

Jason J. Morrissette

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger: Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

In recent years, zombie fiction has clawed its way out of the grave and into mainstream popular culture. Once only a small niche in the broader horror genre, zombies—and depictions of the “zombie apocalypse” in particular—have emerged as a cultural phenomenon in the past decade, as the living dead have infected film, television, literature, and video games with their unique brand of putrescent terror. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention even launched a section on its website titled “Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse” in 2011, capitalizing on the zombie craze to promote disaster readiness (Khan). Why has zombie fiction struck such a chord with contemporary audiences? In a 2008 interview, filmmaker and architect of the modern zombie genre George A. Romero indicated that, in his mind, the zombie apocalypse represents “a global change of some kind. And the stories are about how people respond or fail to respond to this” (McConnell).¹ In turn, Romero’s cinematic mission statement could just as easily describe the field of international relations and its scholarly emphasis on understanding how state and non-state actors alike respond to any number of global challenges, ranging from nuclear proliferation to climate change to the abuse of human rights.

In *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, Daniel W. Drezner describes the living dead as both “one of the fastest-growing concerns in international relations” and “an important puzzle to scholars of international relations” (1). As Drezner goes on to demonstrate in his work, the fictional threat of zombies can serve as a powerful metaphor through which to explore and deconstruct the discipline’s core assumptions. To this end, he applies various theoretical perspectives drawn from the field of international relations—most notably the realist, liberal, and

Jason J. Morrisette

social constructivist paradigms—to the imagined landscape of the zombie apocalypse, shedding light on what kinds of global responses each school of thought might predict under these dire circumstances. Woven throughout Drezner’s analysis is the underlying fictional assumption that zombies, as depicted in works of popular culture, constitute an existential threat to the state, creating a security environment in which war with the undead is virtually inevitable. The present article questions this assumption from the perspective of critical security studies (CSS), exploring the securitization of the undead and the production of danger in fictional human-zombie relations. How does the hegemonic discourse surrounding the zombie apocalypse predispose states to respond with violence? Why are these outbreaks so frequently presented as threats to the survival of the state and not as humanitarian crises or global health emergencies? This article argues that the imagined securitization of zombies creates a world in which the discourse of *fighting* the zombie apocalypse delegitimizes any effort to instead *solve* the zombie apocalypse. Moreover, the present article contends that strikingly similar discourses routinely shape the “real world” of foreign policy with regards to such controversial issues as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, privileging violent responses over less coercive options.

Zombies, International Relations Theory, and World War Z

If we pay heed to Drezner’s warning, a specter is presently haunting world politics—“the specter of reanimated corpses coming to feast on people’s brains” (*Theories* 109). Drezner’s groundbreaking exploration of international relations through the lens of the zombie metaphor began with a blog entry in 2009, which was later expanded upon in a 2010 article for *Foreign Policy* and ultimately transformed into a book under the title *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* in 2011. A common question drives his investigation of the subject: “What would different theories of international relations predict would happen if the zombies started to roam the earth?” (*Theories* 32). Because they “can spread across borders and threaten states and civilizations” (*Theories* 21), Drezner convincingly ar-

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

gues that the zombie metaphor constitutes an effective means by which to “stress test” (*Theories* 17) our existing theories of international relations. Moreover, a fictional outbreak of “zombism” serves as a compelling proxy through which to consider any number of *actual* transnational issues such as terrorism, ethnic conflict, nuclear proliferation, and the global HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Specifically, the zombie metaphor creates an intellectual space unencumbered by preexisting political biases. Since no serious political party has adopted a position on relations with the undead, the zombie metaphor enables us to move beyond any partisan or ideological assumptions about the “proper” approach to foreign policy. Moreover, the zombie apocalypse is a familiar enough fictional construct in contemporary popular culture that its conceits and “ground rules” are probably more familiar to most audiences than, say, the institutional structure of the United Nations. In fact, evidence of a positive correlation between the production of zombie films and periods of social upheaval and/or war suggests that our culture, at least implicitly, is already accustomed to exploring our political anxieties through the metaphorical lens of the zombie (Newitz). As Jentleson summarizes in his review of *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, the result is a “culturally clever and intellectually insightful” book that “brings out key tenets and provides paradigm assessments quite effectively and quite accessibly—especially for undergraduates, and arguably for graduate students” (212).

What insights does Drezner’s application of the zombie metaphor to the discipline of international relations offer? He notes that international relations scholarship “is less concerned with the *cause* of zombies than their *effect* on world politics” (*Theories* 27), reflecting the positivist orientation of mainstream international relations theory. That said, the field of international relations is defined by theoretical diversity; there is no single agreed-upon set of assumptions that define the study of global politics. In the case of a hypothetical zombie apocalypse, Drezner contends that there are “multiple paradigms that attempt to explain international relations, and each has a different take on how political actors can be expected to respond to the living dead” (“Night of the Living Wonks” 1). His assess-

Jason J. Morrisette

ment of these competing paradigms and their explanatory power vis-à-vis flesh-eating ghouls begins with realism, the field's dominant theory since the end of World War II. With its focus on the lack of central authority in global politics (anarchy) and competition among states to accumulate power as a means to ensure their own security and survival (self-help), the realist school of thought is seemingly a perfect fit for analyzing the dystopic conditions of the zombie apocalypse so often depicted in works of popular culture. Skeptical of both meaningful cooperation among states and foreign policy grounded in moral principles, realists depict a world similar to that described by their intellectual forebear Thucydides in the Melian Dialogue: the strong do what they have the power to do, and the weak suffer what they must (103). How would the realist paradigm respond in the face of a zombie pandemic? Intriguingly, Drezner argues that—at least as far as realists are concerned—the introduction of the undead into world politics would leave international relations “largely unaffected” (*Theories* 37). Since realists fundamentally argue that the distribution of power in the international system determines state behavior, a hypothetical plague of zombies is ultimately no different from other more conventional threats to state security like nuclear proliferation or terrorism. States will simply continue to go about seeking power and accumulating resources in order to secure themselves from this new threat. After all, as Drezner points out, “Human beings have an innate lust for power in the realist paradigm; zombies have an innate lust for human flesh. Both are scarce resources” (*Theories* 45).

