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INTRODUCTION ... TO THE UNDEAD

There are many natural sources of fear in world politics—terrorist attacks, lethal pandemics, natural disasters, climate change, financial panic, nuclear proliferation, ethnic conflict, global cyberwarfare, political polarization, great power competition, and so forth. Surveying the cultural zeitgeist, however, it is striking how an unnatural problem has become one of the fastest-growing concerns in international relations. I speak, of course, of zombies.

Whether they are called ghouls, deadites, rotters, walkers, stenchies, hungries, deadheads, post-humans, the mobile deceased, or the differently animated, the specter of the living dead represents an important puzzle to scholars of international relations and the theories we use to understand the world. What would different theories of international politics predict would happen if the dead began to rise from the grave and feast upon the living? How valid—or how rotten—are these predictions?

Serious readers might dismiss these questions as fanciful, but concerns about flesh-eating ghouls are manifestly evident in popular culture. Whether one looks at films, songs, games, or books, the genre is clearly on the rise. As figure 1 shows, the release of zombie films has spiked since the dawn of the new millennium; according to conservative estimates, well more than one-third of all zombie films have been released since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.¹ Figure 2 suggests that these

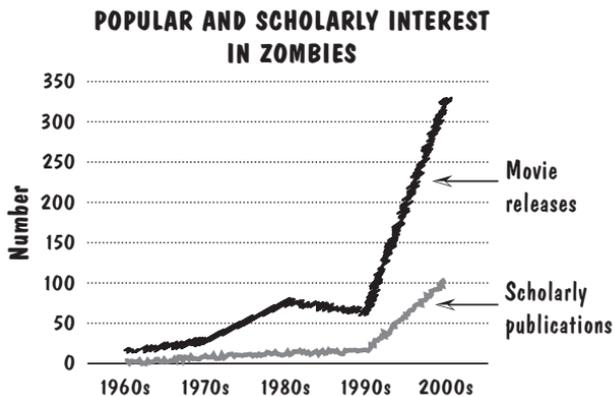


Figure 1. Popular and scholarly interest in zombies.
Sources: Wikipedia, Web of Science.

estimates might be understated. According to one analysis, zombies have become the most important source of postapocalyptic cinema in the twenty-first century.*

Nor is this interest limited to celluloid. A series of zombie video games, including the *Resident Evil* and *Left 4 Dead* franchises, served as a precursor for the renaissance of zombie cinema. These have been followed up by even more video games, such as *The Last of Us*. The undead have spread to television in recent years, including the CW's *iZombie* (2015–19), Syfy's *Z Nation* (2014–18), and Netflix's *Black Summer* (2019–21). Towering over the zombie television landscape is AMC's ratings powerhouse *The Walking Dead* (2010–22), which in 2013 beat all other shows in its time slot in the ratings. While that show has ended it has spawned multiple spin-offs, including *Fear the*

*Phelan 2009. Zombies are clearly a global cinematic phenomenon. Beyond the United States, there have been Australian, British, Chinese, Czech, Cuban, German, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, and Norwegian zombie flicks. See Russell 2005 for an exhaustive filmography.

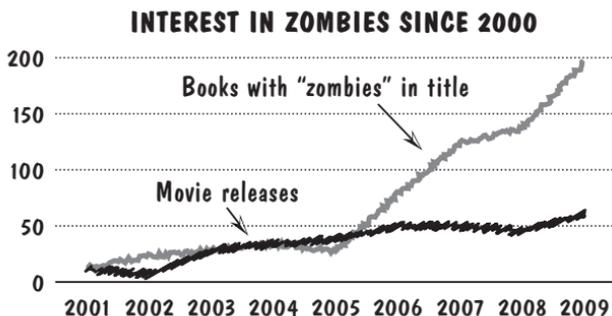


Figure 2. Interest in zombies since 2000.
Sources: Amazon.com, Wikipedia.

Walking Dead, *The Walking Dead: World Beyond*, and perhaps in the future *2 Walking 2 Dead* and *The Walking Dead: Tokyo Drift*.

Zombies have also seeped onto the written page. The popular literature ranges from how-to survival manuals,² to children's books,³ to revisionist early Victorian novels to prestigious fiction.⁴ An examination of Ngrams reveals that after 2008 the number of book mentions of "zombie" eclipsed mentions of "pandemic," "ICBM," and "greenhouse gas." Comic book series such as *The Walking Dead* and *Marvel Zombies* have spread rapidly over the past two decades. One book editor gleefully told *USA Today* that "in the world of traditional horror, nothing is more popular right now than zombies. The living dead are here to stay."⁵ A cursory scan of newspaper databases shows a steady increase in posthuman mentions (see figure 3). Clearly the living dead have lurched from marginal to mainstream.

