They are Night Zombies!! They are Neighbours!!

Capitalism and the Zombie Culture

Mark Fischer, in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative*, discusses the dehumanizing and alienating effects of capitalism on the employee, who must always exceed standards or else lose his place. Today’s employee must be flexible—capable of adapting to new situations as they arise—but he must also be able to market himself and stand out from the masses as a polished product of his training and education. In order to be successful the employee must be subsumed in a network, which values subjective input only insofar as it serves the realization of a common task. Those who attempt to operate outside the network—or are forced to the peripheries of the network through unemployment or systemic discrimination—eventually conform, or else they are devoured by the system. Since the benefits of culture are reserved for the centre, those on the peripheries are left with few resources to ensure their own well being as well as the well being of the families that they provide for. Originality and creativity lose all meaning within the network. Thinking of something new is reduced to re-imagining the same old idea. All employees are regulated by normative ideas, which impose a common goal that must be realized as a team, or not at all. Each individual takes up the same goal so that the pursuit of their own ambitions serves the group as a whole. In this sense the network relies on the dedication of the employee if it is to be successful. Consequently, the individual is either subsumed into the network as an employee that transforms him into a zombie, or he is forced to operate peripherally to the capitalist system as the alienated survivor, who is either completely consumed by or turned into a member of the
zombie network. In effect, whether he is zombie or survivor—employed or unemployed—the individual always operates in relation to the network, which appears to render him unable to get outside of capitalism.

Capitalism has replaced the image of the craftsman with the image of the network. The symbol of the network obscures individuality by replacing the name of the craftsman with the insignia of the company that paid for production. The network assigns workers a specific task in production, which usually mediates their interaction with the product through a machine. According to Marx, “the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of the object over the human, of dead labour over living, of the product over the producer.” In reducing human involvement in production to menial labour the employee becomes an ambiguous figure who lacks particularity. He can be replaced at a moments notice by the next faceless employee in the queue. It is not about finding ‘the right man for the job’, but about having enough bodies to ensure the network operates at an optimum production rate—whatever that product may be. Subjective experience is virtually redundant as long as there is body to perform the labour. This reduction to a body is captured the in neuroscientific belief “that there exists a perfect continuity between the neuronal and the mental,” which takes the subjective employee and turns him into an objective zombie.

In a basic sense, the zombie is the human without the self; he is simply a brain that “looks and acts just like a human, but lacks conscious experience.” As such, the dichotomy between human and zombie is meant to hyperbolize dualism by constructing subjectivity as the differentiating factor. In other words, if the zombie represents the image of the purely neuronal, in that all his actions are reducible to the function of his
brain, then the human must be something that transcends the neuronal. Nonetheless, because “zombies go through the motions of “real” life,” they perform what appears to be the subjective self. When the humans are not around, zombies are the picture of docility in the idle contentedness of human performance. As such, the zombie hoard is a cutting metaphor for capitalist ideology.

The documentary, Zizek!, Slavoj Zizek (2005) defines ideology as keeping up the appearance of being human. More specifically, he says, “the fundamental level of ideology is […] that of an [unconscious] fantasy structuring our social reality itself.” As such, it is exactly because the zombie goes through the “motions of “real” life” that he depicts the capitalist ideology. The absence of subjectivity in the zombie reveals his seemingly human acts to be the ‘unconscious fantasy’ that Zizek speaks of. For the surviving humans, however, the fantasy is dispelled because they witness the performance of capitalist ideology as the destructive consequences of the zombies’ blind consumption. In consequence, the zombies only enact the performance of humanity. The survivors can no longer hide behind the ideological mask of humanity and so give up the performance altogether, which compounds the outside threat of the zombie with the internal threat of disparity amongst the human survivors.

The external threat of the zombies comes from the fact that zombies form a kind of network. The zombie can only operate effectively within the network of the hoard because the zombie is reducible to his brain function and “cerebral organization presupposes the connection of neurons in networks.” Within the network “there cannot be, by definition, a privileged vantage point” and the employees that comprise the network are “self-organized [and] self-controlling” in achieving the tasks the network is
assigned. As such, the role of the employee within the network is analogous to the role of the zombie within the hoard. Just like “the zombies appear to be cooperative and docile toward one another, while remaining efficiently and single-mindedly focused on their human foes,”\textsuperscript{12} the employee within the network must work efficiently as a part of the team, while also particularizing his contributions as fundamentally necessary to the network. This often means undercutting the ideas of another employee in order to solicit the individual’s own ideas. In this manner, the employee can be imagined as a zombie, who is incapable of overcoming a human alone, but amongst the hoard he must struggle against the rotting bodies for his scrap of meat.

