

# “The Only Metaphor Left”: Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* and Zombie Narrative Form

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*Zone One* is doubtless a zombie novel. That is not to say that the novel is *about* zombies; zombie narratives rarely are.<sup>1</sup> However, it is important to note just how faithful a zombie narrative it really is. Colson Whitehead’s 2011 novel is set in a near-future world in which the living dead have pushed humanity to the brink of annihilation. The book tells the story of a joint military and paramilitary civilian effort to reclaim New York City, beginning with the walled-off eponymous zone, Lower Manhattan south of Canal Street. Popular press critics tend to apologize for the novel’s premise; review after review counterposes serious literature to genre fare—sometimes to expose the absurdity of such a distinction (Barton 2011; Charles 2011; Chiarella 2011; Kois 2011; Ness 2011) but not often enough. Typically, reviews offer politer shades of the *New York Times* reviewer Glen Duncan’s (2011) opening simile: “A literary novelist writing a genre novel is like an intellectual dating a porn star. . . . What’s in it for the porn star? Conversation? Ideas? Deconstruction?” Duncan’s sarcasm sets a rather caustic tone, and in no time the review takes shots at horror fans themselves.

Colson Whitehead is a literary novelist, but his latest book, “Zone One,” [*sic*] features zombies, which means horror fans and gore gourmands will soon have

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1. *Zombie narratives* will refer generally to narrative zombie texts across media, including film, television, novels, graphic novels, and video games.

him on their radar. He has my sympathy. I can see the disgruntled reviews on Amazon already: “I don’t get it. This book’s supposed to be about zombies, but the author spends pages and pages talking about all this other stuff I’m not interested in.” Broad-spectrum marketing will attract readers for whom having to look up “cathected” or “brisant” isn’t just an irritant but a moral affront. These readers will huff and writhe and swear their way through (if they make it through) and feel betrayed and outraged and migrained. But unless they’re entirely beyond the beguilements of art they will also feel fruitfully disturbed, because “Zone One” will have forced them, whether they signed up for it or not, to see the strangeness of the familiar and the familiarity of the strange. (Duncan 2011)

The commonplace opposition between literary and genre fiction certainly is no longer accurate, considering such works as Michael Chabon’s *Gentlemen of the Road* (2007), Denis Johnson’s *Nobody Move* (2009), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), or Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999) (McGurl 2010). Yet Duncan, like many other critics, distances the novel’s zombies from their generic milieu and from the audience he supposes it entertains.

This anxiety over the pulp zombie’s presence in a highbrow novel similarly informs *Zone One*’s marketing. In the 2012 paperback edition the first three pages of blurbs assure the potential reader that her or his selection “is not the work of a serious novelist slumming it with some genre-novel cash-in,” “isn’t your typical zombie novel,” is “not just a juicy experiment in genre fiction” and suggest that “if you’re going to break down and read a zombie novel, make it this one” (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a). The publisher evidently feels the need to assuage any lingering doubts the discriminating consumer may have about purchasing a zombie novel. These snippets indicate a shared attitude toward the zombie genre that is most clearly articulated in the *Houston Chronicle*’s blurb: “*Zone One* lifts all the gore and gunfire and oozy bits one might expect from the genre. But this is Whitehead, so there’s also popular culture to critique and parallels to draw between zombies and contemporary society.” The reviewer implies that Whitehead has actually introduced social commentary to the zombie genre. This blurb, like the Duncan review, suggests that the reviewers’ audiences are likely unfamiliar with the genre and that their expectations are likely informed by misleading caricatures both of the genre and of its fans—caricatures exemplified by these reviews themselves.

Despite his reviewers’ dismissals of the genre, Whitehead has made no secret of his own horror fandom. Having grown up on video store horror flicks, particularly the films of George A. Romero, he attributes his inspiration to become a novelist to horror media (Whitehead 2011a). Whitehead has repeatedly indicated his desire to reinvigorate the classic Romero form by embracing some conven-

tions, discarding others, and innovating in the genre (Whitehead 2011a, 2011b, 2012b). He is not specific as to which conventions he embraces and which he discards, and one might assume the zombies themselves to be the sum total of his genre adherence. But a closer look reveals the extent to which *Zone One* not only takes inspiration from the zombie tradition but is also in dialogue with other zombie texts at semantic and structural levels. Whitehead brings far more than the “gore and gunfire and oozy bits” from zombie media. The zombie narratives he so admires are characterized by social commentary and protest, narrative instability, philosophical and symbolic complexity, and above all an intertextual citing and revision of their own tropes. Whatever critics’ attitudes may be, *Zone One* is nonetheless a technically masterful homage to the zombie genre and to Romero in particular, and the novel derives its most powerful figures and motifs from variations on the formal conventions of the zombie genre.

The novel shares a number of broad similarities with many other zombie texts beyond the zombies themselves. *Zone One*’s setting—the rebuilding of a world devastated by a zombie apocalypse—resembles both the film *28 Weeks Later* (2007) and the final act in Max Brooks’s 2006 novel *World War Z*. Scholarly and popular press critics have pointed out that *Zone One*’s plot is nonexistent except in the very loosest definition (Duncan 2011; Forsberg 2012, 134) and its characters are the flat, stock survivors of a Romero zombie melodrama. The main character Mark Spitz is himself an underachiever-cum-quasi-hero in the vein of *Army of Darkness*’s (1992) Ash, *Dead Alive*’s (1992) Lionel, or *Shaun of the Dead*’s (2004) Shaun. The novel’s meditations on race, consumerism, and national trauma are characteristic of any and every Romero film, as are its intertextual nods.

Modern cinematic horror in general and zombie films in particular evince a pattern of generic emulation, relationships of competitive *imitatio* in which one filmmaker acknowledges her or his influences—in more or less subtle ways—and then does them one better, contributing stylistic effects or formal twists or updated metaphors. These I will refer to as *nods*: quotations, allusions, paraphrases, and iterations that go beyond generic tropes broadly to specific texts and instances of tropes therein. Zombie narratives seem among the most active in the horror genre’s ongoing project of dismantling “inherited conventions of a particular filmic kind in order to display [their] formal and ideological complexity, but also . . . to put them back together, so to speak, in better working condition than before” (Browning 2011, 42). When Whitehead (2011b) tells *GQ* that he “wanted to be true to the Romero version of the slow zombie” but he “also wanted to invent

something,” he indicates that he means to meet the genre at this nexus of convention and invention. By writing in the zombie tradition he is also writing about the zombie tradition and its social, historical, and textual relationships, and his nods operate both as indexes and as instances of this generic engagement.

