

**CzasKultury/English**

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**in Zombie-centric**  
**Literary Narratives**

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# No-one Is Innocent Conspiracy Theories in Zombie-centric Literary Narratives

Ksenia Olkusz

*So why, exactly, do we love zombies so much?  
According to experts – and, yes, there are zombie ex-  
perts – it's because for all their limitations,  
the brain-rotted, animated corpses are  
so darned versatile – helping reflect  
whatever our greatest fears happen to be at the time.<sup>1</sup>*

Contrary to widely-held views, popular literature constitutes an important component of culture and a source of extremely incisive observations on the reality from which it emerges. As a particular form of art, popular literature is simultaneously a resonator of widespread moods and a sphere in which they become reified – sometimes in an allegorical fashion, sometimes rather

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<sup>1</sup> D. Gross, *Why we love those rotting, hungry, putrid zombies*, cnn.com, 2.10.2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/10/02/zombie.love/index.html?iref=24hours> (19.02.2016).

allusively, and sometimes expressed straightforwardly – reflecting a variety of social, economic, political, quotidian and other discourses. The perception of this process is relevant in that it relates to the problem of the plausibility of observations made by those authors who choose to work within the conventions of fantasy. Their perceptions and artistic achievements become entangled in the particular kind of binary relation formed from the supposed antagonism, referenced in scholarly discourse and enduring in our collective consciousness, between fiction and reality. As Krzysztof M. Maj insists, “the main problem lies [...] in the fact that since the time when most important theories of fiction and fantasy genres were developed at the same time [...], the realm of fantasy has also witnessed the postmodernist turn, and as a result, it would really be necessary now to [...] talk about post-fantasy rather than fantasy as a strictly defined genre. [...] In what we would thus call post-fantasy narratives, the world ceases to be simply a stage on which characters appear and disappear, marking successive stages in the development of the plot by their presence – and becomes instead a particular kind of virtual reality, an epistemological construct possessing high cognitive potential.”<sup>2</sup> Proof of the justice of this claim can be found in elements that explicitly relate to authentic reality and penetrate the world of fiction as components contributing to the creation of the plot. One example of this predilection consists of works that develop apocalyptic scenarios, representing an artistic conse-

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<sup>2</sup> K.M. Maj, *Allotopie. Topografia światów fikcyjnych*, Kraków 2015, pp. 21–22.

quence of the global crises proliferating in many areas of our social, political, and economic life.

The figures of living corpses or pandemics that we find in zombie-centric narratives<sup>3</sup> can thus fulfil the function of accessories in works whose content diverges from the strictly genre horror. Their decorative function, indeed, argues in favour of abandoning the label of horror or survival horror when discussing this type of plot and recognizing such works as legitimate participants in social discourses. The optics used by authors working in the zombie-centric convention focuses primarily on conspiratorial activity by national governments or corporations. A similar narrow focus is typical in the context of social and economic crisis or the related implicit collapse of societal trust in financial and public institutions and much-heralded forthcoming twilight of capitalism; furthermore, “[c]onspiracy theory demands continual interpretation in which there is *always* something more to know about an alleged conspiracy, the evidence of which is subjected to an investigative machine that demands the perpetual motion of signification. Further, the very attempt to shut interpretation down is itself a suspicious act that requires interpretation”;<sup>4</sup> following a conspiracist

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<sup>3</sup> I apply this term to all cultural texts in which living corpses constitute an element in the construction of the represented world, defining the status of characters in the reality presented there and determining the state of that reality as newly collapsing or previously destabilized due to the spread of a plague of undead aiming to infect or devour all living members of society. It is not relevant what convention the text works within, because the conception by which the worlds are designed are based on pandemic factors that result from global infection with disease causing loss of consciousness and its reduction to the primary need to transmit and duplicate the virus through contact with blood and bodily secretions.

<sup>4</sup> M. Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories. Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis 2008, p. 94.

vision of the world is therefore one of the most frequently used methods for developing a zombie-centric plot.