On the other hand, the internal threat arises because the humans are alienated from one another in their goal of survival. This alienation seeps into the family unit and destroys it from within. Specifically, in \textit{Night of the Living Dead}, the Cooper family depicts the deterioration of the family under the capitalist system insofar as Harry Cooper simultaneously portrays the strain of employment and unemployment on the family. According to Mark Fischer, “capitalism requires the family […] even as it undermines it”\textsuperscript{13} because it is either neglected by the overworked parent or it is the sole means of support for the unemployed parent. An unemployed parent—from now on referred to as the \textit{unemployee}—is made to feel inadequate in his ability to provide for his family on two levels. Firstly, the unemployee feels professionally inadequate because he is laid off from his job or labelled ‘redundant’ to the company. Secondly, the loss of income that is incurred with the loss of his job renders the unemployee unable to provide for the financial needs of his family. As such, the professional inadequacy of the unemployee instils a sense of paternal inadequacy by extension.
Fischer claims that “work and life become inseparable”\(^{14}\) because the network necessitates that “people work by communicating”\(^{15}\). When the employee loses his job, therefore, he also loses his place in the network community, and feels alienated from an aspect of his life. Furthermore, his ability as a parent is contingent on his ability to generate capital inasmuch as “the ‘paternal’ concept of duty [is] subsumed into the ‘maternal’ imperative to enjoy”\(^{16}\), and enjoyment is only achieved through a “surplus”\(^{17}\) that must be purchased. The employee’s financial contribution to the family thus becomes the defining factor of his paternal ability. In adopting this mode of parenting, however, the employee raises his child to be an “idiotic hedonist”\(^{18}\) who is dependent on him to support these pleasure-seeking tendencies. As a result of the loss of income, the unemployee is unable to purchase the level of enjoyment that his children demand. Consequently, the inability to generate capital characterizes the unemployee as an impotent father, and he is resented by his children because he cannot satisfy their incessant need to consume.

In his film, *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero illustrates the effect of unemployment on the family by constructing the Coopers as a metaphorical representation of the plight experienced by the unemployee and his family. Harry Cooper is immediately introduced as an inadequate provider, wherein his inadequacy is taken to be the catalyst to his family’s destruction. During a confrontation with the zombies, Harry’s daughter, Karen, is bitten, which leads Harry to seek refuge in the cellar of a nearby house. Because it only has one point of entrance, Harry believes “the cellar is the strongest place”\(^{19}\). The assumption that the cellar is inherently the safest place is mimetic of the “naturalization effect”\(^{20}\) of capitalism in that it is taken to be the only conceivable
answer to the current state of things. While he hides in the cellar and attempts to escape the apocalyptic reality that bangs upon the door, Harry resembles the capitalist who escapes the inevitable depletion of resources through the justification of continued consumption as necessary to immediate survival. As Ben warns him, however, “the cellar is a death trap” simply because there is only one way out, which is to open the door and hack through the flood of zombies blocking the path to the surface. In other words, capitalism has locked the individual in the cellar and the only way out is to “explode” against the entire zombie system.

Ignoring Ben’s advice, Harry confines himself to the house for fear of the zombie-ridden outside world. Harry depends on his family to inspire his success against the zombies with the same level of dependence the unemployee has on his family to inspire success in finding work. Nevertheless, Harry cannot keep the zombies out of the home for long. A sudden invasion of zombies on the main floor draws Harry out of the cellar. Upon his return, Karen is no longer his little girl, but a ravenous zombie who manages to devour her parents before she is killed too. Since Harry could not provide the help that Karen needed in staving off the zombie infection, she literally transforms into the “idiotic hedonist”—a monster capable of taking what she desires by force when it is not provided for her. In effect, just as Harry is unable to protect his family against the zombies, the unemployee is unable to provide for his family without gainful employment; the repercussion for both Harry and the unemployee is the deterioration of the family.