Though many of the novel’s elements are by now conventional fixtures of zombie narratives, *Zone One* does nod to specific zombie films. One character’s “skel catcher” (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 77) improves upon similar devices featured prominently in *Day of the Dead* (1985). The invocation of the National Guard and a “local search-and-destroy posse” (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 218) allude to Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), respectively. The phrase “they’re all messed up” appears twice in *Zone One* (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 120, 196), and this same phrase is spoken by Sheriff McClelland in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and is repeated in that film’s 1990 remake. What is possibly the novel’s most opaque nod appears early on. At a briefing in a dumpling joint in Chinatown, Mark Spitz notes that it is the Chinese zodiac’s year of the monkey (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 37). This is the only clue as to the year of the novel’s setting, and it places the story in 2016, 2028, or 2040. The exact year is less important than the fact that previous years of the monkey saw the releases of Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Lucio Fulci’s *City of the Living Dead* (1980), Sam Raimi’s *Army of Darkness* (1992), Peter Jackson’s *Dead Alive* (1992), Edgar Wright’s *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), and Zach Snyder’s remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). Certainly one could fill in movies in any twelve-year cycle to suit an argument, but even if one is unimpressed by the lineup of so many influential films in the genre, the presence of Romero’s seminal film alone should make this detail compelling as a nod. Such gestures serve at least three functions. (1) The allusions indicate Whitehead’s bona fides as a genre fan, a point that may not be of any interest in and of itself but that does repudiate the literary elitism of reviewers like Duncan. (2) The nods signal an engagement with the tropes of the zombie genre as such by performing the trope of nods. (3) *Zone One*’s allusions point to the modal functions of the genre and of Romero’s films in particular. By placing his work in the Romero tradition,<sup>2</sup> Whitehead points to shared formal,

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2. One might oppose Romero’s New Left despair to, say, Fulci’s ponderous, surreal gore or to the gleefully nihilistic splatstick of Dan O’Bannon’s *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) and Raimi’s *Evil Dead* (1981, 1987) films. For more on the politics and aesthetics of non-Romeroesque zombie texts in the 1980s, see Russell (2005) 2008, chap. 7.

thematic, and political concerns that in turn suggest readings of the book and its figures.

Rather than offer interpretations of the book and its figures at this point, this article will instead trace formal and stylistic qualities of *Zone One* and explore their implications. Specifically, this article will examine tropes of the zombie figure itself, the barricade, and what I call *soft* and *hard breaches*. I argue that the zombie is a deconstructive and contagious anticharacter that necessitates the construction of barricades (1) to protect the characters from infection and living death, (2) to delineate a narrative space in which plot and character can develop, and (3) to spatialize epistemological and aesthetic modes. Whereas hard breaches involve a narrative-threatening failure of diegetic barricades and usually conclude a zombie story, soft breaches allow the zombie's destabilizing function to operate in the narrative space without posing a diegetic threat. Though, as I argue, these qualities are highly conventional genre tropes, I do not say that Whitehead *borrow*s them, as that would suggest that he is writing outside the zombie narrative tradition. Instead, I place *Zone One* firmly within that tradition, and I offer a formal and aesthetic analysis with specific regard to the novel's eponymous "survival space" (Browning 2011) trope and its constitutive barricade motif, which Whitehead subjects to a soft breach by means of his own zombie contribution, the straggler. By explicating the formal conventions that Whitehead embraces, I hope to contextualize *Zone One* in its genre and thus help inform future interpretive readings of the novel's critical content.

### **The Zombie Figure**

Though little work has been done on the effects of the zombie figure on the form of its narrative, the zombie itself has been theorized extensively over the years, primarily in terms of its affect and its symbolism. Marc Leverette's (2008, 187) Derridean analysis suggests that the zombie is a liminal, undecidable figure whose hybridity threatens to deconstruct "our every ontology." The contranymic "living dead" function as the constitutive caesura that both maintains and troubles the categorical binary of life/death. As an undecidable figure neither living nor dead, the zombie destabilizes epistemological and ethical models of intelligibility and action in a genre that otherwise embraces realism (187). The unde(ad)cidable zombie embodies threats to characters' ability to know and to act rationally and ethically. Three commonplaces in the genre illustrate this.

1. The living have difficulty naming the monsters. Zombies are frequently referred to by other terms: *ghouls*, *the dead*, *walkers*, or simply *those things*. Characters in zombie narratives have no language with which to talk about zombies and often resort to vague, imprecise terms or slangy neologisms—for example, “Zach” (*World War Z*), “stenches” (*Land of the Dead* [2005]), or “skels” (*Zone One*).
2. Would-be survivors frequently have difficulty learning the weaknesses of the zombies and waste untold numbers of rounds on center-mass shots as if they were battling living beings. Characters do eventually learn the efficacy of the head shot—gleaned, importantly, from practical experience and quickly forgotten in moments of panic—but not before many, many other humans die and/or “turn.”<sup>3</sup>
3. A similar misrecognition of zombies as humans occasions numerous deadly confusions and ethical dilemmas and reversals. The bitten-but-not-yet-dead trope demands the passage of a character from “living” to “dead” to “non-character.”<sup>4</sup> Alternately, living characters who have been bitten or otherwise infected but are still alive are treated as threats; for example, in *Day of the Dead*, despite the immediate amputation of Miguel’s bitten arm, Captain Rhodes and his men anxiously hunt down the injured soldier.<sup>5</sup> The zombie’s destabilization of the categories of living and dead by extension troubles practical ethics based on those categories, and dead (passive) flesh is treated with more reverence than that of either the (active) living or the living dead.

Following from the epistemological and ethical crises the zombie precipitates, subjectivity itself is threatened by zombiism. Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry (2008, 87) conceive of the zombie as a posthuman, postindividual theo-

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3. Brooks’s *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) plays ironically on these tropes, wryly demystifying the zombie in positivist terms to correct the irrational behavior that survivors display in zombie films.

4. For example, the bitten Barbara in *Shaun of the Dead* and Roger in *Dawn of the Dead* must be allowed to die and then to reanimate before they can be terminated ethically. Dead bodies are treated with reverent defense against desecration. In *Shaun of the Dead* David’s attempt to dispatch Shaun’s dead but not yet reanimated mother results in a Mexican standoff, while in *Day of the Dead* Dr. Logan is murdered in retaliation for having experimented on the cadavers of dead soldiers.