One could dismiss the zombie trend as merely feeding a mass public that craves the strange and bizarre. Such an explanation would be only skin-deep. Popular culture often provides a window into the subliminal or unstated fears of citizens, and zombies are no exception. Some cultural commentators argue that

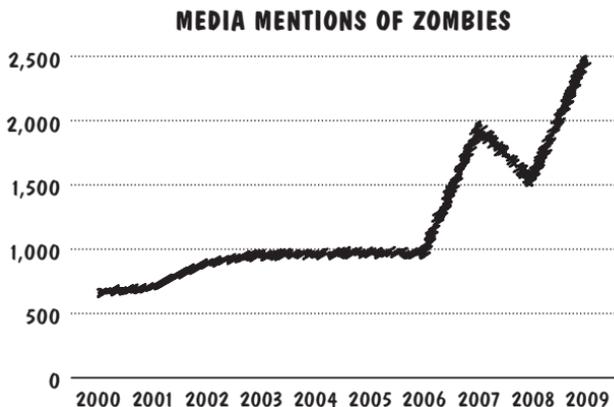


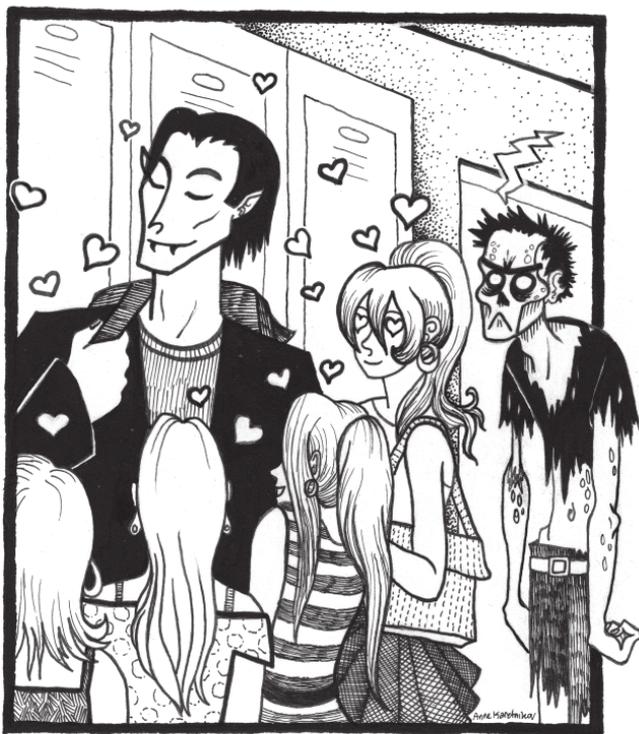
Figure 3. Media mentions of zombies. Source: Lexis-Nexis.

the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were a primary cause for renewed interest in the living dead, and the numbers appear to back up this assertion (see figure 2).⁶ Certainly the anthrax attacks in the autumn of 2001 raised fears about bioterrorism and biosecurity.⁷ Subsequent pandemics, including Ebola, Zika, and most prominently COVID-19, have intensified these fears. As Peter Dendle notes, “It is clear that the zombie holocausts vividly painted in movies and video games have tapped into a deep-seated anxiety about society.”⁸ Zombies have been an obvious metaphor for medical maladies, mob rule, and Marxist dialectics.*

*In one of the more interesting interpretations, Grady Hendrix (2008) concludes that Juan Carlos Fresnadillo’s *28 Weeks Later* (2007) is “an effective metaphor for the unstoppable, global spread of Starbucks.” For more general discussions of how zombies are used as metaphors, see Aquilina and Hughes 2006; Christie and Lauro 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2002; Cooke 2009, chap. 7; Fay 2008; Harper 2002; Kay 2008; Lauro and Embry 2008; Newitz 2006; Paffenroth 2006; Russell 2005; Smith? 2011; and Webb and Byrnard 2008.

Some international relations scholars would posit that interest in zombies is an indirect attempt to get a cognitive grip on what former US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld famously referred to as the “unknown unknowns” in international security.⁹ Perhaps, however, there also exists a genuine but publicly unacknowledged fear of the dead rising from the grave and feasting upon the entrails of the living. Clearly, biosecurity is a new imperative among national governments.¹⁰ The government of Haiti has laws on the books to prevent the zombification of individuals.¹¹ Multiple US government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, have issued public statements with respect to the living dead. US Strategic Command developed CONPLAN 8888, entitled “Counter-Zombie Dominance.” Its very first line reads, “This plan was not actually designed as a joke.”¹² One can only speculate what other governments are doing in private. Despite CONPLAN 8888, in 2013, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey went to the Pentagon and explicitly asked his service commanders, “Oh my God, what are we going to do if the zombies attack?”¹³