An atmosphere of general suspicion toward government and business significantly influences the formation of narrative models for plots about living corpses and rules for designing their represented worlds. There is a visible tendency in such plots toward monochrome and explicitly antagonistically inclined methods of presenting relations between citizens and the state or corporations. In that model, the individual is always shown to be a victim of the machinations of state or corporate rulers, and the twilight of the human race the result of diabolical and short-sighted attempts to experiment with illicit substances or pathogens. Such a black-and-white vision of the world falling apart as the fault of conspiring authorities is sometimes amplified by devices that heighten the negative features of the representatives of state or corporate power, depicted as driven by unimaginable hubris, obsessive ambition or psychic ability, and their juxtaposition with the attributes of the protagonists, who are honest, empathetic, and devoted to their families, prizing honour, sincerity, and openness. This typical theatricalization of the antagonists' behaviours serves to underscore the wrongheadedness of their decisions, and aims to intensify and finally solidify the reader's belief that the individuals in charge generally have only their own interests and personal satisfaction at heart, becoming a decidedly accusatory sign of the authors' perception and resulting artistic presentation, of those in power.

Conspiracism, we should underscore, is not a distinguishing feature of zombie-centric plots, although, significantly, the number of narratives in which the axis of the plot revolves around the results of a conspiracy at the state echelons is notably high. An important component of conspiracist thought is the belief that official statements by the authorities diverge from their actual (hidden) manoeuvres, which have nothing to do with working on behalf of building and maintaining social order. This belief is concretized in many narratives about living corpses as a constitutive element in the destruction of civilization. Government branches engaged in illegal activities prepare viruses for which there are no vaccines; they conduct various (usually unsuccessful) tests, freely and nonchalantly with regard to questions of safety, tests which often spiral out of control (as in Luke Aherne's *Euphoria Z or Transformation*, or Alex Laybourne's *Diaries of the Damned*), while sometimes their adversaries seize upon the results of their work, who are replicating the pathogen in their own complexes (Gary M. Chesla's *The Last Days*) in such a way that it becomes impossible to stop the epidemic.

Laybourne's novel *Diaries of the Damned* is unquestionably inspired by conspiracy theories about government involvement in actions harmful to citizens; the novel is a Decameron-like depiction of a vision of a government responsible for wiping out the population. Evacuated from areas engulfed by the plague, the passengers of an airplane take turns telling of their experiences during

the first days of the rise of the zombie disease, attempting to find the reason for the emergence of the epidemic. Successive stages in the stories of individual characters lead to the revelation of a government conspiracy aimed at expanding military power in the future through simulations of a terrorist attack with biological weapons. At the instructions of those in power, scientists prepare a mutated flu virus intended to be purely local in scope and to demonstrate that external forces are interfering with the peace and well-being of the Norwich community. Such actions are justified by the need to prevent possible acts of aggression by other powers, since, as one of the people involved in the production of the pathogen states, “We are always at war. There is always a threat, but you can never make a move. You don’t want to be the aggressor.”<sup>5</sup> This policy of evading responsibility fails even to stop the transformation of a local epidemic into a global pandemic, because the government decides to undertake further conspiratorial action, this time aiming to achieve supremacy over other nations. Politicians, working together with governments of various Eastern European countries and Asia, declare the evacuation of survivors to those territories, while concurring that in view of these refugees’ probable infection, they should be killed immediately upon disembarking. Such actions are not only intended to hush up the fact that state actors are implicated in the outbreak of the epidemic, but above all, become the basis for forming political relationships with those nations that were not previously eager

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<sup>5</sup> A. Laybourne, *Diaries of the Damned*, Kindle Edition, p. 192.

to become allies. As one of the conspirators justifies this decision, “Everybody is clambering over themselves to help, to prove it wasn’t them. We even have a few planes being taken into North Korea. The world is uniting. It’s remarkable.”<sup>6</sup> These optimistic revelations are discredited, however, by one of the passengers, a tabloid journalist who directly states that mass murder will operate as the pretext for obtaining political hegemony due to the fact that each of the governments involved in the killings will become complicit in the conspiracy. “That’s blackmail,” another character declares, “It’s a fucking dictatorship [...]. Ruling by fear [...].”<sup>7</sup> In the passages quoted, there is a distinct echo of conspiracy theories which claim that citizens should have limited trust in their government, a claim linked to the belief that those governments are capable of doing anything for the sake of achieving military advantage or economic control.