5. “Wildfire,” the penultimate episode in *The Walking Dead*’s (2011) first season, depicts a group of characters struggling with the practical ethics of how to treat infected living and dead characters simultaneously. Jim is bitten and faces euthanasia, while the grieving Andrea defends her sister’s corpse prior to its reanimation.

retical figure, arguing that “the zombie’s irreconcilable body (both living and dead) raises the insufficiency of the dialectical model (subject/object)”;<sup>6</sup> hence “the zombie is an antisubject, and the zombie horde is a swarm where no trace of the individual remains” (89).<sup>6</sup> Zombies are figures not only of death but also of the infectious negation of the individual subject.<sup>7</sup> The zombie’s philosophical anti-subjectivity correlates to its narratological function as well. Mark McGurl (2010) argues that zombies are “anticharacters,” generic figures whose archetypal flatness “is a pure negation of the concept of character at the heart of . . . realism. . . . Their origins are not interesting. They no longer even have names.” Like an exaggeration of the most clichéd action film protagonist or romantic comedy heroine, the zombie is characterized as such by virtue of its adherence to generic prescription. Individual zombies are virtually indistinguishable in or among narratives in the genre. The vestigial signifiers of a past life may cling rotting to their corpses in the form of a nun’s habit or a clown wig, but each zombie is nevertheless a nonagential antisubject undifferentiated from its horde.

Though McGurl is more interested in zombies as allegorical figures, a concern I will address later, his observations helpfully contextualize the zombie anticharacter in a narrative and allow us to investigate the implications of this highly contagious narrative zombiism. To be bitten is not only to lose one’s life but to lose one’s consciousness and to be absorbed into a posthuman, antinarrative mass. Zombies are frequently described via collective nouns—for example, *the (living/walking) dead*, *Zach*—and death by zombie plague is tantamount to character nullification both in the collapse of subject/object dialectic and in the absorption of the individual into the collective. Zombies, as contagious antisubjects, not only kill characters, they produce more anticharacters. Left unchecked, the zombie

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6. Lauro and Embry’s article uses the zombie figure as a way to trace tensions between global capitalism and theories of posthumanism. Moving from the folkloric Haitian “zombi,” to the cinematic living-dead “zombie,” the authors proffer the “zombii” as a deindividuated, irreducible collective. Unlike Donna Haraway’s cyborg, Lauro and Embry’s (2008, 88) antisubject zombii is a “consciousless being that is a swarm organism,” a figure they do not celebrate as liberatory but which is “the only imaginable specter that could really be posthuman.” Like Leverette, Lauro and Embry decontextualize and generalize the zombie figure to trace its philosophical qualities. I am primarily interested here in what implications such readings have for the form of the zombie narrative itself.

7. Zombies have been conceived as desubjected both in their folkloric origins in Haiti and in the beginnings of the modern cinematic zombie era. In the former case zombies were bound to slavery even after death, a fate that negated the collective struggles for Haitian independence. In the latter case quasi-zombie narratives, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, dramatized the loss of individuality and subjective will to social forces, e.g., postwar capitalist conformity or communist indoctrination, depending on one’s reading. See Russell (2005) 2008, chaps. 1 and 4.

contagion would depopulate the narrative of agential subjects (characters) and replace them with the generic tropes of diegetic walking corpses (anticharacters), among whom no narrative could be maintained. The formal drama of a zombie narrative is thus provided by the self-destructive instability of its central premise—the zombie menaces the constitutive characters of a narrative and therefore the narrative itself.<sup>8</sup> By considering the zombie as an undecidable, infectious anti-character, we can describe the kind of specifically narrative dangers zombies bring to characters: zombies trouble basic categories of knowledge, confuse and invert ethical behavior, and threaten nullification and deindividuation of character. Thus the characters' diegetic struggle to survive is also an ultradiegetic struggle to maintain the existence of narrative as such, and defensive shelter—a survival space for character and narrative—becomes a necessary condition of the form.

### Barricades

To understand the threats zombies pose at a narrative level we must step back and ask a very basic question: What is required for a zombie narrative? A zombie narrative must have two basic elements. Obviously, it must have zombies—the *sine qua non* of the genre. It must also have a narrative, which means it must have human characters, otherwise there would simply be some number of meandering zombies. Yet the zombie is inimical to the existence of character; its *raison d'être* is to nullify character, and so any zombie narrative is structured around the struggle to maintain character subjectivity in the face of contagious antisubjectivity. The zombie horde is a collectivity of anticharacters that actively works to negate/subsume all characters, and by extension the zombie threatens to annihilate the narrative itself. If all characters become zombies, how can further narrative exist?

Among the most easily recognizable tropes of the zombie genre is the barricade, including but not limited to the iconic boarded-up windows of *Night of the Living Dead* and its imitators. Barricades are crucial in that the preservation of the *narrative* part of *zombie narrative* depends on maintaining living characters. Literal barricades—boards, trucks, fences, walls, doors, and so forth—serve the diegetic function of protecting the flesh of the living from consumption by the

8. For exceptions that prove the rule, consider the narrative functions of immunity or “carrier” status to zombie viruses in the film *28 Weeks Later* and the video games *Left 4 Dead* (2008), *Left 4 Dead 2* (2009), and *Dead Island* (2011). In these games a player's avatar is not at risk of being infected and reanimating but of being beaten or bitten to death.



living dead. Structurally, the particularities of the zombie figure may seem to be accidental to the genre. Films such as *The Birds* (1963), *The Day of the Triffids* (1962),<sup>9</sup> and the various manifestations of *I Am Legend* are structured around a central siege by masses of nonzombie figures (i.e., not subsentient, anthropophagic ambulatory reanimated human corpses).<sup>10</sup> In these cases as in many zombie films, the aviary, botanical, or vampiric MacGuffin simply functions structurally as a device that threatens human characters and gets them indoors to the “survival space” (Browning 2011, 44). Wright notes his zombies’ structural fungibility. “You could go to the script and replace the word ‘zombies’ with ‘traffic jam’ or ‘power outage’ and it would still make sense” (Badley 2008, 48). Any widespread crisis that isolates a group of characters and forces it to seek defensive shelter in a survival space could have the same effect and would likely produce much of the same dramatic tension and conflicts among the protagonists.

Though boarded-up doors and windows may be necessary to keep some zombies out, the barricades may not need to be diegetically convincing, depending on the text’s narrative interests. For instance, for the entirety of season 2 of *The Walking Dead* (2012) the survivors are able to hole up on a farm with no real defenses at all. Inexplicably, the zombies just do not seem to find them—not in large enough numbers for a proper siege, anyway. However, the farm is surrounded by trees and cattle fences that demarcate the space in which the rather melodramatic character conflicts develop. The season borrows its main plot device from John Ford’s 1956 western noir *The Searchers*. A young girl has gone missing from the group and the men regularly leave and return to the farmhouse, searching for the girl whom they fear has been turned into one of the zombies. This farm’s defenses are figurative, and the television series borrows the door, porch, and fence metaphors from Ford’s film to delineate barriers between human civilization and the dangers of the wilderness: Comanche in *The Searchers*, zombies in *The Walking Dead*. Ultimately, the figurative barriers are insufficient to keep out a literal horde. The farm is overrun by zombies at the season’s end, and the characters must flee to the next survival space.