In contrast, the liberal paradigm—realism's perennial rival in the field—puts greater faith in the ability of states to cooperate with one another for mutual gain. By eschewing realism's perspective on international relations as a zero-sum game, liberalism depicts a world in which state interests extend beyond just security, war is inevitable, and international organizations like the United Nations have a meaningful role to play in promoting peace and progress. Drawing on this more optimistic perspective, Drezner summarizes the likely liberal response to the zombie apocalypse as follows:

Provided that the initial spread of zombies did not completely wipe out

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger: Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

governments, the liberal expectation would be that an international counter-zombie regime could make significant inroads into the problem. Given the considerable public-good benefits of wiping the undead from the face of the Earth, significant policy coordination seems a likely response. (“Night” 3)

He goes on to suggest that something akin to a World Zombie Organization (WZO) would likely emerge to coordinate the wide range of security, trade, and health issues that result from the dead walking the earth, in much the same way that institutions like the United Nations, the European Union, and NATO have formed to facilitate cooperation on *actual* global challenges. Drezner’s reading of the liberal paradigm indicates that states would “unite to fight” the zombie menace, perhaps establishing counter-zombie peacekeeping missions in failed states, similar to those currently in place to prevent hostilities in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mali. While the “permanent eradication of flesh-eating ghouls is unlikely,” liberals would likely hold out hope that an outbreak of zombism could be reduced to “one of many manageable threats” (Drezner, “Night” 3).

With the two oldest and most prominent theories of international relations accounted for, Drezner turns his attention toward two more recent theoretical paradigms: neoconservatism and social constructivism. Most closely associated with the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration, neoconservatism combines a concern for American primacy in global affairs and an effort to promote American values abroad with a willingness to engage in preemptive military action to address emerging threats. In turn, Drezner argues that the neoconservative perspective, faced with the kind of zombie outbreak so frequently portrayed in popular culture, would advocate “an aggressive and militarized response to ensure the continued hegemony of the human race. Rather than wait for the ghouls to come to them, neoconservatives would recommend proactive policy options that take the fight to the undead” (*Theories* 63). According to this perspective, a clash between the forces of “good” and “evil”—as Drezner puts it, a Global War on Zombies—is virtually inevitable.

Constructivism, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of

Jason J. Morrissette

norms, beliefs, values, and identities in constructing social reality and ultimately shaping state behavior. As one prominent scholar encapsulated the constructivist paradigm, “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt 391). As opposed to realists, who argue that anarchy inevitably leads to competition for power and conflict, social constructivists maintain that the lack of central authority in global politics has no intrinsic qualities that impose upon states a specific pattern of behavior. Rather, transnational norms, identities, and relationships are shaped over time as states interact with one another; these norms and identities, in turn, mutually construct state behavior. Therefore, constructivism opens the door to a wide range of policy responses to a particular challenge. The paradigm also helps explain, for instance, how the contrasting identities and norms of interaction at play in contemporary international affairs could lead the United States to perceive merely the possibility of Iran developing a single nuclear weapon as a dire threat to global security, while simultaneously demonstrating little concern about the sizable nuclear arsenal already in the hands of an ally like the United Kingdom. Applying the constructivist perspective to the fictional zombie apocalypse scenario, Drezner contends that “the existential peril posed by zombies could be the exogenous shock needed to break down nationalist divides,” creating a stronger sense of shared identity among humans and advancing the creation of a “pluralistic counter-zombie security community” in which states pool their sovereignty and resources to fight the growing threat (*Theories* 71-72).

What does the fictional zombie canon tell us about the relative merits of these theoretical perspectives? While most zombie stories tend to focus on a small band of survivors fighting the undead hordes, with relatively little attention paid to the broader global political response and the affairs of nations, Max Brooks’ 2006 novel *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* stands out as a notable exception. Presented as a succession of vignette-style interviews with survivors of a cataclysmic global war against the undead, the novel devotes significant coverage to the political responses mounted by various states against the living dead. In turn, it arguably serves as the closest analogue available for the purposes of the present article to a true case study of the dynamics of global

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

politics during the zombie apocalypse. For instance, in *World War Z*, the United States adopts a stance broadly reflective of neoconservative principles, waging an active and largely unilateral war against the flesh-eating ghouls, eventually “liberating” both Canada and Mexico in the process. A character in the novel describes the American strategy as follows: “The United States intended to go permanently on the offensive, marching forward every day, until, as he put it, ‘every trace was sponged, and purged, and, if need be, blasted from the surface of the Earth’” (Brooks, *World War Z* 265). Perhaps America’s neoconservative stance comes as no surprise considering the novel’s publication date of 2006, when the Bush Doctrine of American foreign policy was front and center. This aggressive approach is also mirrored in other contemporaneous works of zombie fiction. In the 2007 film *28 Weeks Later*, for instance, an American occupation force charged with overseeing the resettlement of London following an outbreak of the zombie-like “Rage Virus” eventually releases nerve gas and later orders citywide firebombing to avert a second outbreak, demonstrating little concern for massive casualties among the uninfected. The detonation of a “sanitizing” nuclear missile over the zombie-infested Raccoon City in the 2004 film *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* also reflects a similar “containment at any cost” strategy.

