

From the Parasite to the BwO: Subversive Mimicry in Viral Zombies

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It is surely easy to forge a common idea of what may be called *zombie mimicry*. Probably, we all have in mind the recurrent image of hordes of nonliving individuals whose remarkably standardized behavior (way of walking, gestures, etc.) has become a recognizable feature. This well-known mental picture has been extensively disseminated and has shaped our contemporary visual culture in a wide range of forms: TV series, comic books, videogames, and, of course, cinema, on which we will focus. The main aim of this chapter is to take cinematographic zombies as a case study to argue that zombie mimicry might be considered part of *posthuman mimesis* as a relevant consequence of the mimetic turn in posthuman studies. The purpose is to analyze zombie mimicry as a defining feature of the mimetic posthuman in the sense that the ego is easily possessed, that is, hypnotized (especially in crowds) and vulnerable to becoming a phantom, permeable to contagion, in such a way that zombies constitute a perfect model of contemporary homo mimeticus 2.0, whose contagious *pathos* spreads over our present posthuman culture.

First, a word must be said about posthuman mimesis inasmuch as it may seem a contradiction in terms. As Nidesh Lawtoo explains, the long-established notion of mimesis and contemporary posthuman studies look in two opposed directions: The first refers to metaphysical tradition of western aesthetics which, rooted in an idealizing conception of being, deals with Platonic dialectics of representation between originals and illusory, fallacious copies, thus reducing mimesis to the logic of the Same, whereas the second challenges precisely these sorts of humanistic ideals, addressing mimesis as an immanent, relational force, affective power, or *pathos*.¹ At this point, the mimetic turn

¹ As Nidesh Lawtoo puts it: “The opposition between mimesis and the posthuman is thus clearly set: a philosophy of sameness contra a philosophy of difference, anthropocentrism contra post-anthropocentrism, humanism contra anti-humanism, a *past*-oriented aesthetic theory contra a *future*-oriented technological theory.” Nidesh Lawtoo, “Posthuman Mimesis I: Concepts for the Mimetic Turn,” *Journal of Posthumanism* 2, no. 2 (2022): 101–14, 102.

implies a radical detachment from traditional mimetic theories and promotes a new idea of mimesis, to the extent that

the mimetic turn suggests to *re-turn* to a different conception of mimesis that includes heterogeneous phenomena that go from mimicry to identification, mimetism to emotional contagion, influence to mirror neurons, trance to hypnosis, simulation to hypermimesis among other avatars of mimesis central to exploring the protean ramification of posthuman subjectivity in the twenty-first century.²

These procedures can be found at the core of the contemporary posthuman condition, taking part in the advent of *homo mimeticus 2.0*. This ontological production develops by deconstructing and decentering the metaphysical notion of unitary subjectivity as well as unconsciously imitating affective patterns in the plane of immanence that also entail cultural, visual, ideological, and consumerist practices. Theoretical references for this paradigm of the self range from Nietzsche to Deleuze, Derrida, Baudrillard, Braidotti, Tarde, and Hayles.

That said, it is precisely in this context that zombies become a perfect example of the mimetic side of posthuman subjectivity, because they show many features of the mimetic posthuman, as we will see later, such as disorganized excessive mimicry, hypnosis and trance, possession and simulation, and pathological contagion, ultimately articulated in a deconstructive notion of being that merges monstrous techno-corporalities with viral transhumanism. It is my conviction that zombies must be situated at the birth of posthuman mimesis as they constitute a significant way in which *homo mimeticus* takes form. Finally, a homogenous multitude of *phantasmal* zombies radically illustrates the very functioning of *mimetic pathos*: Posthuman subjects imitate both individually and collectively via unconscious mirroring, which render us open to contagion at the level of affect, or *pathos*. It is no coincidence that zombies reveal the double movement that defines *mimetic pathos*, that is, the oscillation between the contradictory feelings of terror and pleasure, called the *pathos of distance*.³

Zombies fit perfectly well with the definition of the mimetic posthuman: Both “go beyond good and evil, in the sense that it can be put to both life-affirmative and life-negating, sympathetic and violent, logical and pathological

2 Nidesh Lawtoo, “Posthumanism and Mimesis: An Introduction,” *Journal of Posthumanism* 2, no. 2 (2022): 87–100, 88.

3 Lawtoo, “Posthumanism,” 91.

use and abuse.”⁴ According to this definition, *mimetic pathos* could also be named the “zombie pathology.”

