this notion of the people is an empty signifier that can 'generate a shared identity between different groups and facilitate their support for a common cause' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 53). This echoes Laclau's thinking on populism and turns upon the idea of a political force that reveals the porousness of individual identity.

The second indistinction, in which the crowd is understood as a wave, invokes the fluid metaphors often used to describe the physical and political dynamics of the crowd. In the case of *World War Z*, these wave dynamics are literalized through the computer-generated effects that govern the movement of the undead. Like many contemporary blockbusters, *World War Z* utilized complex software programs to animate and control the bodies of the zombies on screen. This is particularly apparent in those extreme long shots that include dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of bodies moving en masse. In an interview, Jessica Norman, a visual effects supervisor at MPC (Motion Picture Company), who worked on the film, discusses the challenges posed by so many artificially generated bodies. Using a proprietary program called ALICE (which stands for Artificial Life Crowd Engine), the effects artists at MPC drew upon a set of borrowed characteristics to animate and imagine the zombie mass, moving as a wave.[12] Norman says, 'During pre-production we received reference material showing insects swarming and schools of fish formations … we also received concept work early on showing different formations that the Zombie crowds could take. These included pyramid formations and also tentacle-like shapes' (Frei, 2013). The uncanny quality of the zombie's movements in the Jerusalem scene in *World War Z* is due to the formal characteristics that were borrowed from other environments and remapped onto the crowd. The zombies move *like* a swarm because their movements are generated and based on the movement of insects; zombies move

like a wave because the schooling dynamics of fish have been borrowed and recreated within the crowds of zombies.

Programs like ALICE lend a level of granular detail to the movement of the bodies appearing on screen because each one is individually governed by an artificial intelligence to move seamlessly with the crowd. Despite being run by an overarching AI, the 'agents' generated by ALICE have a set of rules that govern their behavior on screen at the individual level, allowing them to exhibit a degree of apparent freedom. In her discussion of digital crowds, Kristen Whissel has argued that, '[b]y virtue of its composition, the digital multitude immediately calls into question the relationship between the individual and the mass, the self and the collective' (2014: 77). Whissel, following this line of thinking, quotes Eugene Thacker on the logic of the swarm, '[o]n the ontological plane, the first important observation is that the multitude is neither the individual or the group. It is positioned somewhere in between, somewhere else entirely (2004).[13] In turn, this in-between space echoes Foucault's description of the way that transgression generates a space of oscillation, crossing and re-crossing the symbolically significant boundary. The third indistinction arrives in the form of the digital programs in charge of orchestrating the zombies of *World War Z* operate at the level of formal analogy made possible by the universal equivalence, as well as the accompanying exchangeability of medium and form, that takes place within the realm of the digital.

In *Bergsonism*, Gilles Deleuze sees that 'quality is nothing other than a contracted quantity' and that this is the very basis of sensation itself: 'contracting trillions of vibrations onto a receptive surface' (1991: 74). Quality is quantity at a difference scale - experienced from another vantage point and level of abstraction. It is at least once removed from the level of embodied experience that initially triggers those impressions. Perhaps surprisingly, populism works along very similar lines. A basic understanding of populism defines it as, 'the quality of appealing to or being aimed at ordinary people' (Google). Like Deleuze's reading of Bergson, quality emerges out of quantity: the quality of populism emerges out of the compound impressions of the collective popular impressions. Put another way, populism is condensed from out of the populace. Here, populism is a quality that is aimed at 'ordinary' people, which in turn targets and frames them as such. Quality obscures the underlying quantity, making it imperceptible in the same way

that, in populism, individual difference is obscured by the unified wave of populist discourse.