Other nations depicted in *World War Z* adopt what Drezner might describe as a realist stance—attempting to remain “safe and sedentary” (Brooks, *World War Z* 265) while shoring up their own defenses against the undead threat. Both Cuba—described by one character in the novel as having “won” the war as a result of emerging with one of the world’s strongest postwar economies—and Israel implement sweeping isolationist plans, closing their borders completely to refugees and focusing instead on defensive measures.² In contrast, Iran and Pakistan engage in a devastating nuclear exchange with one another as a result of a series of disputes and skirmishes over the thousands of infected refugees spreading across their borders. China, the plague’s country of origin in *World War Z*, is also mindful of the balance of power, provoking an international incident with Taiwan to distract the global community from its internal zombie crisis and, in turn, avoid appearing weak in the eyes of the United States and

Jason J. Morrisette

Russia.

What becomes of the United Nations, the liberal paradigm's last great hope for promoting peace and cooperation? While a character early in the novel observes that "nuggets of valuable data buried in mountains of unread reports" compiled by the World Health Organization helped detect the zombie threat (Brooks, *World War Z* 35), by the time the infection has gone global in the novel, the UN consists of only seventy 72 delegates (in contrast to the 193 countries currently represented in the General Assembly). Furthermore, when the United States proposes its active military campaign against the zombies at the Honolulu Conference, 17 members of the new UN oppose it and an additional 31 members abstain from voting (Brooks, *World War Z* 269). Despite lacking support from a majority of member states, the United States nevertheless moves forward with its aggressive strategy. While the UN survives (the novel itself is framed as a byproduct of the UN's Postwar Commission Report), meaningful cooperation among states and respect for international institutions disintegrate in the midst of the Zombie War, providing little support for the liberal paradigm. Similar themes are present in other works of zombie fiction, where societal and governmental institutions, at least at the domestic level, are frequently depicted as buckling under the stress of an outbreak and efforts at interpersonal cooperation routinely fail. For instance, a lack of solidarity and the inability to work together leads directly to the protagonists' grisly deaths in 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero's first exploration of the zombie genre. In turn, the film's Hobbesian, "every man for himself" perspective on human nature emerges as a familiar motif throughout the zombie canon. Furthermore, many tales of the undead explore the limited capacity of governmental institutions to promote order and cooperation in times of crisis. In AMC's television adaptation of *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), for example, the CDC establishes a safe zone in Atlanta and broadcasts a radio transmission encouraging survivors to come to the city for military protection and food. Zombies—"walkers" in the parlance of the series—quickly overrun the safe zone, however, and the CDC's transmissions serve only to lure a steady stream of victims into the city ("Days Gone Bye").³ Again, the government is depicted as ineffectual, and

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger: Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

those who survive the outbreak are left to fend for themselves.

In summary, *World War Z* provides an enlightening case study through which to assess Drezner's work on applying the zombie metaphor to international relations—and many of its central themes are reinforced in other works of zombie fiction. As Drezner points out in his conclusion, however, the results of such efforts to apply competing theories of international politics to the zombie apocalypse are not entirely satisfying. While he argues that international relations theory “clearly retains some practical utility” with regards to the fictional zombie pandemic, he suggests that perhaps “the ability of these theories to explain current global threats and challenges is more circumscribed than international relations theories proclaim in their scholarship” (*Theories* 114). The state-centric focus of mainstream theories of international relations results in paradigms and schools of thought that struggle to address threats posed by non-state actors, including fictional zombies. Drezner continues, “The international-relations profession has always started with the state—and governments will continue to play a vital role in world politics. But the field has been slow to adapt to the plethora of asymmetric threats that we now face. Unless that changes, international relations scholars will be hard-pressed to offer cogent policy responses to emerging threats, much less the living dead” (“How I Learned”). With this in mind, the present article will now turn its attention to the perspective on global politics offered by critical security studies (CSS). By challenging the state-centrism of mainstream international relations theories, CSS highlights how the underlying assumptions of the zombie apocalypse—and the discourse that emerges from these presuppositions—create an environment in which military responses to the perceived zombie threat are privileged over other policy alternatives. In turn, this deconstruction of the zombie metaphor provides a valuable starting point for challenging our preconceived notions surrounding actual global challenges like terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

The following definition by Walt is frequently cited as the quint-

Jason J. Morrisette

essential expression of the traditional approach to security studies: “Security studies may be defined as the study of the threat, use, and control of military force. It explores the conditions that make the use of force more likely, the ways that the use of force affects individuals, states, and societies, and the specific policies that states adopt in order to prepare for, prevent, and engage in war” (212). On the other hand, critical approaches to security problematize several elements of this definition, including its narrow focus on *national* security and the utility of military force in achieving security. Krause and Williams question the assumed prominence of the state in traditional security studies as the referent object of security—that is, the primary object that is to be secured—in their foundational 1997 text, *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. In turn, CSS treats security as an “essentially contested concept,” defined by Fierke as “a concept that generates debates that cannot be resolved by reference to empirical evidence because the concept contains a clear ideological or moral element and defies precise, generally accepted definition” (34). Fierke further argues that CSS’s language of referent objects “suggests that not only states but individuals or the global environment can be threatened. The language raises a question about the primary focus on the state as the object of security” (5). While the theories introduced by Drezner in *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* differ in their specific details, they all share an emphasis on the hypothetical threat posed by the undead to *national* security and the corresponding *state* response—in many cases, through military force—to that perceived threat. Questions of *human* security raised by a hypothetical zombie apocalypse are, at best, an afterthought for traditional security studies. In turn, CSS takes issue with this focus on the survival of the state as a sovereign political unit as the ultimate benchmark of true security.