In a nutshell: *mimetic pathos* indicates that all affects are mimetic and part of the process of becoming posthuman; *pathos of distance* suggests a certain ambivalence, oscillation, or tension both the concepts of mimesis and of the posthuman tend to generate; and *patho(-)logies* reveal a fundamental diagnostic duplicity whereby a loss of embodiment, individual disconnection, and collective tribalization constitutive of posthuman pathologies can, at the same time, be put to productive use for emerging technologies to generate new connections, human/nonhuman collaborations, and vital new *patho-logies*.⁵

Such circumstances are easily located in the evolution of the figure of the zombie in cinema and the mimetic procedures at stake in each stage, which go from anthropological primitive ego to viral technozombies.

1 Genealogy of Zombie Mimicry

In their compulsive, wavering, deorganicized movements, the zombies are *allegorical* and *mimetic* figures.

STEVEN SHAVIRO, *Cinematic Body*

A brief genealogy of zombie films is in order. The first stage is usually characterized by Haitian zombies, as can be appreciated in *White Zombie* (1932), the film by Victor Halperin based on the novel *The Magic Island* (written by Seabrook in 1929), and *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), set in Cambodia, also by Halperin. In this stage, the figure of the zombie is portrayed as a primitive automaton under hypnosis or voodoo, an exotic puppet in a trance state who involuntarily does the bidding of a superior criminal mind by mimetically performing their command. Without going into greater detail—in this realm a comment on racism would be necessary—the zombie that can be found in this early stage is still not the common stereotype. In fact, it is more like the somnambulist Cesare as seen in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene, 1920).

However, even in this initial moment, the centrality of mimesis appears as a striking aspect in order to fully grasp the meaning of zombies. Mimicry

4 Lawtoo, “Posthumanism,” 92.

5 Lawtoo, “Posthumanism,” 92.

and zombification seem to be linked from the very beginning. From the mid-1950s, such characterizations of zombies progressively disappear in a context of global change and widespread fear among societies, caused by the Cold War and the nuclear threat. This is the backdrop for the second stage of cinematographic zombies, the key moment of George Romero's famous trilogy: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985). This is a crucial work marking a pivotal moment in the history of zombies inasmuch as it helped establish the main elements that characterize zombies as we understand them today. Romero's pioneering work fixed the classical features that persist in present culture: a putrid, disgusting living dead creature, with an insatiable appetite for flesh and violent manhunts.

But above all, the Romerian zombies have been analyzed as a metaphor for consumerism. In fact, zombification could be thought of in terms of mass culture under the spell of consumer ideology. Thus, the analysis of the mimetic unconscious might take zombies as an example of mass pathology originating in hypnosis and suggestion that manages to control the collective ego under trance states. Consumerist discourse spreads like a virus and inoculates subjectivities with stereotyped mimetic patterns. This sort of contagion generates *phantom egos*. The contemporary subject, which is produced as a potential consumer, loses their human condition and becomes a market product, a waste, a residue of the economic and cultural strategies that legitimate such alienating system. This subject is truly living dead, inasmuch as they undergo a process of dehumanization, thereby finding a perfect expression in the zombies. In this respect, Steven Shaviro's vision on Romero's zombies is clear enough. He has argued that the life-in-death of the zombies is a sophisticated allegory for the inner logic of late capitalism, responsible for aggressive business practices, exploitation, and social hysteria. In this context, the zombies enact a radical refusal of value and become a detritus of industrial society. In the words of Shaviro: "The zombies mark the dead end or zero degree of capitalism's logic of endless consumption and ever-expanding accumulation, precisely because they embody this logic so literally and to such excess."⁶