Jan-Werner Müller defines populism as a political discourse that is inherently anti-pluralist, putting it in direct opposition to a more cosmopolitan outlook - populism demands a cohesiveness of ideology and a consistency of the social body (2016: 8). Müller also emphasizes the way that populism operates according to a totalizing logic, in which the imagined populace represents the complete social body. 'For the populists,' Müller argues, 'the equation always works out: any remainder can be dismissed as immoral and not properly part of the people at all. That's another way of saying that populism is always a form of identity politics (though not all versions of identity politics are populist)' (2016: 8). This last point is crucial in understanding the significance of the zombie, and the patterns of symbolic and structural crossing that illustrate the transgressiveness of the zombie and its analogy to populism. Recognizing populism as a form of identity politics is useful in two ways. First, following the insights of Laclau and Wald, it reveals the important role that fantasy and identity have to play in any populist politics. Second, the invocation of identity reveals an inherent demand for sameness embedded within the politics of identity. In other words, to embody an identity is to be identical to oneself, not through stillness but through rabid repetition, the re-affirmation of the same across all boundaries of difference.

This drive towards sameness also reflects the most troubling aspects of media populism, which both turns on and fosters a uniformity of opinion, an antipathy towards any political body that it considers 'elite,' and a blending of opinion and truth, the people and the state. Media populism makes indistinct the lines and boundaries between the people and the state in ways that seem to exacerbate the tendency of populism towards fascism. As Urbinati points out, '[f]ascism is the state and the people merging,' and while she is explicitly referring to fascism understood through the lens of political theory, it is hard not to see this blurring of boundaries as the result of the disfigured self-reflection of the vexed category of 'the people,' and a crisis of analogy out of control (2019: 21). The zombie is not populist in the sense that it directly embodies these political characteristics, but the zombie, particularly the zombies of *World War Z*, embodies this rapid and repetitive generation of sameness as it reproduces itself across every boundary that it encounters through the mechanisms of transgression, analogy,

and contagion. If populism contains this drive to homogeneity and sameness within the body politic, then media populism extends that into the realm of representation, both at the level of technology and fantasy. The presence of the term 'zombie' in so many areas of culture in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries is symptomatic of this impulse and signals its significance: the analogy of the zombie itself displays zombie-like qualities, parasitizing and moving via the mechanisms of semiotic contagion across discursive and conceptual fields, medial platforms, and film genres. The zombie represents a hypertrophy of analogy itself, as it becomes a reigning trope, ready to be attached to any concept, ideology, political formation, economic system, or material object whose lifespan seems to have exceeded its natural limit.

Notes

1. While the zombie emerged out of a uniquely American cultural history, having been born out of the slave plantations of the Americas and the Caribbean, the form of the zombie movie has subsequently spread as one Hollywood genre among many into other national and cultural cinemas.

2. The first zombie movie was *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932).

3. Evidence for this is clearly seen in the earliest writings on the zombie, such as the travelogues of William Seabrook and the anthropological writings of Zora Neale Hurston. See Seabrook, W. and Hurston, Z.N., respectively.

4. See Frei, V. below.

5. In particular Lev Manovich, who argues that the ultimate defining feature of digital technology is "transcoding," or the ability to translate images into sounds or vice versa through the universal mediation of digital code, although this is a common discourse surrounding the rise of the digital. See specifically: Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 45.

6. This passage was also quoted in Keenan, 1997: 118.

7. Again, Jamie Russell provides a useful insight about this relationship: "Intriguingly, the relationship between zombie movies and these videogames proved strangely reciprocal: *Resident Evil*'s success as a videogame franchise reinvigorated zombie cinema in the late 1990s and paved the way for the zombie renaissance that occurred in the 2000s. It was the first sign of the zombie's impending mutation into a cross-media monster - a creature so adaptable it could jump from movies to games to comics and novels with ease." See Russell, 128.

8. The "zombies" in *28 Days Later* were never actually called zombies but were referred to as the "infected".

9. Emphasis in original.

10. This phrase comes from Eric Santner's discussion of "creaturely life." See Santer, EL (2006).

11. Emphasis mine.

12. Information on what the ALICE acronym stands for was found at < http://www.kolve.com/vfxwork/vfxwork.htm>.

13. Also cited in Whissel, 2014: 77.

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