Employment within the network, however, also undermines the family for the same reason as unemployment: “work and life become inseparable.” As such, the home can no longer be considered “a place of respite from the pressures of [the] world”
because work has breached the border of family life. Fischer expresses this inseparability when using the phrase, “working from home, and homing from work”\textsuperscript{26}, which obscures the border between the professional and the domestic sphere. At work, the employee thinks of home, and what is required of him there; at home, however, the employee thinks of work, and all the tasks he has yet to accomplish. In this manner, Romero constructs Harry not just as the unemployee, but the as the employee as well, in that the border of the domestic sphere is literally breached by the zombie network. As the zombies burst through the hastily boarded up doors and windows, Harry is faced with the same conflict as the employee. While he fights the zombies, Harry can think only of his family waiting in the cellar; while he is with his family, on the other hand, Harry can only think of the zombies clawing at the door. Such pressure becomes too much for Harry to handle. The fact that Harry freezes during the sudden invasion of zombies indicates that the pressure of the task renders him professionally impotent, insofar as Harry’s job is family protector. Moreover, Harry’s impotence as a father—and as a husband—is realized in Karen’s transformation as she becomes the agent of her parents’ destruction.

In effect, the employee and the unemployee are shown to suffer the same fate. The “naturalization effect”\textsuperscript{27} of capitalism makes the individual’s fate appear fatally determined because capitalism always positions him in relation to the network so that he is never completely separate from it. As such, the term unemployee becomes particularly effective because it illustrates that unemployment does not remove the individual from the network but merely displaces him to the peripheries of the capitalist system. Yet, it is not always professional inadequacy that renders one a unemployee; it is sometimes a case of systemic discrimination. Accordingly, the survivors (aside from Harry Cooper) in
Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) represent those generally put at a disadvantage by interaction with the network: the racial minority (Ben), the single woman (Barbra), and the young couple (Tom and Judy). Although Ben, Barbra, Tom, and Judy do not survive, none of them turn into zombies because their subordinate positions ‘naturally’ expose them to the exploitation of the network. That is, although they cannot be subsumed by the network, their bodies are a necessary resource to the strength and survival of the zombie hoard.

Capitalism manages to keep the individual in constant relation to the network by seeming to “replace essentialist ontologies with open spaces without borders”\(^{28}\). Without borders, however, it becomes very difficult to locate the outside of capitalism because “capitalism [has] seeped into the very unconscious”\(^{29}\). The individual in the capitalist society is like the survivor in the zombie apocalypse insofar as the individual is confronted by capitalism in the same places the survivor is confronted by zombies. The gas station, the grocery store, the shopping mall are just a few of the most popular zombie attractions illustrating that capitalist ideology persists even in the unconscious zombie brain. In order to deconstruct the capitalist system, therefore, the individual must first “annihilate the very form”\(^{30}\) of his unconscious. Malabou suggests that the brain should be reconstructed as “plastic”\(^{31}\) because although plastic has a definite shape, it can also be melted down and transformed into something completely new. A conception of the mind as plastic endows it with “the capacity to annihilate”\(^{32}\) the flexible capitalist unconscious that has bent itself into a million new shapes to avoid destruction. Since “there is today an exact correlation between descriptions of brain functioning and the political understanding of commanding”\(^{33}\), a change in the conception of the mind can evoke
political change. Essentially, to reconstruct the brain generates the capacity to reconstruct the political system in which the brain functions. How can the capitalist employee make the leap to the plastic individual?