In many other zombie-centric narratives (such as Mira Grant’s *Newsflesh* and *Parasitology* trilogies, Lisa Morton’s *Washington Deceased*, Stephen Knight’s *Zombie Apocalypse* novels, Manel Loureiro’s *Apocalypse Z*, James Dean’s *This Dying World*, Devan Sagliani’s *The Rising Dead*, Marie Lanza’s *Fractured. Outbreak ZOM-813*) we can discern emphatic philippics against politicians and the military, who are accused of dishonesty, incompetence, or a lack of professionalism. Furthermore, in the apocalyptic orientation of such visions, geared toward revolutionary change taking place in the system, we can hear echoes of theo-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



ries announcing the decline of capitalism and predicting transformations relating not only to economic but also sociopolitical systems.<sup>8</sup>

In that context, the actions of the authorities are usually shown to end in the failure of their attempts to find optimal solutions, in the process revealing a fundamental, unprecedented lack of competence in crisis management in situations of utmost danger, or even utter abandonment of their responsibilities toward citizens – as occurs in the series<sup>9</sup> *#Retreat* by Jole McKinney, Craig Dilouie and Stephen Knight, in which military officers, not wanting to endanger the integrity of their ranks, decide not only to give up on fighting those infected, but more importantly, to refrain from doing anything to help the civilian population. This helplessness or passivity at a critical juncture for civilization allegorically represents the authorities'

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<sup>8</sup> A similar formulation has been proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein, though obviously in his theory the end of capitalism is not linked with drastic revolutionary change; nevertheless, for him too, the phenomenon will represent the consequence of such events as the crisis of the state, the growth of anti-state tendencies, etc. As Marcin Dachter states in presenting Wallerstein's thought, "a choice between future systems awaits humanity. In the time of the final crisis of the contemporary world system, which may last another 25–50 years, every human action counts. In Wallerstein's view, we face a choice between the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre. Davos represents the old system, its hierarchical, antiegalitarian structure and the defense of the old interests of the elite of the capitalist world-system in the course of creating a new system. The new system that emerges as a result of the transformation, need not be any better than the current one. If the spirit of Davos is victorious, the new system may be even worse than the current one. The spirit of Porto Alegre, on the other hand, is an appeal to the egalitarian and democratic demands formulated during the alterglobalist summits that have taken place in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre [...]." M. Dachter, "Przyszłość systemu-świata. Wizja konfliktowa," [in:] M. Baranowski (ed.), *Demokracja i rola obywatela. O napięciu pomiędzy państwem, społeczeństwem i procesami globalizacyjnymi*, Poznań 2014, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> I refer to these novels as a series, since the term "cycle" does not suit them very well. The action in these books takes place in a universe created by these authors, but individual parts are written by other authors and their plots do not always intersect.

lack of skill and neglect of their duties, while the apocalyptic scenarios unmask the dilettantism of political strategies and reveal the characteristic dysfunctionality of the system when faced with crisis.

Contemporary literary narratives about zombies also represent a peculiar kind of critical voice toward government transparency, and the authors of such plots enter directly into the discourse on the level of professionalism, competency, and engagement of politicians via references to real events, including real scandals.<sup>10</sup> Through their inclusion in the matrix of representation, they raise doubts as to the reliability and motivation of those in power, branding murky and secretive activities as potentially destabilizing. In these narratives, we can perceive reflexes of conspiracist thinking which do in fact apply to secret operations. A refusal to accept political processes is strongly expressed by Lisa Morton in her novel *Washington Deceased*, in which the US vice president, Delaney, initiates conspiratorial activity with the goal of collaborating with the zombies, as he plans for the advent of a new world and a new order to be ruled by those who belong to his political faction.

In zombie-centric plots, responsibility for the future of humankind no less often lies in the hands of corporations whose operations or resources are capable of meeting the demands of the emergency, a situation, however, that presents them with the opportunity to break free of any

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<sup>10</sup> In *Washington Deceased* Morton refers, for example, to the Secret Service scandal. An important component of many novels about zombies consists of references to the war in Iraq.

kind of supervision. This view is illustrated by, for example, the scene from Morton's novel, mentioned above, in which the authorities, in possession of a vaccine, blackmail the surviving national leaders, proposing joint rule in exchange for providing the medicine for the immunization of their populations.