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9. John Wyndham’s 1951 novel *The Day of the Triffids* has also been subject to adaptation and readaptation in magazine serialization, film, television, stage, radio, and graphic novel. See Harpold 2011 and LaRose 2011.

10. Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel *I Am Legend* was adapted for film as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007). For an extensive discussion of the novel in the zombie genre, see Browning 2011.

Since *Night of the Living Dead* the zombie genre has generally adhered to this fairly rigid plot structure: a flight from the zombies to a defensible shelter, a siege of that shelter that results in its eventual fall, and then a flight from the fallen defenses presumably to the next survival space.<sup>11</sup> The first flight may be part of the narrative in real time—as in *Night of the Living Dead* or *Dawn of the Dead*—or it may be a past event implied by circumstances of the present action; for example, *Day of the Dead*'s bunker setting indicates that the characters fled from somewhere, and the literal helicopter reconnaissance flight that opens the film symbolizes this prediegetic, figurative flight. Of course in the flight→siege→flight model the characters flee, seek shelter, and flee again, because their lives are endangered by the living dead. Encounters with zombies generally result in some immediate representation of body horror, the violent destruction or deformation of zombie or human bodies or both. However, the threat of zombie violence serves a specifically formal, aesthetic function beyond simple diegetic character motivation.

In analyzing the horror genre's modes of representing trauma, Adam Lowenstein (2010, 106) uses the film historian Tom Gunning's aesthetic concept of a "cinema of attractions" to frame the horror film's spectacular excess. This aesthetic sensibility is best described in contradistinction to more conventional Hollywood storytelling.

Classical Hollywood style emphasizes psychologically motivated, goal-oriented characters as active agents who move through cause-effect chains of events . . . based on a series of temporal deadlines that resolve with a strong degree of closure by the time the film concludes. The result is a film style where "telling a story is the basic formal concern" and conventions of "realism" arise from commitments to concealment of artifice, "comprehensible and unambiguous" storytelling, and a "fundamental emotional appeal that transcends class and nation."  
(106)

The classical Hollywood model is the straightforward approach to representational, narrative filmmaking with which the conventions of mainstream cinema are and have been most closely associated. By contrast, in a cinema of attractions—associated with "primitive" early film and "excessive" genre artifice, as found in horror and musicals—spectacle "dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a

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11. There are alternate formal and aesthetic trajectories among zombie narratives, especially in European zombie films, which tend to vary more broadly in their structures and to embrace the supernatural elements that Romero and his followers eschew. See Russell (2005) 2008, chaps. 6 and 7, for an overview of Italian, Spanish, and French zombie cinema in the 1970s and 1980s.

story or . . . creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality” (106). In a pure “cinema of zombie attractions” the artifice and excess of graphic dismemberments and eviscerations would function as ends in themselves, direct invitations to viewers to marvel at and/or be sickened by the effects of makeup artists. Character and plot would either be absent altogether or would serve strictly as ancillary devices to frame such sequences perfunctorily in some pro forma narrative. Doubtless some detractors of cinematic horror believe this to be the case already. However, the middle act of a zombie narrative—the siege section—gives lie to this characterization.

Recently, critics have paid more attention to siege spaces in zombie narratives (Browning 2011; Griffin 2012; Pagano 2008). John Edgar Browning traces the zombie siege convention back to Richard Matheson’s 1954 vampire novel *I Am Legend* and credits Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* with adapting and disseminating the “survival space” setting as a full-blown trope. Browning (2011, 44) rightly points out *Night*’s indebtedness to Matheson, arguing that the zombie siege premise—the “multiple threat” attack on a fortified “survival space”—came fully formed to Romero from Matheson. In praising Romero critics have often overlooked Matheson’s distinct contribution of “the ‘survival space,’ whose occupants must, together, fortify in order to protect the enclosure from what is ‘outside,’ coping all the while with the bleak sense of despair and hopelessness around them” (44).<sup>12</sup> Romero’s primary innovation, according to Browning, was multiplying the number of survivors in the survival space (from Matheson’s one, Robert Neville, to Romero’s seven) and “reconfiguring the ‘survival space’ into a repository for socially turbulent . . . configurations . . . permitting it to function as a highly porous ‘public performance space,’ one in which

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12. Browning’s comments are insightful, but he overstates his case in conflating Matheson’s vampires with Romero’s ghouls and the conventional zombies they begot. Matheson’s vampires, while infectious and “massified” (Browning 2011, 44), *are subjects*. The vampires speak, plan, have emotions, and engage in motivated, goal-oriented actions. In short, they are characters. As I argue above, Romeroesque zombies—infectious, antsubject anticharacters—threaten not only human life but subjectivity and narrative itself. *I Am Legend*’s twist is that there exists a vampire society and culture to which the novel’s protagonist, Neville, is a monster; the book’s title refers to the very narratives the vampires will construct about him. Valences of audience sympathy may shift—that is Matheson’s goal—but the potential for character-populated narrative remains in this world, even if the characters are not human. The extermination of human or nonhuman subjectivity is the logical conclusion of an unchecked zombie outbreak, and the self-destruction of narrative as such is its necessary implication. It is important to consider the tropic zombies in question as Romeroesque, since Romero’s own zombies have slowly evolved into characters. By 1985 in *Day of the Dead* Romero had introduced a zombie character, Bub, and by 2005 in *Land of the Dead* the zombies exhibit self-awareness, empathy, emotion, communication, problem solving, cooperation, and leadership.

political tensioning has swelled and contracted in every sequel, adaptation, and hybridization” (45). However, analysis of the allegorical “public performance” in the survival space has neglected the implications of zombie-human interactions and thus misses the particular formal and philosophical significance of the fortifications that constitute the survival space in the zombie genre.

Though their protective diegetic functions are taken for granted, structurally barricades also delineate a narrative space in which character, plot, and conflict can develop. By keeping the zombies out, barricades protect narrative from spectacle and characters from nullification. The zombie’s state of undecidability is crucial to its monstrosity in the abstract, but to appreciate the effect of its undecidability on a narrative’s form, we must also consider the zombie in its structural context. Leverette (2008, 187) offers a deconstructive model of the zombie that might be approximated as:

living/dead

The zombie exists as the hymenal slash—the “/”—that constitutes absolute ontological categories of *living* and *dead* dichotomously while belonging to neither. However, in the context of the zombie siege narrative, the model must be modified to:

(living/dead)/zombie

Working along a structural order of operations, we might consider the parentheses to contain received epistemological categories in their untroubled binary form, separated from the now graphically represented *zombie* by a “barricade slash.” That is, by barricading the undead out, living characters can continue to function as if the categories *living* and *dead* were still stable. This reformulation illustrates how zombie narratives embody and exteriorize undecidability and how a philosophically deconstructive figure is literalized as diegetically destructive. Inside the parentheses narrative, character, and dialogue can appear to function unproblematically, so long as the zombie is kept outside the parentheses and on the other side of the barricade slash.