In addition to calling into question the status of the state as the referent object of security, the Copenhagen School—its name derived from the fact that several scholars associated with the school during its early years were based at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute—also introduces the concept of “securitization,” which has subsequently made a significant impact on CSS. Securitization refers to the process through

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

which a particular issue is framed as a threat to security. In turn, Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde distinguish between nonpoliticized, politicized, and securitized issues in the following passage:

“Security” is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or above politics. In theory, any public issue can be located on the spectrum ranging from nonpoliticized (meaning the state does not deal with it and it is not in any other way made an issue of public debate and decision) through politicized (meaning the issue is part of public policy, requiring government decision and resource allocations, or more rarely, some other form of communal governance) to securitized (meaning the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure). (23-24)

In other words, once a particular issue is securitized and defined as an existential threat to the continued survival of the state, CSS argues that governments are effectively empowered to enact policies aimed at eradicating the perceived threat through whatever means necessary. Therefore, the language and dominant discourse surrounding an issue—whether it is considered a political issue and therefore open to public debate with regards to possible solutions, or a security issue that threatens the state’s survival and necessitates a military response—emerge as key variables in CSS. Security, in this regard, is no longer an object, but rather a speech act (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 26). Fierke contends that the central question in the “production of danger” is “how, given the range of threats or risks that exist in the world, from the destruction of the environment to nuclear weapons to terrorism to human rights, some threats come to have priority over others and become the focus of discourses of security” (100). Moreover, since successful securitization brings with it certain tangible benefits, including the mobilization of public support and the allocation of vital resources, political actors may have a motive to pursue securitization of an issue in order to legitimize certain policies (Emmers 141-142).

A critical perspective on a fictional zombie pandemic would focus in large part on the framing of the event. Is the epidemic presented as a humanitarian crisis or a medical emergency warranting a political

Jason J. Morrisette

solution, or is it framed as an existential threat to the security of the state, necessitating a more extreme—and presumably more violent—response? In framing the undead as a menace that threatens the continued survival of the *state* as a sovereign political unit, as Drezner does in *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, are military responses aimed at annihilating the threat privileged over efforts to assist the infected, search for a cure, and pursue *human* security? The sections below challenge or otherwise problematize three underlying assumptions that shape the dominant, securitized discourse of the zombie apocalypse as it is typically depicted in works of fiction: the view of zombies as an existential threat to state security, the presumed “inhumanity” of the undead, and the perceived necessity of a military response to the living dead. In turn, we might observe similar discourses that shape our perception of less fantastical concerns in contemporary global affairs.

The Zombie as an Existential Threat

In *The Zombie Survival Guide*, Brooks outlines the scale of the zombie threat, arguing that “these somnambulists are the greatest threat to humanity, other than humanity itself.... Survival is the key word to remember—not victory, not conquest, just survival” (xii). Certainly, dreadful, gory images of ghouls devouring innocent victims on film and television underscore the danger posed by the undead to human security. That said, do zombies necessarily constitute an existential threat to the *state* as a sovereign political unit? Drezner’s effort to reconcile the scholarly fields of international relations and zombie studies clearly treats the state as the referent object of security, in turn reflecting the assumptions of traditional approaches to security studies. His work presents the state as the object that is to be secured; state interests and state responses vis-à-vis the hypothetical zombie apocalypse are at the center of his analysis. Drezner frames his examination of the living dead from “a national security perspective” (*Theories* 21), looks at the “challenge they pose to states” (*Theories* 18), considers the “effect on different national governments” (*Theories* 109), and draws the comparison between zombies and what former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld described as the “unknown unknowns”

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

that threaten international security (*Theories* 5).

Do flesh-eating ghouls actually represent an existential threat to the state itself, as traditional approaches to international relations might suggest? A return to the fictional case study presented in Brooks' *World War Z* offers valuable insights. For instance, as most of the country east of the Rocky Mountains is overwhelmed by the infected, the United States government abandons the mainland for Honolulu in order to maintain continuity of leadership (Brooks, *World War Z* 137ff.). One could argue that this relocation in the face of mass civilian casualties represents a consensus among US policymakers that favors the political unit of the state as the referent object of security. South Africa undertakes even more drastic measures in its fight against the undead, purposefully stranding pockets of survivors in infested areas to serve as "bait" to lure the undead away from a government-backed safe zone (Brooks, *World War Z* 105ff.). Meanwhile, the Chinese Politburo retreats to a defensible location and sends wave after wave of conscripted civilians to die at the hands of the undead (Brooks, *World War Z* 233ff.).

Without question, the prewar balance of power is transformed as a result of the Zombie War depicted in *World War Z*; for instance, relatively minor players such as Cuba and Tibet emerge as major global powers when the smoke clears. That said, while former great powers like China, Russia, and the United States are weakened by the events of the zombie apocalypse depicted in *World War Z*, they continue to survive as sovereign states—worse for the wear, but not yet consigned to the dustbin of history. In turn, the securitization of the undead and the resulting policy focus on sustaining *state* power and security consequently relegates matters of *human* security—the lives of the men, women, and children imperiled by the zombie hordes—to lesser status in the discourse hierarchy. Similarly, in *28 Weeks Later*, this state-centric discourse provides a justification—pragmatic, if not moral—for Brigadier General Stone to initiate "Code Red" and order his troops to "abandon selective targeting" and "shoot everything" in the face of an outbreak, sacrificing the lives of innocent civilians in the process. In a world where Drezner notes that the zombie apocalypse would leave billions of human beings facing "an additional

Jason J. Morrisette

menace on top of disease, poverty, and the erosion of the rule of law,” the overwhelming emphasis on state security over human security in fictional works like *World War Z* and *28 Weeks Later* seems sorely misplaced (“How I Learned”).