Therefore, it is no surprise that zombies undertake such a subversive action by means of hyperbolic mimicry. Briefly put, Romero's zombies are mimetic replications that embody and reproduce to excess the ontological effects of unbridled consumerism. They play the role of alter egos or avatars of human beings taking the form of a simulacrum, a distorted mirror that ironically shows humans' true image. Hence, the living dead, under the hypnotic spell

6 Steven Shaviro, *Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 92–93.

of consumer ideology, participate within a posthuman notion of mimesis that exemplifies, through bodily deterioration and dispossession of identity, the process of becoming a non-Platonic *phantom*.⁷ As Lawtoo puts it: “This phantom no longer functions as a devalued and derivative copy of the real. In the postmodern world, the sphere of hyperreal phantoms (or simulacra) can no longer be contained within the logic of [traditional] mimesis.”⁸

Posthuman mimesis and the living dead are effectively connected in the second stage of zombie cinema, while operating in tandem with mimetic procedures. In this vein, the mimetic potential of the zombies, their automatic gestures and distinctive movements, constitute an invaluable structuring principle to analyze what zombies really mean in our present-day world. As Shaviro explains:

Indeed, Romero has called to life the first postmodern zombies. ... Romero’s zombies could almost be said to be quintessential media images, since they are vacuous, mimetic replications of the human beings they once were. ... Zombies move slowly and affectlessly, as if in a trance, but the danger they represent is real: they kill and consume. They are slower, weaker, and stupider than living humans; their menace lies in numbers, and in the fact that they never give up. Their slow-motion voracity and continual hungry wailing sometimes appears clownish, but at other times emerges as an obsessive leitmotif of suspended and ungratified desire.⁹

Following Shaviro, it seems reasonable to locate the origin of contemporary zombies in the mimetic drive displayed in George Romero’s cinema. This creates fertile ground for the rise of new forms of zombification in subsequent films, so it will be necessary to go a step further in this direction turning now to the third stage, which is believed to have started in 2002 with Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later*, strongly reinforced in 2013 by Marc Forster’s *World War Z*. In this final stage, the novelty is the birth of viral zombies. At this point, becoming a zombie is propagated through viral contagion, not by means of bite, as was the

7 It is not just desire but dispossession of identity that operates at the level of *pathos*. In this respect, see René Girard’s notion of mimesis in Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 46–52.

8 Lawtoo, *Phantom*, 188.

9 Shaviro, *Cinematic Body*, 84.

case in the second stage, or through hypnosis, as in the first.¹⁰ Indeed, contagion is one of the main characteristics of the mimetic unconscious, which thus usually operates in crowds, as do zombies.¹¹ So it could be said that zombies embody “mimesis not as straightforward imitation, then, but rather mimesis as a disconcerting form of unconscious communication that troubles the boundaries of individuation.”¹² Zombification is now a question of infection. It is a rapid, even instantaneous, process of contagion which implies apocalyptic pandemic environments, strikingly similar to the current COVID-19 era.¹³ Lawtoo continues:

Thus, a subject driven by a mimetic pathos (fear, anxiety, resentment, aggression, conspiratorial beliefs, etc.) has the power to contaminate one or more subjects with the same pathos, which can expand rhizomatically and exponentially in order to affect/infect a mass or public in the body politic crowd.¹⁴

This situation entails that zombie mimicry becomes viral, and such an unprecedented fact involves new mimetic implications that should be carefully considered: Zombification becomes a type of affective contagion that spreads like a viral infection, affecting collective subjectivation, mass emotional psychology, general conduct, and will.¹⁵ As it happens, the objective of viral zombies is no

10 According to Nidesh Lawtoo, “It becomes quickly apparent that mimesis shares some important characteristics with viruses: it is linked to reproduction; it transgresses the logic of representation to affect and infect human bodies in imperceptible ways; it renders humans vulnerable to a type of contagion that is amplified by proximity with others; it challenges the binary dividing human and nonhuman agents; and last but not least, it generates effects that go beyond clear-cut categories of good and evil and cannot be contained within unilateral diagnostic.” Nidesh Lawtoo, “Viral Mimesis: The Patho(-)logies of the Coronavirus,” *Paragrana* 30, no. 2 (2021): 155–68, 156.