It is important to note in dealing with such a philosophically troublesome figure that the zombie has become a relatively stable figure generically, despite its destabilizing tendencies. Forty-six years after *Night of the Living Dead* and over a decade into the latest zombie renaissance (Birch-Bayley 2012; Bishop 2009; Browning 2011, 50–52; Lauro and Embry 2008, 85–86; McGurl 2010; Russell

[2005] 2008, chap. 8) we can begin to make some provisional claims about generic familiarity. (1) It can be safely assumed that casual audiences—in the context of reception of a narrative artwork—are familiar enough with the zombie figure to accept its hybridity as a given convention no more or less intrinsically disturbing than any other horror figure. (2) It appears generally true that critics are willing to accept an ur-zombie trope as a “multivalent sign” (Leverette 2008, 199), or a “floating signifier” (Griffin 2012, 33), or some other semiotic placeholder for a constellation of figurative associations specific to a given narrative’s time, place, and form. If these can be accepted even provisionally—that there is something familiar about the zombie as a tropic figure—then the zombie’s narrative function can be set in opposition to the sticky *living/dead* aporia it embodies.

In the context of a siege narrative framework, then, the zombie is a given figure whose hermeneutic undecidability is secondary to its formal narrative function. That function is to threaten the lives of the characters in the diegesis. The extraparenthetical dividing slash in the (*living/dead*)/*zombie* schema is materialized in zombie siege narratives as the barricade. The “/” segregates philosophical and tonal indeterminacy, undead antisubjectivity, and a narrative-sublating cinema of attractions from a more conventional diegesis. That slash is the boarded-up window that separates character from anticharacter, story from spectacle, and allegory from polysemy. In the spatiotemporal mapping of the film, the slashes might also be thought of as surrounding the middle act and its setting:

flight→/siege/→flight

Behind the barricades—in the space of classical filmmaking, of narrative—character conflicts develop and with them the suggestion of allegory.

Behind the barricades, in the survival space, characters begin to look like allegorical figures, particularly in Romero’s films. In *Night of Living Dead* Ben and Harry Cooper’s conflict suggests racial and generational strife that forces the white youths, Tom and Judy, to choose a side. In *Dawn of the Dead* the characters’ initial excitement and eventual disenchantment with the mall and its goods indicates the empty pleasures of consumerism. In *Day of the Dead* the conflict between the scientists and the soldiers recapitulates the “science versus military” trope characteristic of atomic era science fiction. There are issues with calculating the extent to which a film insists on its point of view by valorizing one character’s attitudes or actions over another’s. However, the refuge from anti-narrative spectacle that the survival space provides—whether in a farmhouse, a

mall, or a bunker—encourages this kind of symbolic interpretation. The extent to which the zombies are absent from a scene or a conflict is the extent to which we might interpret the scene as being about something else. The extent to which the zombies penetrate the narrative space—that is, the extent to which they breach the barricade—is the extent to which they destabilize narrative, character, and meaning.

### ***Zone One* and Barricades**

Appreciating *Zone One*'s formal and aesthetic strategies requires placing the novel in its generic tradition; understanding *Zone One* in the context of its generic tradition requires thinking about the novel in terms of the barricade trope and its implications. Lower Manhattan's Zone One is the narrative (survival) space in which the novel takes place, demarcated by blocked bridges and tunnels and a massive, besieged wall along Canal Street. The implicit importance of barricades to previous zombie siege narratives is made an explicit, central motif of *Zone One*. The Lieutenant spells it out for Mark Spitz and the reader:

We'll take [New York] back, barricade by barricade. . . . That wall out there has to work. The barricade is the only metaphor left in this mess. The last one standing. Keep chaos out, order in. Chaos knocks on the door and bangs on the wood and gets a claw in. Will the boards hold until morning? You know what I'm talking about if you made it this far. There are small barricades—across the apartment door, then a whole house nailed up—then we have the bigger barricades. The camp. The settlement. The city. We work our way to bigger walls. . . . One naturally thinks of the siege, but we overlook that because the word takes away our agency. Sure I can play that game. We are safe inside from what is outside. (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 121–22)

Whitehead's character's exegesis moves deftly back and forth from all variety of barricades in literal and figurative forms. Beginning with the paradox of an offensive strategy (taking New York back) that employs the most desperate form of defensive tactics, the section indicates the tragic delusions that inform the entire enterprise. The zombies are signified by a mass noun ("chaos") that both suggests their overwhelming numbers (grammatically and figuratively uncountable) and foreshadows the extended water metaphor (299–322) that describes Zone One's ultimate inundation. Whitehead does eventually describe the wall's fatal weak point as "flimsy as plywood boards nailed into a window frame, in that elemental image of a barricade" (305), yet the rhetorical question "Will the boards hold until morning?" already presages doom. First of all, "until morning" is hardly

acceptable if this is to be a permanent reclamation. More importantly, however, we the audience know that it will not. The narrative's conventional structure will not allow it; all barricades must fall. Further explicit invocations of the motif describe metaphorical "personal barricades" as vessels of hope and faith (127) that evoke the willing self-delusion of besieged agency. Later reflections on the

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13. Suicides by zombies that breach barricades also occur in *Day of the Dead* and *Shaun of the Dead*.

and/or the New York “Mets”: opera, museum, and baseball team. Whitehead contrives highly artificial moments of observation and reflection. When Mark Spitz’s team clears an office early on:

He interpreted: We are studied in the old ways and acolytes of what’s to come. A fine home for a promising young lawyer. For all that has transpired outside this building in the great unraveling, the pure industry of this place persisted. Insisting on itself. He felt it in his skin even though the people were gone and all the soft stuff was dead. Moldering lumps shot out tendrils in the common area fridges, and the vicinities of the dry water coolers were devoid of shit-shooting idlers, but the ferns and yuccas were still green because they were plastic, the awards and citations remained secure on the walls, and the portraits of bigwigs preserved one afternoon’s calculated poses. These things remained. (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 14)

The narration diverges from the forward motion of the plot into a baroque aside that admittedly establishes setting and tone but does so in a highly ornamented way. There are eight alliterative phrases, the assonance and rhyme of phrases like “He felt it in his skin,” and a rhythm that alternates between long sentences stacked with prepositional phrases and conjunctive clauses, on one hand, and short, clipped phrases, on the other, for example, “Moldering” through “remained” above. Another passage associates the decline in action with an increase in stylized prose.