One must be wary of overstating the case—after all, flesh-eating ghouls are not the only paranormal phenomenon to spark popular interest. In recent years, UFOs, ghosts, vampires, wizards, witches, and hobbits have also been on the tip of everyone’s tongue. For some, the specter of zombies pales in comparison to other paranormal creatures. The disdain of cultural elites has abetted this perspective by placing zombies in the derivative, low-rent part of the paranormal spectrum—a shuffling, stumbling creature that desires only braaaaiiiiiinnnnnnns. Thirty-five years ago, James Twitchell concluded that “the zombie is an utter cretin,



Zombies, in contrast to vampires, do not thrive in high schools.

a vampire with a lobotomy.”¹⁴ Despite the zombie renaissance in popular culture, these ghouls are still considered disreputable. Paul Waldmann observed in 2009 that “in truth, zombies should be boring . . . what’s remarkable is that a villain with such little complexity has thrived for so long.”¹⁵ In 2010, the Academy Awards presented a three-minute homage to horror cinema, and only a millisecond was devoted to any zombie film—way less than that Chucky doll. No zombie has the appeal of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* or the *Twilight* series’ Edward Cullen.

From a public policy perspective, however, zombies merit greater interest than other paranormal phenomenon. As figure 4

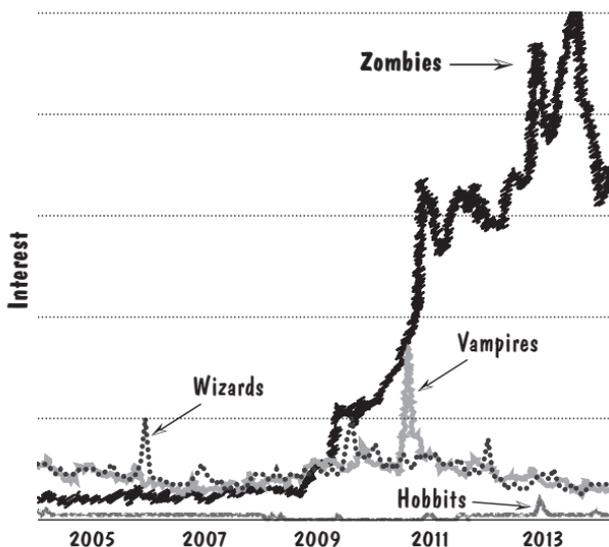


Figure 4. Google Trends analysis of paranormal actors.

demonstrates through Google Trends analysis, interest in zombies has far outpaced interest in other paranormal phenomena—especially the friggin’ hobbits. Furthermore, the gap in attention surged after the 2008 financial crisis. The living dead appear to resonate more than other paranormal actors in an age of uncertainty.

Scientists and doctors acknowledge that, in contrast to vampires or demons, some variation of a zombie could exist in our physical world.* Zombies possess a patina of plausibility that vampires, ghosts, witches, demons, or wizards lack; the creation of a zombie does not necessarily require a supernatural act. Indeed,

*Berlinski 2009; Davis 1985, 1988; Efthimiou and Gandhi 2007; Koch and Crick 2001; Littlewood and Douyon 1997. In the main, these possibilities adhere closely to the traditional Haitian notion of the zombie as a human revived via voodoo and devoid of free will, rather than the flesh-eating ghouls that started with George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).

this plausibility of zombies can be seen in expert surveys. A poll of professional philosophers showed that more than 58 percent of philosophers believed that zombies could exist on some level. In contrast, fewer than 15 percent of the same respondents were prepared to believe in God.* Given the raft of religion and theology departments in the academy, it seems churlish for scholars to neglect the question of reanimated corpses snacking on human flesh.

The traditional narrative of the zombie canon also looks different from stories about other paranormal beings. Zombie stories usually end in one of two ways—the elimination/subjugation of all zombies, or the eradication of humanity from the face of the earth.¹⁶ If popular culture is to be believed, the peaceful coexistence of ghouls and humans is a remote possibility. Such extreme all-or-nothing outcomes are less common in the vampire or wizard literatures. There are far fewer narratives of vampires trying to take over the world.¹⁷ Instead, creatures of the night are frequently co-opted into existing power structures. Indeed, recent literary tropes suggest that vampires or wizards can peacefully coexist with ordinary teens in many of the world's high schools, provided they are sufficiently hunky.¹⁸ Zombies, not so much. If it is true that “popular culture *makes* world politics what it currently *is*,” then the international relations community needs to digest the problem posed by flesh-eating ghouls in a more urgent manner.¹⁹

*Data from the PhilPapers Survey of 3,226 professional philosophers and others carried out in November 2009 (<http://philpapers.org/surveys/>). The philosophical definition of *zombie* (a being identical to humans in every way except lacking in consciousness) is somewhat different from the vernacular meaning (a reanimated corpse intent on eating human flesh). There is some conceptual overlap between the two meanings, however. As David Chalmers (1996, 96) puts it, “all is dark inside” for both categories of zombies.

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