11 Here it would be relevant to take into account parallel reflections on crowd behavior and public opinions within the psychological structure of Fascism and Bataillean concept of “sovereign communication.” See Lawtoo, *Phantom*, 249.

12 Lawtoo, *Phantom*, 2.

13 See Lawtoo, “Viral Mimesis,” 155–68.

14 Lawtoo, “Viral Mimesis,” 163–64.

15 “There are, thus, largely unnoticed similarities between mimetic theory and crowd psychology that deserve to be revisited in an age haunted by the double specter of affective and viral contagion. Like Girard after them, both Tarde and Le Bon use the term “contagion” metaphorically to indicate an invisible transmission of emotions that spreads from self to others as a contagious sickness like the plague or the cholera would do; and yet, they do so on theoretical foundations that have hypnotic suggestion as a *via regia* to crowd behavior and pave the way for alternative theories of mimetic contagion that take seriously the literal danger of epidemic contamination.” Lawtoo, “Viral Mimesis,” 162–63.

more to feed themselves but to kill everyone who is not like them. Now the fear that humans have is not of being devoured by the zombies, but of being infected and transformed into one of them. Shaviro explains that “The dread that the zombies occasion is based more on a fear of infection than on one of annihilation. The living characters are concerned less about the prospect of being killed than they are about being swept away by mimesis.”¹⁶

In these circumstances, the latent risk is not merely to be afraid of the Other, that is, an external dangerous threat materialized in a multitude of famished living dead creatures that we have to escape from, but it is actually the terror unveiled by homogeneity. At this point, mimesis has been transformed into the main threat of zombification, the true risk at the core of contagion. Human beings have finally realized that the real enemy is none other than the virus of impersonal enactment that addresses problems of identification and phantasmatic-mimetic ego. As Fernández Gonzalo points out: “It is not the fear of otherness ... it is fear of sameness, of being everyone infected, bitten, by that equalizing sieve which levels all of us.”¹⁷ According to this idea, mimesis has become a major danger, but could it also be a path of liberation? As Lawtoo states, “if we want to understand how humans come into being, much more theoretical attention needs to be given to the formative function of these inter-subjective, unconscious, responses that give birth to the ego—out the *pathos* of the other.”¹⁸ Reflection on mimetic zombies can help us take this stance, which becomes imperative nowadays.

2 Parasites' Politics

Copying the relation of man to man brings us back to parasitism.

MICHEL SERRES, *The Parasite*

In order to analyze the changes undergone by zombification and its final transformation into viral infection, it will be useful to turn to Michel Serres's concept of *parasite*, because zombies have finally become a sort of parasitic force. The French philosopher took rats from the fable of *The Town Rat and the Country Rat* by La Fontaine as an illustrative example to explain his main thesis: To parasite means *to eat next to*, or in other words, to eat at the expense

16 Shaviro, *Cinematic Body*, 97.

17 Jorge Fernández Gonzalo, *Filosofía zombi* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2011), 28–29 (my translation).

18 Lawtoo, *Phantom*, 18.

of someone; this is the host that generously—although not selflessly— gives itself to be eaten.¹⁹ As Serres writes:

The host is not a prey, for he offers and continues to give. Not a prey, but the host. The other one is not a predator but a parasite. Would you say the mother's breast is the child's prey? It is more or less the child's home.²⁰

Then, what the parasite actually eats is the host. We may also see the parasite is a guest who is maternally nurtured by the host. Indeed, according to Serres's metaphor, when the country rat is invited to dinner by the town rat, it realizes that the city happily feeds the rats that live within it. Ironically, every system needs its parasites. As Serres says, there is no system without parasites.²¹