One day they noticed the ebb. Impossible not to. The grotesque parades thinned. Slaughter slowed. The dead creaked forth in groups of a dozen, then five at a time, in pairs, and finally solo, taking their proper place atop the heads of corpses as they were cut down. The soldiers steadied themselves atop the corpses in turn and drew a bead. They made hills. Putrefying mounds on the cobblestones of the crooked streets of the financial district. They rid the South Street Seaport of native and tourists alike, and the breeze off the water carted away buckets of the stench. Snipers crosshaired on swaying silhouettes six, seven blocks crosstown, that sensible, age-old grid layout allowing passage for traffic that traveled at the speed of sound. As the numbers of the creatures thinned, the soldiers no longer offered themselves as lures. They hunted, ambled, leisurely, easygoing flaneurs drifting where the streets took them. (95)

This passage similarly alters its rhythms, from two-word alliterative sentences like “Slaughter slowed” that recall Old English poetic forms to increasingly complex constructions and figures, as if the decline in action gives Whitehead more time and space to rhapsodize, particularly in the almost euphuistic use of alliteration in this passage. Note the repetition of sibilance—about sixty-five instances in this passage, fifteen in the tenth sentence (“Snipers crosshaired”) alone—which both suggests a sigh of relief for the “ebb” and functions as an instance of the ornamental excess that the ebb in action allows.



The examples above, along with playful phonemic challenges<sup>14</sup> and punning figures,<sup>15</sup> reflect a mode of extranarrative stylization of textual spectacle and a sort of literature of attractions. Cinema of attractions is built on showmanship, on exploiting an audience's desire to see spectacle pushed further. Audiences do not go to a zombie film to see a head explode, they go to see it explode more artfully than last time. The stylized execution of execution is thus built on craft. Whereas Romero or Jackson or Wright achieves an intertextual excess by means of cinematography, film editing, sound editing, and special makeup effects, Whitehead employs grammatical, phonemic, and figurative constructions to titillate his audience. Audience is the primary factor here. The cinema of attractions is above all a rhetorical address that invites an audience to marvel at the artifice qua artifice (Lowenstein 2010, 106). So while a zombie film would disappoint an audience if its "oozy bits" did not ooze enough, whatever its figurative concerns, likewise Whitehead would disappoint his audiences if he did not stylize *Zone One* with Chandleresque constructions, wryly complex figures, clever paronomasia, and GRE-level vocabulary. In his idiom Whitehead is as committed to extranarrative, artificial spectacle as Romero.

It is only in the context of *Zone One*'s knowing embrace of the barricade trope—and its narrative, characterological, and aesthetic implications—that Whitehead's most radical innovation becomes apparent as such, that is, the straggler. Whitehead's contribution to the zombie genre is a new taxonomic division of zombies. The world of *Zone One* is populated mostly by skels, the typical aggressive, flesh-eating, contagious zombie: "They came to eat you—not all of you, but a nice big chomp here or there, enough to pass on the plague" (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 60). However, Whitehead creates a minority subspecies of skel, the "straggler," an immobile, nonaggressive zombie stuck in some memory from its past life. The stragglers closely resemble the zombies from *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) who return to the mall because, as Peter explains: "They're after the place. They don't know why; they just remember. Remember that they want to be in here." Yet whereas Romero's zombies were relatively simple metaphors for mindless consumers, Whitehead's stragglers are far more complex figures because of the relational function their behavioral traits afford.

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14. E.g., "'Dag,' Tad said. 'Ten days'" (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 214).

15. E.g., "Irony was an ore buried too deep in the crust and the machine did not exist on Earth that was capable of reaching it" (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 202).

Because they are not aggressive, stragglers enable characters to interact with anticharacters without fear of nullification. Mark Spitz is able to wax philosophical, the narrator is able to rhapsodize, and the other sweepers are able to humiliate and abuse the stragglers only because they do not pose an immediate, physical threat. Previous narratives have invented other ways to bring humans and zombies together. Romero is able to make his zombies into slapstick rubes in *Dawn of the Dead* only because they are exceptionally slow. Jackson keeps his *Dead Alive* zombies sedated and confined to a basement. Numerous other films have explored the narrative complications of admitting zombies behind the barricades bound or corralled or incapacitated.<sup>16</sup>

I call this trope the soft breach, and it occurs whenever a zombie appears in the narrative space without posing an immediate diegetic threat to the characters. A hard breach is usually a climactic event in which barricades fail; the narrative space is compromised; and characters are forced to flee, fight, or fall back to another barricade, like the action scenes cited above. However, a soft breach poses no physical threat and also no danger of character nullification, of anti-character transmission. Human survivors are forced to confront the ontological and ethical challenges that zombies pose in a narrative space. Moreover, helpless zombies can become comic and/or pathetic figures, and surviving humans can become the monsters. The soft breach allows zombies to multiply tonal and allegorical complications while not threatening character or story as such. A soft breach usually prompts character conflicts; some will want to dispatch even a nonthreatening zombie, as if the character is aware of the zombie's textually destabilizing potential.<sup>17</sup>

*Zone One*'s plot turns entirely on the barricade trope and the soft breach. Though shuffled by flashbacks, if laid out chronologically the novel does involve a flight that eventually leads Mark Spitz to Zone One, the skels' siege, and the eventual fall of the Canal Street wall. Because most of Lower Manhattan is barricaded, the entire zone is the site of a siege, and the stragglers thus represent soft breaches. *Zone One* indulges in numerous flashbacks, but the ersatz chapter titles "Friday," "Saturday," and "Sunday" make it clear that the action of the narrative takes place in the time indicated by those chapter headings and in the space

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16. See *28 Days Later . . .* (2002); *Dawn of the Dead* (2004); *Day of the Dead*; *Land of the Dead*; *Shaun of the Dead*; and seasons 2 and 3 of *The Walking Dead* (2011–13).

17. See *Dawn of the Dead* (2004); *Day of the Dead*; and the "barn" subplot in season 2 of *The Walking Dead*.

indicated by the title. The novel is the story of the final three days of a zombie siege. As in zombie films, the barricades provide a narrative space in which the text's figurative concerns can be played out—race, class, gender, consumerism, militarism, power, national trauma, and so forth. And as in zombie films, the soft breach causes crises of signification and complications of tone.

