Stomping the undead: a blues theory of zombie culture

Adam Golub (California State University, Fullerton)

“Sometimes you forget all about them in spite of yourself, but all too often the very first thing you realize when you wake up is that they are there again, settling in like bad weather, hovering like plague-bearing insects, swarming precisely as if they were indeed blue demons dispatched on their mission of harassment by none other than the Chief Red Devil of all devils himself.”

Albert Murray, Stomping the Blues

“Don’t you get bit. Bites kill you. The fever burns you out.”

Morgan, The Walking Dead

With this essay, I join the moaning hordes who have tried to explain the resurgent popularity of the zombie in American culture. Why has this particular monster so pervaded our popular imagination in the 21st century? Consider The Walking Dead, Land of the Dead, World War Z, Zombieland, iZombie, Resident Evil, The Last of Us—from film and television, to novels and comic books, to video games and public spectacles like zombie walks, what do all of these zombie stories tell us about the stories we tell and why we tell them?

In his influential essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us that monsters signify, that they exist “only to be read” (4). Historically, the zombie has proven to be a flexible metaphor. The zombie first entered the American consciousness in the 1920s, via Haitian folklore, when it was popularly depicted as a reanimated corpse under the spell of a voodoo master. In the late sixties and seventies, the films of George Romero helped reinvent the zombie as a ravenous cannibal, a characterization that continues to the present day (though increasingly we see in the “zom com” subgenre a trend to humanize the zombie). In its multiple iterations, the zombie has always signified a state of thralldom, variously operating as a metaphor for slavery, colonialism, industrial capitalism, consumerism, and social conformity. The zombie embodies our anxieties about loss of control and freewill, but it can also signify resistance—after all, it defies not only death, but also social categories and civic governance. To this end, a wellspring of scholarship has converged on the zombie narrative as political allegory. Scholars have read tales of the reanimated dead as, for instance, parables about class revolution, globalization, body politics, and national trauma.[1]

Such analyses suggest that the cultural function of zombie stories is essentially mimetic and metacognitive: they reflect back our fears about thralldom, and they provide a creative space where we can critique our history and politics. I want to further explore the cultural work of zombies, but the significance I’m interested in describing here is more aesthetic than
sociological. In what follows, I propose a new framework for interpreting zombie culture, one that considers the zombie tale not just as political allegory, but as artistic statement.[2] Specifically, I wish to examine the zombie narrative as a stylized cultural idiom that closely resembles the blues.

There are a number of striking parallels between zombie storytelling and the blues idiom. Like the blues, the zombie idiom explores existential concerns, relies on a central metaphor to personify trouble (“the blues,” the zombie), models a type of heroic action that values improvisation in the face of adversity, and generates communal rituals for audiences. At their heart, tales of the zombie apocalypse pose a fundamentally blues-toned question: How do you go on living when you wake up in the morning and the undead are all around?

In his vast work on the blues idiom, the late Albert Murray characterized the blues not as a woe-is-me croon, but as an empowering survival mechanism. By performing the blues or listening to them, one can confront life head on, chase away the sense that life is a “lowdown dirty shame,” and affirm oneself in the process (Blue Devils 14). The blues idiom provides equipment for living, teaching us the importance of creative improvisation in situations of disruption. According to Murray, the blues idiom—expressed in blues lyrics and musical structure, but also found in certain works of blues-toned literature—offers a model for heroic action. The prototypical “blues hero” is someone who confronts the “blue devils” all around, as best as he or she can, and, in so doing, achieves a sense of grace and existential affirmation.

I would argue that zombie stories resonate with audiences in part because they speak a familiar cultural language: they are inflected (indeed, infected) with the blues idiom.[3] For one, zombie narratives, like the blues, focus on everyday people facing adversity and unexpected change in their lives: a lover has left, or, perhaps worse, the apocalypse has begun. As musicologist Jeffrey Todd Titon remarks, “blues lyrics start from trouble” (186). Moreover, in both the blues and the zombie idiom, characters often discover this trouble in the morning, waking up to changed circumstances. As Rick Grimes says in the first episode of The Walking Dead, “I woke up today in the hospital, came home, and that’s all I know.” This is Rick swinging the zombie blues, trying to make sense of disruption, standing at the crossroads. Similar morning realizations take place in the films 28 Days Later and the 2004 remake of Dawn of the Dead. In Romero’s Diary of the Dead, a character observes that mornings “show you for what you are, instead of what you think you are.” Like blues singer Charley Lincoln, these characters all wake up “with the blues three different ways.”