Similar state-centric discourses also shape foreign policy on a wide range of “real world” issues, and the discursive elevation of legitimate national security concerns to supposed *existential* threats frequently constructs a policymaking environment that favors violent measures over non-coercive responses. For example, in his remarks to the nation on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush described the day’s terrorist attacks as an assault on “our way of life,” establishing the existential stakes that would help pave the way for a militarized War on Terror that has now lasted over a decade (“Address to the Nation”). In framing these attacks as more than *just* a matter of national security, but rather an existential threat, the administration took the first step in making the case that a military response was not only appropriate, but in fact necessary, to ensure the state’s survival. A similar discourse emerged in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when a letter to Congress signed by President Bush described Iraq’s failure to comply with Security Council Resolutions as a “continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States” and requested “the broad authorities necessary” to apply pressure to Iraq during this “national emergency” (“Report”). Again, CSS and the concept of securitization suggest that “extraordinary” threats effectively empower governments to enact whatever policies they deem necessary to secure the continued survival of the state—whether that threat is terrorism, nuclear proliferation, or the living dead.

Personhood and the Living Dead

Are zombies still human? Identity and the social construction thereof are central to CSS (Fierke 75ff.), and questions about the personhood of the living dead represent a recurring theme in the zombie canon. A scientist in Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, summarizes the “zombies are *not* human beings” perspective during a televised interview:

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

The normal question, the first question is always, “Are these cannibals?” No, they are not cannibals. Cannibalism in the true sense of the word implies an intraspecies activity. These creatures cannot be considered human. They prey on humans. They do not prey on each other; that’s the difference These creatures are nothing but pure, motorized instinct. We must not be lulled by the concept that these are our family members or our friends. They are not. They will not respond to such emotions.

As Larkin contends, however, these scenes “actually serve to draw our attention to and even reinforce our gut-level reaction that these zombies really are our family members and friends. For we intuitively think that the scientists have got it wrong here. These so-called experts are looking at the zombie phenomenon from a safe and clinical distance” (23).

Dehumanization of the enemy often goes hand-in-hand with warfare—part of a process of moral disengagement that permits otherwise principled individuals to engage in acts of brutal violence against the perceived “Other.” This discursive act frames the Other as “culpable of great crimes” and, consequently, “less than human and deserving of punishment” (Boudreau and Polkinghorn 176). Once the enemy is socially constructed as somehow less than human—or, at the very least, less than civilized—we find ourselves in a policymaking environment wherein otherwise extraordinary measures are deemed acceptable. We need look no further than the 2003/2004 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal for a striking example of the end product of dehumanization run rampant. Furthermore, as modern warfare is increasingly conducted via long-range cruise missiles and unmanned drones, the lack of physical proximity between combatants only facilitates dehumanization. Even as research indicates that only one person out of fifty killed in the unmanned drone strikes favored by the Obama administration is actually a terrorist, the perceived magnitude of the terrorist threat—and, just as importantly, the dehumanized status of the target—reduces these civilian deaths to little more than “collateral damage” (“Living Under Drones”).

Returning to the zombie apocalypse scenario, Bishop has referred to zombies as “the ultimate foreign Other” (201)—lacking identity, the negation of everything we are as living human beings. If zombies retain

Jason J. Morrisette

even a shred of their prior humanity, however, efforts to address a large-scale outbreak through military force are increasingly problematic. Writing on the topic of vampires, the zombie's undead cousin, Whitman ponders, "Do vampires possess whatever characteristics would entitle them to moral consideration?... Not to put too fine a point on it: if vampires are persons, then hunting and staking vampires constitutes an egregious violation of their rights, a gross indifference to their interests, or both" (Whitman 173). Certainly, if we assume that the fictional zombie retains any trace of his or her prior humanity, the same could be said of returning a flesh-eating ghoul to the grave with a well-timed shotgun blast to the head. While Brooks argues that zombies "could not possibly retain memories of their former lives in either the conscious or subconscious mind, because neither exist!" (*Zombie Survival Guide* 15-16), Larkin counters that the zombies "are dead flesh all right, but not *merely* so. Just because they are dead flesh doesn't mean they aren't also our family and friends" (23). Or, as a character in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) succinctly states, "They're us!" Certainly, scenes depicting the zombies returning to a shopping mall in *Dawn of the Dead* ("an important place in their lives"),⁴ demonstrating the initial stirrings of social behavior in *Day of the Dead* (1985), taking up firearms against their human foes in *Land of the Dead* (2005)—or even the enduring ability of Ed, the title character's zombified best friend in *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), to play video games while chained up in a garden shed following his untimely un-demise—call into question the assumed inhumanity of the living dead.