When it is not directly threatening, the zombie's rigid, stumbling movement and lack of self-awareness can make it something of a rube and a target for abuse and derision. Those very qualities that make it frightening can also make it humorous (Badley 2008, 35, 37–40), and the emotional ambiguity—or undecidability—that the zombie engenders has profound implications for the narrative in which it figures. The zombie is in this sense a tonally unstable figure. Audience sympathy for and identification with the monster complicates the symbolic relationships among those living characters and troubles allegorical readings. Zombies are incapable of cruelty or malevolence and cannot be villains in the same way that humans can. Because a zombie cannot be held morally responsible for its actions yet can be laughed at and thus potentially sympathized with, it presents a threat both to a character's life and to her or his likability.

Complications arise in *Zone One* when the characters do not heed the Lieutenant's admonitions: "Mustn't humanize them. The whole thing breaks down unless you are fundamentally sure that they are not you" (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 195). Yet the ongoing game of "solve the straggler" relies fundamentally on humanizing them conceptually if only to dehumanize them through humiliation.

In their paralysis they invited a more perplexing variety of abuse. One might draw a Hitler mustache on one, or jab a sponsor cigarette between a straggler's lips. Administer a wedgie. They didn't flinch. They took it. And then they were deactivated—beheaded or got their brains blown out. Although the subject was not mentioned in the PASD seminars . . . , it was generally assumed that this behavior was a healthy outlet. Occupational therapy.

Mark Spitz had noticed on numerous occasions that while the regular skels got referred to as it, the stragglers were awarded male and female pronouns, and he wondered what that meant. (102)

The abuse and humiliations the sweepers aim at stragglers indicate the threats the soft breach presents. One does not feel superior to an inanimate object in such a way that would allow one to humiliate a bench or Buick or pencil sharpener. Humiliation requires some level of personification, as the gendered pronouns suggest. Whitehead's juxtaposition of the robotic language of "deactivated" with the passive anatomical images of "beheaded or got their brains blown out" locates mechanical humor in a specifically human form—the mechanical behavior of a

human or the human behavior of a machine (Badley 2008). The “subject” that was never brought up at PASD (postapocalyptic stress disorder) seminars may have been the topic of straggler humiliation; it may also refer to the “subject” in a grammatical/theoretical sense. Zombies are antisubjects, and the regular skels, referred to by the gender-neutral “it,” have no distinct subject or object noun or pronoun forms; they are grammatically indeterminate. Yet the stragglers are “awarded male and female pronouns” and thus have distinct subject and object forms—he/him, she/her. This moment indicates that the survivors’ distinctions among zombies inform humanizing tendencies as a result of the soft breach, tendencies that enable the subjectification of the zombies as named characters. Mark Spitz’s sympathy for the straggler Ned the Copy Boy betrays a tension between softness and humanity—the straggler is a skel but is also a pitiable figure, and abusing him is disrespectful. This tension, however, indicates the kind of breakdown the Lieutenant warns against.

The kind of misrecognition the stragglers elicit is more dangerous to the characters of *Zone One* than that of typical zombie narratives. In most zombie texts a traumatized character mistakes a zombie for a loved one, but her or his misrecognition is evident to other characters or at least to the audience. There usually is someone, if only an audience member, who is clearheaded enough to see zombies objectively. However, Whitehead’s sweepers are all subject to the effects of PASD, and whether they bully or sympathize with their projections, they nevertheless humanize the stragglers. As Mark Spitz speculates whom Gary and Kaitlyn each project onto their skel targets, he muses, “We never see other people anyway, only the monsters we make of them” (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 266). This reflection foreshadows the consequences of the soft breach. If we apply to this sentiment the logic of “reversals” and “complications”—words echoed cryptically by different minor characters (235, 236, 252)—then we might reformulate it as a warning: We never see the monsters anyway, only the people we make of them.

The soft breach thus works insidiously in *Zone One*. The sweepers’ PASD/past imposes a human filter over their perceptions of the stragglers. All Mark Spitz’s sympathy and sentiment and all Gary’s derisive scorn are likewise built on a shared fundamental misrecognition of the stragglers as not what they are. In this way the novel dramatizes less the folly of misrecognizing what is—of *not knowing*—and more the danger of constructing categories of what is not, of generating false knowledge. While the regular skels claw desperately at the bar-

ricade, effectively segregated from the characters and their narrative space, the survivors of *Zone One* posit stragglers as a separate category, a known quantity that can be integrated into their epistemic schemata and safely contained within the space of the siege. In misrecognizing stragglers, the survivors fail to acknowledge the soft breach and the chaos it represents.

In truth the survivors elide the soft breach because they must. The reclamation effort is as dependent on the epistemic barrier between straggler and skel as it is on the literal barricade along Canal. The climactic attack on Gary denies the survivors' taxonomies and fundamentally damages the tenability of the entire enterprise. Mark Spitz's team's last sweep of a fortune-teller's storefront involves a protracted game of solve the straggler that results in a zombie biting off Gary's thumb (277–85). This event prefigures the ultimate failure of the Canal Street barricade and heralds the beginning of the final scene. Within fourteen pages of Gary's attack the narration picks up the pace of the imminent hard breach: "The barrier was about to fail" (298). In pages 285–97 the text is composed largely of flashbacks, and Gary's attack and Mark Spitz's arrival at the now heavily besieged Fort Wonton occur very closely in the linear time of the plot, as the infection of a main character announces the narrative's chaotic conclusion.<sup>18</sup>

With Gary's mutilation, the novel signals shifts in perception and knowledge that anticipate the figurative breaches. Mark Spitz's reassessment of the stragglers as "not kin to their perished resemblances but vermin that needed to be put down" (281) points to a shift in perspective on the skels that immediately precedes the fortune-teller's attack. Her occupation gestures to older Gothic modes of horror and a mystical but unequivocal monstrosity. The hitherto clinical narration reflects on supernatural matters of "souls" and a "cruel deity" (283) as Mark Spitz becomes distrustful of his perceptions: feeling first a strange vibration (283), then hallucinating two lines before the skel bites Gary (284), after which Mark Spitz imagines a smile on the skel's face (285). This scene's modal blending of Romeresque materialist realism with the signifiers of supernatural Gothicism suggests epistemological failures that Whitehead emphasizes first by a discussion of the "folklore" of a "megadose of drugs that snuffed out the plague if you swallowed it fast enough" (285) and then by Mark Spitz's account of his racist nickname (287). That his name reflects a stereotype—a heuristic—and is applied

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18. The death or infection of a main character that thematically but noncausally heralds the narrative's end is also a trope; e.g., see *Dawn of the Dead* (1978); *Day of the Dead*; *Land of the Dead*; *Night of the Living Dead* (both versions); and *Shaun of the Dead*.

ironically indicate that problems of knowledge and representation have been signified throughout the novel with every instance of “Mark Spitz.”