Similar to the blues, the zombie idiom also presents us with characters who must respond to their troubles in some way: they face a break, a moment of discontinuity for which there is no established rulebook. As a consequence, they must improvise—a weapon, or an escape, or some innovation that will keep them alive. Some characters rise to the occasion, some do not (so they die and rise again). In this way, the zombie idiom models heroic action, offering audiences blues-like exemplars of what Murray calls “impromptu heroism,” characters who can turn “disjunctures into continuities” and display the “will to persevere” (Omni-Americans 59; Stomping 10). As a result of their action, both the blues hero and the zombie hero achieve a kind of self-affirmation: I am a survivor.[4]
Of course, heroic improvisation may help the moment of danger pass, but the danger never leaves for good. Like the blues, the zombies always return. Murray calls the blues the “embodiment of entropy,” noting that, “you can’t destroy them, but you can push them back…” And as soon as you relax, they’re right back (“Function” 575). Or, as bluesman Buddy Guy sings, “Good morning blues… I wonder what you’re doing here so soon.” Along similar lines, Peter Dendle describes zombie narratives as “parables of entropy” (8).[5] In the film 28 Days Later, one character observes, “Plans are pointless. Staying alive’s as good as it gets.” Put most plainly, a character in the novel World War Z remarks of the zombie apocalypse, “You can’t stop the rain” (61). All you can do is keep on keeping on, and keep on killing zombies.

So what might it mean that zombies are functioning as a kind of 21st century blues? Murray argues that the blues idiom is all about “continuity in the face of adversity,” that it sustains our humanity and enables us to maintain “higher aspirations” (Blue Devils 14; Hero 37). Perhaps zombie narratives function in much the same way. Again, we need to consider zombie culture as both politics and art. As political allegory, zombie tales speak to contemporary anxieties about alienation, dehumanization, and a loss of faith in institutions—our “crisis of conscience…and consciousness” (Lauro and Embry 92). A character in the zombie novel Dead City articulates this well when he says, “I have the terrible feeling that what we’re seeing out there is the failure of our community, that all of that death is simply the manifestation of our lack of place, a sense of who we are and what we mean to each other” (266). Of course, if we only read zombie culture as allegory, we would probably see it as a woe-is-me croon, a hopeless, apocalyptic lament. However, when we consider the undead narrative as cultural aesthetic, as art, then we discover that the zombie idiom may actually show us how to survive and affirm, despite it all.

Perhaps most telling about the parallels between zombies and the blues is their shared cultural roots in the history of slavery and colonialism: blues music emerged in North America, zombie lore in Haiti, and both in turn were influenced by West African folk forms. Both idioms were created within systems of racial inequality and oppression, both gained traction in the wider (and whiter) popular culture of the 20th century, both experienced cycles of co-optation and transnational reinvention, and now a kind of (monstrous) hybrid of the two is giving meaning to our everyday lives in the new millennium. Kyle William Bishop argues that zombie narratives represent a “stylized reaction to the greater cultural consciousness” (15). For Murray, the blues idiom exemplifies “symbolic conduct that is most adequate to the problems of our time” (“Function” 575). In the 21st century, under the thrall of neoliberalism, in a social landscape rife with racial conflict, political animus, and sharp cultural divides, I would argue that the “zombie blues” has become our new survival mechanism; it represents the symbolic conduct for our age. Zombie culture provides us with equipment for living: we stomp the undead to make us feel human and get through another day.

NOTES

1. Zombie studies is a growing field of interdisciplinary inquiry. Some key works include Kyle William Bishop, American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (And Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2010) and Bishop’s follow-up, How

2. Here I intentionally paraphrase Ralph Ellison, who suggested in his 1964 review of Blues People that Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka had focused too much on the sociological dimensions of blues culture and not enough on its aesthetic function: “He might have come much closer had he considered the blues not as politics but as art” (287).

3. Granted, the blues may have faded from our musical radar over the years, and audiences may have grown smaller, but I’m reminded of Robert O’Meally’s point that “American art forms circle and reverberate, influencing one another in unexpected ways and by unexpected means” (xi). Scholars like Houston Baker, Jr. and Adam Gussow have characterized the blues as a “matrix” and an “expressive continuum,” suggesting that the blues lives in our culture, outside of the music. We may not listen to the blues much anymore, but the blues still haunts our art, like an undead idiom, swinging old tunes in a new timbre.

4. This sentiment is echoed in Max Brooks’s Zombie Survival Guide: “Survival is the key word to remember—not victory, not conquest, just survival” (xiii).

5. Indeed, critic R.H.W. Dillard characterized Romero’s Night of the Living Dead as a film of “ceaseless and unremitting struggle” (22).

WORKS CITED


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