If zombies are humans—albeit transformed humans—efforts to protect the infected and perhaps even search for a cure, rather than violently eradicating the threat, represent a matter of human security. From this "zombies are people too" perspective, the undead are just as much victims of the zombie apocalypse as the uninfected populations they threaten. In fact, Paffenroth contends that "it is not just horrible to watch zombies devouring humans, but it is more subtly and insidiously horrible to imagine the human characters in the movies slaughtering hundreds of zombies who look, and, to some extent, still act, exactly like human beings" (9). After all, as Hershel, a character in *The Walking Dead*, states when his fellow

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

survivors discover that he is hiding zombified family members in his barn, holding out hope for an eventual cure, “We don’t shoot sick people” (“Secrets”). On the other hand, if we assume that zombies are already dead—nothing more than walking corpses with no trace of humanity—any government effort to rescue, protect, or otherwise save the infected essentially goes out the window. As Paffenroth notes, it is frequently stated in works of zombie fiction “that infected humans and zombies must be ‘exterminated’ or ‘put down,’ wording more usual for how one deals with a nonhuman pestilence, like cockroaches or rabid dogs, not human beings” (10). The dominant discourse of the imagined zombie apocalypse privileges violent military responses over human-centered approaches to actually *solving* the underlying problem and protecting individuals affected by it. Similarly, while the United States has long held that one of its central goals in the War on Terror is to diminish the underlying causes of terrorism, the campaign to this point has clearly favored more coercive approaches to threat reduction.

Closely related to the issue of zombie personhood are questions concerning whether zombies are inherently evil. If the dehumanization of zombies already reinforces violent state responses, framing the issue in terms of a struggle of good versus evil only further legitimates such policies. Peter Washington, a character in Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, draws this parallel when he opines, “When there’s no more room in hell, the dead will walk the Earth.” Writing on the moral philosophy of evil, Greene argues that the undead “are evil, or at minimum, performs acts that we tend to view as evil...they eat human flesh, they drink blood, they destroy property, they maim, they kill, and they cavort with the dregs of hell” (12). Drezner mirrors the language of the George W. Bush administration when he refers to “the Axis of Evil Dead” (*Theories* 61). Whether the enemy in question is the Soviet Union, al-Qaeda, Iran, or a slowly advancing horde of zombies, the social construction of a rival as “evil” creates a perceived moral obligation to eradicate the perceived threat. Nevertheless, Vargas cautions us against treating zombies as agents of malevolent evil in the following passage:

Suppose zombies are motivated to, say, eat fresh brains. Would

Jason J. Morrisette

these motives count as non-instrumental desires to see the welfare of others harmed? Nope. To the extent that zombies do have desires to eat fresh brains, those motivations likely depend on a more basic desire to get food, and the belief that fresh brains constitute food. That would make an instrumental and not an evil-constituting motive. (49)

He goes on to observe that “even if there were Undead agents with the right capacities to be evil, there is no special reason to think that they have the motives that make one evil in any greater frequency than we find in regular, not-previously-dead humans” (Vargas 52). Challenging the discourses of zombie inhumanity and “good versus evil” that dominate fictional depictions of the zombie apocalypse once again underscores the dilemma inherent in state-centric military responses to the problem. As Thompson argues, “Zombie films challenge the dichotomies that we often take for granted A more reflective analysis of zombies should perhaps lead us to reject the notion that zombies are simply soulless or dead” (36).

Zombies and the Necessity of Military Force

As noted above, the Copenhagen School argues that once an issue becomes securitized, exceptional measures—that is, deviations “from ‘normal’ deliberative and democratic politics” (Fierke 100)—are legitimized as a manner of combatting the perceived threat. Brooks describes the government response to a widespread outbreak of zombism in *The Zombie Survival Guide*:

Class 3 outbreaks, more than any other, demonstrate the clear threat posed by the living dead This is a full-blown battle, with law enforcement replaced by units of the regular military. A state of emergency will be declared for the infested zone, as well as the neighboring areas. Expect martial law, restricted travel, rationed supplies, federalized services, and strictly monitored communication. (25)

In turn, works of zombie fiction tends to associate the risen dead with the complete collapse of social order and a descent into chaos. Such circumstances call to mind the pessimistic state of nature described by Hobbes in *Leviathan*: a war of “every man against every man” characterized by

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

“continual fear and danger of violent death,” in which the life of man is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (84). In fact, as Paffenroth observes, much of the zombie canon is built on the assumption that “the only way to stay alive and continue some kind of human ‘civilization’ would be to shoot any suspicious person in the head before he tries to tear our your throat and eat you alive” (10). Is perpetual war against the undead truly the only answer when confronted with this Hobbesian state of nature?

In a mathematical study of the epidemiology of a zombie outbreak, Munz et al. conclude that “while aggressive quarantine may contain the epidemic, or a cure may lead to coexistence of humans and zombies, the most effective way to contain the rise of the undead is to hit hard and hit often” (146). Certainly, the notion that anarchy in global politics leads inevitably to conflict and war is closely associated with the realist perspective on international relations that informs traditional security studies. Realists consider anarchy the permissive cause of war; since there is no central authority in place to prevent war, states are constantly preparing for, actively engaging in, or recovering from war (Morgenthau 52). Critical approaches to security studies, however, challenge the realist assumption that anarchy inevitably leads to self-help, competition, and war as reflective of the state-centric approach of traditional international relations theory. If, as the social constructivist paradigm argues, anarchy truly is what states make of it—that is, if identity, discourse, and other normative factors play a role in shaping state behavior—there is nothing to stop states from engaging in cooperative efforts to mitigate the ill effects of a zombie outbreak instead of responding with unilateral military force. The militarized response is not a product of anarchy, but rather a product of the *securitization* of the zombie threat and the perceived need for extraordinary measures—i.e. militarized violence—to combat it. Similarly, the securitization of global terrorism has given rise to the oft-repeated stance that democracies must never, under any circumstances, negotiate with terrorists, lest they set a dangerous precedent that creates future threats to national security.⁵ Once again, the dominant discourse frames non-coercive options as too risky; when dealing with a rival that supposedly only understands the language of force, more aggressive responses emerge as

Jason J. Morrisette

the only “reasonable” response.