The “docility and obedience”\textsuperscript{34} that capitalism inspires in society subordinates the individual to the perpetuation of the capitalist system in that gainful employment requires the success of capitalism and the success of capitalism requires increasing output of labour. Remaining docile, however, forces the individual to suppress and then release his rage “in unforeseen contexts”\textsuperscript{35}. It is as if the individual is infected with rage as he loses all control over the context of his violent outbursts. In Danny Boyle’s film, \textit{28 Days Later}, the transformation of the zombie from the un-dead corpse into the infected human embodies the “rising rate of mental illness”\textsuperscript{36} in capitalism. The infected perform the hyperbolized rage of mental illness as a social illness insofar as the ‘docility’ enforced by capitalism is analogous to the docility of the infected. Although the infected appears to be passive when he or she is not provoked by uninfected flesh, the fury which uninfected flesh provokes in the infected differs from the zombie’s desire to consume. Rather, the infected craves an outlet for his rage, and he desires to release the anger infecting his brain into the first healthy human he encounters. While tearing apart the flesh of a human, the infected disregards his own well being, which illustrates the characteristic behaviour of mental illness in that the infected persists in violent action towards others, even as it inflicts self-injury.

It seems contradictory that escape from capitalism should require us to “enrage ourselves”\textsuperscript{37}. In this case, however, rage calls the individual to “explode against a certain culture of docility,”\textsuperscript{38} rather than explode against his neighbour. As such, Jim, played by
Cillian Murphy in *28 Days Later*, performs the notion of rage that Malabou posits because his rage is directed at the system that antagonizes him, and his rage enables him to effectively protect those he deems family—Selena and Hannah. Jim’s main enemy is Major Henry West, commander of a small military settlement that is responsible for the radio broadcast promising a ‘new’ civilization. Unfortunately, what Jim and the others find there is nothing new at all, but “a strange hybrid of the ultra-modern and the archaic”\(^3\). Against the backdrop of a fully equipped, modern military base, West performs the barbaric role of a pillaging Viking. Working under the conviction that he is going to repopulate the country, West confines Selena and Hannah in bedrooms where they are to await their impending rape. Meanwhile, West and his men fire grenades and machine guns at an approaching barrage of infected. Although Major West is content to settle on an archaic method of governance over women in order to rebuild civilization, he is only able to ensure the safety of his civilization through the use of hi-tech weaponry.

Furthermore, West’s attempt to exploit the reproductive capacities of Selena and Hannah is comparable to capitalism in that this does not create a genuinely new civilization, but rather preserves the old culture that is all but eradicated by infection; and according to Fischer, “a culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all”\(^4\) (this can perhaps be less contentiously stated by saying that reproduction creates a simulation of culture that cannot be considered real). In order to disrupt West’s plan for preservation, Jim invites the chaotic rage of the infected into the military settlement. Amid the frenzied destruction, however, Jim is able to construct his plan of rescue. The purposeful rage of Jim’s conscious revenge allows him to kill the enemy soldier before the indirect rage of the unconscious infected can do so. At the same time, however, his rage allows him to
blend in with the hoard. Consequently, Jim is successful in his mission because the appearance of rage makes him invisible to his foes, and he goes undetected by both the infected and the soldier.

In effect, getting outside of capitalism requires a similar notion of making oneself invisible. That is, the individual must work undetected if he is to successfully annihilate the capitalist system because it allows him to step outside the limits of capitalism and view it in its entirety. Without the impending doom of a zombie apocalypse, or any form of violent anarchy, however, it is doubtful that rage will be purposefully directed at the political foundations upholding capitalism, which readily attacks any organized system that opposes it. The torrent of sequels that accompany films like *Night of the Living Dead* and *28 Days Later* exposes any rescue of survivors to be nothing more than re-incorporation into the system responsible for the zombie threat in the first place. Just like the zombie infection, the smallest remnant of capitalism is capable of resurrecting the entire system. Since the majority of individuals are already capitalist zombies, the destruction of capitalism seems to hail the coming of a messiah survivor. This is not the notion that Malabou or Fischer desire to perpetuate however. Essentially, finding an alternative suggests that the individual is both zombie and survivor, that the war is one of his or her surviving subjectivity against the zombie unconscious.

Notes

3. Ibid., 12)
5. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain*, 55


11. Ibid., 42.


14. Ibid., 34.

15. Ibid., 34.

16. Ibid., 71.


23. Fischer, *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative*, 71.

24. Ibid., 34.

25. Ibid., 33.

26. Ibid., 22.


28. Ibid., 45.


31. Ibid., 19.

32. Ibid., 5.

33. Ibid., 32.

34. Ibid., 53.


36. Fischer, *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative*, 36.


38. Ibid., 79.


40. Ibid., 3.
Works Cited