The novel’s destabilization of perception, mode, and knowledge prompts the disintegration of the entire narrative. “Gary’s Gypsy curse was a problem. This mutiny broke the rules. If one skel broke the rules, there were more” (301). The straggler turns out to be as dangerous as a standard skel, a zombie “capable of permeating our boundaries of both the state and of the body, while causing the idea of borders to collapse altogether” (Griffin 2012, 10). In this way *Zone One*’s soft breach—predicated entirely on the perception of the stragglers’ docility—had been a hard breach all along; the foundational distinction along which lines *Zone One*’s reclamation attempt had been organized *and* the very basis of the narrative/survival space’s delineation is exposed to be illusory. “When the wall fell it fell quickly, as if it had been waiting for this moment, as if it had been created for the very instant of its failure. Barricades collapsed with haste once exposed for the riddled and rotten things they had always been. Beneath that façade of stability they were as ethereal as the society that created them” (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 275). Here the literal barricade along Canal stands in for the putative division between straggler and skel, the collapse of a binary distinction. The ontologies of their survivors and the literal space of their survival are not compromised so much as denied. Yet the novel also nods to generic conventions by suggesting that the barricades are created to be breached. All literal barricades must fall; such fatalism is a prescription of the genre, a function of the internal tensions of the narrative and of the ineluctable rhetorical demands of an audience seeking spectacle. A zombie narrative’s purpose is not to resolve contradictions but to embody and exteriorize them so they can demolish systems of thought in spectacular fashion.

## Conclusion

*Zone One*’s value as a novel will be assessed differently by different audiences and is likely contingent on what value each audience finds in the zombie genre. Whitehead finds in it a formal template for social commentary, a constellation of stylistic and structural tropes that at once encourages revision as a means of retaining currency and demands a historicized comparison with its past iterations. The author couches his criticisms of twenty-first-century America in a formal recapitulation and transformation of Romero’s early modes of protest. In recalling *Night of the Living Dead*, for instance, Whitehead not only associates *Zone*

*One* with a cinematic tradition, he also points to a potential kinship of structural, tonal, aesthetic, and political modes. *Zone One* and *Night of the Living Dead* each treat their black main character's race as incidental, even as it tacitly informs the subtext. Each repoliticizes a mainstreamed and toothless genre—for Romero it was the 1950s “monster flick” (Hervey 2008, 10)—and concludes with a cynically bleak ending. Each voices an urgent frustration with its historical moment not by means of neat allegory but through ambiguous, associative imagery. For Romero, images of Vietnam, racial oppression, and the Cold War mingle among his film's sci-fi monsters.<sup>19</sup> For Whitehead, elements reminiscent of 9/11, Abu Ghraib, the Iraq occupation, Hurricane Katrina, and Occupy Wall Street restore social relevance and aesthetic complexity to a genre that has in many ways lost its edge.<sup>20</sup> Forty-three years of generic development separate *Night of the Living Dead* from *Zone One*, and Whitehead's novel demands not only comparison of their respective historical periods but a careful consideration of our perspectives on and representations of them.

While the racial and social politics of *Zone One* will indubitably become the subject of valuable critical analysis and commentary, the novel's generic qualities are absolutely crucial to its form. In marrying the pulpiest of pulp genres to a respected literary name, Whitehead has already achieved something altogether new in the zombie canon. Yet his execution and its careful balance of generic convention and literary style—and the probing philosophical meditations it frames—are a vindication for zombie fans and critics who saw something of this potential in the zombie figure long ago. Whitehead's transformation of the ubiquitous barricade trope into the central deconstructive metaphor underscores the instability inherent in every prior narrative, and he successfully translates the logic of exploitative spectacle to a high-literary audience, capturing its baroque spirit if not its gory letter. It is clear that *Zone One* is unabashedly dependent on its generic heritage, but it remains to be seen to what extent it will be hailed as a literary work *because* of this and not despite it.

Zombie fans and critics have sought such vindication for years. Writing in 2010, a year before *Zone One*'s publication, McGurl laments that “in a more just world [Brooks's] *Zombie Survival Guide* and *World War Z* would be strong

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19. For more on *Night of the Living Dead* in this vein, see *The American Nightmare* (2000); Hervey 2008; Lowenstein 2010.

20. I am grateful to Rachel Smith and Emily Phillips for discussions of these elements of *Zone One*'s imagery.

enough to drag the zombie into some semblance of cultural respectability on their own account.” He argues that some element of high literature’s disdain for genre fiction is traceable back to the opposition between allegory and realism, between ideas and their vehicles, on one hand, and the experience and expression of ideas, on the other. This opposition finds its conventional manifestation in the highly allegorical yet stylistically flat “speculative realism” of genre fiction. *The Zombie Survival Guide* of 2003 and *World War Z* of 2006 exemplify the superhuman forces of politics, economy, history, and geography that structure the experiences of their characters, whose flatness indicates their illustrative typicality. In this way the urgency of Brooks’s allegories takes priority over demands of character and nuance. Brooks’s zombies are monstrous known quantities. *The Zombie Survival Guide* demystifies zombies by framing them in rational, scientific terms, terms that govern their behavior in *World War Z*’s narrative universe. That the zombies are structurally fungible is precisely the point in Brooks’s allegories. What he takes from Romero’s oeuvre is the failure of humans to respond rationally and to cooperate in the face of an external threat, in this case a zombie horde.

Whitehead, by contrast, is engaged more closely with the ambiguity and skepticism of early Romero. Brooks establishes the rules that govern zombies and dramatizes the failure to recognize and respond to them rationally; Whitehead points to the constructedness of the rules themselves and questions how rational a traumatized subject can be. Whereas Brooks exteriorizes the logical certitude of the survival space—whole chapters of *The Zombie Survival Guide* focus on defenses and provisions for one’s shelter—Whitehead demonstrates that the undecidability the zombie embodies is always already at work in the narrative’s very constitution by the barricade trope. In embracing the barricade and the soft breach and their structural and epistemological implications, *Zone One* provides a corrective to the worldwide reclamation dramatized in *World War Z*; the gradual, strategic expansion of survival spaces posited by Brooks is Whitehead’s central ironic premise. The barriers are illusions and mere narrative contrivances. Because the zombie’s very being defies dichotomous categorization; because the genre’s critical pessimism demands the failure of human institutions; because rhetorical considerations of spectacle require a stylized, thrilling climax; and simply because the narrative must end, the Canal Street barricade must fall, “as it always did” (Whitehead [2011c] 2012a, 298).



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