The unique nature of the zombie apocalypse as depicted in popular culture also raises questions about the *utility* of military force against the undead. After all, every soldier that falls in battle to the living dead represents another potential convert to the ever-growing zombie horde as the infection spreads. By choosing to employ military force against the flesh-eating ghouls, governments risk adding to the enemy’s ranks and further imperiling their own security. Ironically enough, military responses intended to eliminate the undead threat and secure the survival of the state as a sovereign political unit may ultimately have the opposite effect—in much the same way that critics of the War on Terror have suggested that killing a suspected terrorist only creates more terrorists aimed at avenging the initial death.

Conclusion: Global Terrorism and the Zombie Metaphor

Does the securitized discourse surrounding the perceived threat of the zombie apocalypse privilege military responses over policy alternatives that may instead seek to address the problem collaboratively and peacefully? Grover Carlson, the fictional former White House Chief of Staff interviewed in *World War Z*, remains skeptical of non-violent approaches:

Oh, c’mon. Can you ever “solve” poverty? Can you ever “solve” crime? Can you ever “solve” disease, unemployment, war, or any other societal herpes? Hell no. All you can hope for is to make them manageable enough to allow people to get on with their lives. That’s not cynicism, that’s maturity. You can’t stop the rain. All you can do is just build a roof that you hope won’t leak, or at least won’t leak on the people who are gonna vote for you. (61)

Nevertheless, the present article demonstrates that several of the underlying assumptions concerning the zombie apocalypse that have given rise to this securitized discourse—the perception of the undead as an existential threat to state security, the inhumanity of zombies, and the necessity of military force—are not as objective as traditional approaches to security

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

studies suggest.

In conclusion, while the zombie metaphor represents an intriguing challenge for the field of international relations, it is also immediately relevant to the “real world” of global politics, particularly with regards to contemporary terrorism. In fact, Hamako argues that zombies, as a metaphor, “allow audiences to experience and explore their Orientalist fears about terrorism, Islam, and social collapse” and goes on to attribute the rising popularity of the genre to post-9/11 anxieties in the West (107). One can easily imagine how a similar set of assumptions that underlie the global War on Terror—the discourse of “evil” terrorists who “hate our freedoms” and seek to “destroy our way of life,” with whom negotiations are impossible, making an active military “crusade” our only recourse for survival—might result in a securitized environment that privileges military responses over efforts to address the root causes of the phenomenon.

Moreover, once this discourse is firmly ensconced, it can legitimate such “extraordinary measures” as the torture of terror suspects, the violation of the international laws of war, the marginalization of international organizations like the United Nations, assassination, military campaigns that result in massive civilian casualties, and the expansion of domestic surveillance as means to secure the state from the perceived existential threat of terrorism. These connections are not lost on the creators of zombie fiction; as Paffenroth observes, “more recent [zombie film] directors probably want to draw parallels with the modern situation of terrorism, to which ‘civilized’ countries cede some of their ‘civilization’ when they fall into the rhetoric and behavior of, ‘We’ve got to get them before they get us, no matter what it takes’” (10). Terrorism—much like the fictional zombie apocalypses so ubiquitous in contemporary popular culture—requires that we go beyond the state-centric approach favored by traditional theories of international relations, adopting instead a critical perspective that addresses such discursive dynamics as the production of danger and the securitization of emerging global issues. With regards to managing a zombie outbreak, Drezner advises that students of international politics should use our brains “before the zombies do” (“Night” 5). To that end, critical security studies presents a perspective in which war

Jason J. Morrissette

remains a possible solution to emerging threats, but it is not necessarily the *only* or *best* solution.

Jason Morrissette
Marshall University

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

Notes

¹This article uses the term “zombie” as shorthand for the so-called “Romero zombie” that dominates contemporary popular culture—distinct from the zombies of Haitian *Vodou* and fundamentally characterized by an appetite for human flesh and the ability to infect human victims with “zombism” through their bite.

²In contrast, the 2010 Spanish-language film *Juan de los Muertos* (*Juan of the Dead*) depicts a full-scale zombie outbreak on the island of Cuba. While the Communist government dismisses the zombie attacks as disturbances “by dissident groups paid by the U.S. government,” the film’s protagonist devises a plan to profit from the crisis by launching a business that promises to kill its customers’ reanimated loved ones for a reasonable fee.

³While the transnational norms that social constructivists emphasize are relegated to the background of *World War Z*, Brooks does raise intriguing questions of identity with the introduction of so-called “quislings,” humans who succumb to the pressures of the war and begin acting like zombies themselves (155-159).

⁴Editor’s note: On the cultural implications of zombies and the mall, see Matthew Bailey’s “Memory, Place, and the Mall: George Romero on Consumerism” in the Spring 2013 issue of this journal.

⁵As Neumann and others have observed, democracies have frequently negotiated with terrorists. Perhaps most notably, negotiations between the British government and the Provisional Irish Republican Army produced the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that brought an end to decades of violence in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the hegemonic discourse that frames terrorism as an existential threat assumes that efforts at negotiation are not only destined to fail, but also place the state at a greater risk of future attacks.