The corporation, in zombie-centric narratives, either plays the role of the main antagonist, even more dangerous than the virus itself, or is responsible for the development and spread of the virus. In both cases, its primary goal is to seize power over the mechanisms of social control. In Mira Grant's *Newsflesh* trilogy, the corporation assists the government in its operations, while also manipulating the puppet president, and despite having a vaccine against zombism, does not publicize that information, using the regulation of the drug in order to maintain public order. Worse, the corporation selects the citizens who display the most interesting cases of carrying the virus (so-called reservoirs) in order to conduct some ethically questionable tests and experiments relating to cloning. In Grant's trilogy, the etiology of zombism distinctly echoes conspiracy theories, as it attributes bioethically controversial experiments in secret laboratories to pharmaceutical corporations – not without reason, if one considers the widespread practices of testing new drugs among citizens of developing countries.

In the *Paracitology* trilogy by the same author, a pharmaceutical concern is shown to be directly responsible for

the outbreak of the epidemic; for purely mercantile reasons, it ignores signals from its scientific team working on a mutation of tapeworms that gives it unheard-of resistance to all diseases, and in the name of profit, allows the mass zombification of the population, whose consciousness is taken control of by the parasites. In such cases, pharmaceutical companies, concerns, and corporations become clear allegories for the discourse of the neoliberal economy – in the end, as shown in the chapter “The Pharmaceutical Nexus” in Adriana Petryna and Arthur Kleinman’s book *Global Pharmaceuticals: Ethics, Markets, Practices*, “[s]candals in the pharmaceutical industry—be they related to questionable marketing practices or the withholding of information about dangerous drug side effects—are often traced back to the same cause: a conflict of interest. It is now required among researchers and even medical ethicists to declare any financial conflicts of interest at the end of their lectures or journal articles.”<sup>11</sup>

The other force involved in a conspiracy against the community are the media moguls, whose activities from the outset serve purposes of disinformation by hushing up the first moments of the epidemic and frustrating any attempts to take remedial measures before it reaches the level of a global pandemic. Under the pretext of not wanting to stir panic, the government exerts pressure on journalists to keep them from telling the real news about the plague, ensuring they disseminate only concocted explanations of incidents relating to the appearance of the

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<sup>11</sup> A. Petryna, A. Lakoff, A. Kleinman (eds.), *Global Pharmaceuticals: Ethics, Markets, Practices*, Durham 2006, p. 11.

zombism virus. Authors of zombie-centric narratives unambiguously show the media's involvement in processes of falsifying data, driven by a belief in the possibility of manipulating the news, and more concretely, operating according to a peculiar twist on the theory of agenda setting, which says that "[a] great deal of evidence has been amassed suggesting that the news media greatly impact the public's political opinions and behaviors. Perhaps the most broadly accepted and studied impact of the news is its ability to set the audience's issue agenda. In this scenario, news outlets report issues, and the public subsequently views those issues as important. This represents a very powerful effect, and a multitude of studies have lent credence to this paradigm, called 'agenda-setting.'"<sup>12</sup> Given that such a pattern exists, the content of news media can easily be manipulated so as to hide issues that are uncomfortable for certain groups, instead promulgating such media narratives as allow control over the population to be maintained. The manipulation of public opinion and knowledge functions in zombie-centric narratives in the context of a plan to stifle the effect that information about the incipient pandemic could generate. Thus both the government authorities and television or radio stations conspire for the purpose of reducing the potential risk of an explosion of panic and its related implications. Media outlets present all incidents related to efforts by the police and armed forces to fight the living dead as

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<sup>12</sup> J.E. Uscinski, *The People's News. Media, Politics, and the Demands of Capitalism*, New York 2014, p. 44. It should additionally be noted that this theory has applications with regard to other types of media as well, as its inventor, Maxwell McCombs, underscored as early as 2005. See: M. McCombs, "A Look at Agenda-setting: Past, Present and Future," *Journalism Studies* 6/2005, pp. 543–557.

pacification of riots, control of protesters, and information about quarantine or the rising number of infected people is confined to reports of the disease's etiology as a form of flu or possibly tuberculosis, in the process minimizing the symptoms and their effects (this happens, for example, in Lanza's *Fractured. Outbreak ZOM-8*<sup>13</sup> and Jason McPherson's *Dead Ascent*). This type of disinformation campaign not only fails to protect citizens, but even exposes them to contact with the unidentified virus and its dangerous carriers, whom the idea of disarming is practically unimaginable to anyone who has encountered an attack by the flesh-eaters. The intended protection or control over society is transformed into an even greater danger when the level of informational disorganization in traditional media is high. In many zombie narratives, such disorganization is also aggravated by the simultaneous loss of internet resources – websites publishing any kind of information about the inexplicable events, illnesses, unexplained deaths and so on are gradually shut down, and characters who moments ago had complete access to them announce with amazement that none of the sites exists any longer (Lanza's *Fractured. Outbreak ZOM-813*, Dean's *This Dying World*).<sup>13</sup> This notable disappearance of all forms and possibilities of communication is meant to show the deliberate nature of activities whose purpose is to cut the citizenry off from all sources of information, and thereby deny the existence of the pan-

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<sup>13</sup> In Rick Restucci's novelistic cycle *The Zombie Theories (Chaos Theory and Conspiracy Theory)*, his most blatantly conspiracist works, it is revealed that government websites comprise the only functioning internet source, but specific skills, not available to ordinary citizens, are required to access them.

demic. Needless to say, the method is ineffective, since the pandemic continues pitilessly spreading regardless of attempts to hush it up.

The authors of zombie-centric narratives distinctly negate or undermine the objectivity and independence of media content, and thus enter into the discourse on the significance of published information and its degree of accuracy. Fears of the manipulation of information thus result in the creation of represented worlds in which the reliability of the media is markedly questioned by the revelation of their direct dependence on state authorities who are attempting to shield their own negligence or simply mistakes. Our belief in the media's independence is contradicted by the work of many researchers who have demonstrated a peculiar kind of balance between the needs of the audience and the fulfilment of their expectations by the creators of broadcasting services. Joseph E. Uscinski, for example, writes that "correlations between the media's agenda and the public's agenda do not necessarily indicate that the media have set the audience's agenda. A correlation between [these– K.O.] two numerical variables implies only that their values rise and fall in relation to one another; correlation does not imply that one value causes the other."<sup>14</sup> It is obviously easier for authors of zombie-centric narratives to show a clear opposition between honest citizens and a dishonest government running a disinformation campaign than to present a more complex pursuit of motives relating to the flow of

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<sup>14</sup> J.E. Uscinski, *The People's News...*, pp. 44-45.

information. This monochrome aspect of the represented world aims primarily at heightening the mood of paranoia and menace, creating a believable and plot-motivated atmosphere of chaos and decline of the established order. Using the motif of dishonest media thus serves a particular dramatization of events, constituting a useful tool for creating an apocalyptic climate in which the quick unravelling of state and social structures that we see is linked with (among other things) the lack of proper data or readily available procedural protocols.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the themes presented in this essay of conspiracies in zombie-centric narratives, there is yet another issue worthy of our attention, namely the differences in how responsibility for the outbreak of the pandemic is outlined in various works. In books by European authors, the epidemic's genesis is usually irrelevant, or possibly indicated to lie in unspecified eastern-bloc countries (see, for example, Magdalena Owczarek's *Po moim trupie* [Over My Dead Body], or Loureiro's *Apocalypse Z*), whereas in works by American authors the dissemination of the virus is the fault of state actors (or possibly corporate ones; or, as in the universe portrayed in Knight's *Apocalypse!*, both together), whose hidden manoeuvres have led to the twilight of the human species. Such considerable

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, this problem drew particular attention from Max Brooks, in his discussion of the rather injudicious comparisons of the ebola epidemic to a zombism pandemic. In commenting on the misguidedness of the analogy, the author declared: "The final reason my fictional pandemic managed to nearly wipe us out was that the global village failed to form a neighborhood watch. The nations [depicted in] World War Z all acted out of self-interest, allowing themselves to be divided and conquered"; M. Brooks, "Is Ebola the real 'World War Z?' (Spoiler alert: It's not)," Reuters, 16.10.2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/10/16/is-ebola-the-real-world-war-z-spoiler-alert-its-not/> (18.12.2015).



amplification of conspiratorial activity is related, firstly, to the societal crisis of trust in government, and secondly, to the predilection, congenital in American culture above all, for conspiracist interpretations of history. The multitude of works depicting an apocalypse that results from the negligence of the government and its inability to bear the consequences of its own actions reveals the critical interpretation of reality that inspired such stories.

**translated by Timothy Williams**