Jason J. Morrissette

Works Cited

- 28 Weeks Later*. Dir. Juan Carlos Fresnadillo. 20th Century Fox, 2007. Film.
- Bailey, Matthew. "Memory, Place, and the Mall: George Romero on Consumerism." *Studies in Popular Culture* 35.2 (Spring 2013): 95-110. Print.
- Bishop, Kyle. "Raising the Dead." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 33.4 (2006): 196-205. Print.
- Boudreau, Thomas E., and Brian D. Polkinghorn. "Reversing the Destructive Discourses of Dehumanization: A Model for Reframing Narratives in Protracted Social Conflict Through Identity Affirmation." *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 29 (2008): 175-205. Print.
- Brooks, Max. *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006. Print.
- . *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003. Print.
- Bush, George W. "Address to the Nation." *CNN*, 11 September 2001. Web. 15 September 2013.
- . "Report on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to Iraq." *U.S. Government Printing Office*. GPO, 4 September 2002. Web. 15 September 2013.
- Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998. Print.
- Dawn of the Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. United, 1978. Film.
- Day of the Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. United, 1985. Film.
- "Days Gone Bye." *The Walking Dead*. Writ. and dir. Frank Darabont. American Movie Classics, 2010. Television.
- Drezner, Daniel. "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Zombies." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 13 February 2011. Web. 11 March 2012.
- . "Night of the Living Wonks: Toward an International Relations Theory of Zombies." *Foreign Policy* July/August 2010. Web. 19 March 2012.
- . *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011. Print.

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

- . "Theory of International Politics and Zombies." *Foreign Policy: Global Politics, Economics, & Pop Culture* 18 August 2009. Web. 19 March 2012.
- Emmers, Ralf. "Securitization." *Contemporary Security Studies*. 2nd ed. Ed. Alan Collins. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.
- Fierke, K.M. *Critical Approaches to International Security*. Malden: Polity, 2007. Print.
- Greene, Richard. "The Badness of Undeath." *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless*. Ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad. Chicago: Open Court, 2006. 3-14. Print.
- Hamako, Eric. "Zombie Orientals Ate My Brain! Orientalism in Contemporary Zombie Stories." *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*. Ed. Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. 107-123. Print.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. 1651. Ed. J.C.A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.
- Jentleson, Bruce W. Review of *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, by Daniel W. Drezner. *Perspectives on Politics* March 2012: 212-213. Print.
- Khan, Ali S. "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. CDC, 16 May 2011. Web. 12 Mar. 2014.
- Juan de los Muertos*. Dir. Alejandro Brugués. Focus Features, 2010. Film.
- Krause, Keith, and Michael C. Williams. "From Strategy to Security: Foundations of Critical Security Studies." *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. Ed. Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. Print.
- Land of the Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. Universal, 2005. Film.
- Larkin, William S. "Res Corporealis: Persons, Bodies, and Zombies." *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless*. Ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad. Chicago: Open Court, 2006. 15-26. Print.
- "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices in Pakistan." The International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic of Stanford Law School and the Global Justice Clinic at New York University School of Law. September 2012. Web. 15 September 2013.

Jason J. Morrisette

- McConnell, Mariana. "Interview: George A. Romero on *Diary Of The Dead*." *Cinema Blend* 14 February 2008. Web. 11 March 2012.
- Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics Among Nations*. 6th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985. Print.
- Munz, Philip, et al. "When Zombies Attack!: Mathematical Modeling of an Outbreak of Zombie Infection." *Infectious Disease Modelling Research Progress*. Ed. Jean Michel Tchuenche and C. Chiyaka. Nova Science, 2009. 133-150. Print.
- Neumann, Peter R. "Negotiating with Terrorists." *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2007. Web. 16 September 2013.
- Newitz, Annalee. "War and Social Upheaval Cause Spikes in Zombie Movie Production." *io9*, 29 October 2008. Web. 15 September 2013.
- Night of the Living Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. The Walter Reade Organization, 1968. Film.
- Paffenroth, Kim. *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth*. Waco: Baylor UP, 2006. Print.
- Resident Evil: Apocalypse*. Dir. Alexander Witt. Screen Gems, 2004. Film.
- "Secrets." *The Walking Dead*. Writ. Angela Kang. Dir. David Boyd. American Movie Classics, 2011. Television.
- Shaun of the Dead*. Dir. Edgar Wright. Universal, 2004. Film.
- Thompson, Hamish. "'She's Not Your Mother Anymore, She's a Zombie!': Zombies, Value and Personal Identity." *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless*. Ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad. Chicago: Open Court, 2006. 27-38. Print.
- Thucydides. *On Justice, Power, and Human Nature: Selections from The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993. Print.
- Vargas, Manuel. "Dead Serious: Evil and the Ontology of the Undead." *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless*. Ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad. Chicago: Open Court, 2006. 39-52. Print.
- Walt, Stephen. "The Renaissance of Security Studies." *International Studies Quarterly* 35.2 (June 1991): 211-239. Print.
- Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 42.2: (Spring 1992): 391-425. Print.

Zombies, International Relations, and the Production of Danger:
Critical Security Studies versus the Living Dead

Whitman, Douglas Glen. "The Political Economy of Non-Coercive Vampire Lifestyles." *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless*. Ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad. Chicago: Open Court, 2006. 169-182. Print.

Jason J. Morrissette is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of International Affairs at Marshall University. He specializes in international relations theory, foreign policy, and the politics of popular culture. In 2012, Dr. Morrissette began teaching a course titled Politics of the Undead, wherein he explores how fictional portrayals of zombies, vampires, and mummies can offer insight into "real world" political phenomena. His research has appeared in *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *European Political Science Review*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *CTX: Combating Terrorism Exchange*, and *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly*.