The host welcomes its guests with pleasant hospitality. However, this is precisely the strategy used by the host to control the guests, which means to cancel the threatening danger of a *plague* of rats that could potentially infect it. This is because, by eating next to, the rats become neutralized, homogenized, *immunized*. As a result, the parasite imitates the host and proceeds like a reinforcing element that imitates the host's inner dynamics. Thus understood, the parasites replicate the system that feeds them. Therefore, far from being a disruptive force within the organism that welcomes them, the parasites become assimilated. The parasites are parasitized. In sum, the host's hospitality is a

19 "Para' as a prefix in English (sometimes 'par') indicates alongside, near or beside, beyond, incorrectly, resembling or similar to, subsidiary to, isomeric or polymeric to. In borrowed Greek compounds 'para' indicates beside, to the side of, alongside, beyond, wrongfully, harmfully, unfavorably, and among. ... 'Parasite' comes from the Greek, *parasitos*, etymologically: 'beside the grain,' *para*, beside (in this case) plus *sitos*, grain, food. 'Sitology' is the science of foods, nutrition, and diet. 'Parasite' was originally something positive, a fellow guest, someone sharing the food with you, there with you beside the grain. Later on, 'parasite' came to mean a professional dinner guest, someone expert at cadging invitations without ever giving dinners in return. From this developed the two main modern meanings in English, the biological and the social. A parasite is (1) 'Any organism that grows, feeds, and is sheltered on or in a different organism while contributing nothing to the survival of its host'; (2) 'A person who habitually takes advantage of the generosity of others with-out making any useful return.'" J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (1977): 439–47, 441–42.

20 Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 7.

21 J. Hillis Miller develops a similar theory: "A curious system of thought, or of language, or of social organization (in fact all three at once) is implicit in the word parasite. There is no parasite without a host. The host and the somewhat sinister or subversive parasite are fellow guests beside the food, sharing it. On the other hand, the host is himself the food, his substance consumed without recompense, as when one says, 'He is eating me out of house and home.'" Miller, "Critic," 442.

trick, a perverse paradox, because it is actually a way of exercising hostility. In Serres's words: "Parasitology, as we shall soon realize, uses the vocabulary of the host: hostility or hospitality."²² A clear notion of repetitive mimicry can be inferred from this: The parasite identifies with and behaves like the host. In effect, as part of society each individual parasites others for their own benefit, to the extent that relationships and subjective dispossession are marked by this sort of consumerist hunting seen in Romero's zombies. In this scenario, Serres accurately describes contemporary society as an animal, an evil beast called Leviathan, that human beings parasite.

However, Serres also says that the parasite does not simply hunt. It is a guest. It is my intention to elucidate whether the parasite could be an annoying guest that subverts the host's mimetic politics from within.

We parasite each other and live amidst parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment. We live in that black box called the collective; we live by it, on it, and in it. It so happens that this collective was given the form of an animal: Leviathan. We are certainly within something bestial; we are speaking of an organic model for the members of a society. Our host? I don't know. But I do know that we are within. And that it is dark in there.²³

Trying to dissipate such darkness, the parasites—let us say, the *viral zombies*—entail a disruptive potential against the host, in the conviction that parasitism—or rather, *zombification*—should be articulated according to a different mimetic procedure. That said, the relation between the guest and the host might be reconsidered, specially bearing in mind that, as Serres remarks, "the parasitic relation is intersubjective. It is the atomic form of our relations."²⁴ Then, the question would be whether the alienating mimesis spread by the host can be destroyed. In this regard, Serres provides a promising alternative. In his view, the key is to abandon the conventional mimesis based on meaning and representation so as to unleash a system made up of connections and ruptures. Hence, the relation between the guest and the host would adopt the form of a short-circuited mimetic sequence that dismantles imitation. "Quite simply, what is essential is neither the image nor the deep meaning, neither the representation nor its hall of mirrored reflections, but

22 Serres, *Parasite*, 193.

23 Serres, *Parasite*, 10.

24 Serres, *Parasite*, 8.

the system of relations. The relation is that of guest to host (*hôte à hôte*).²⁵ Note here that “*hôte*” means both “guest” and “host” in French, so conceptually speaking, the relationship between them becomes convoluted and constitutes an explicitly mimetic, mirroring relation. In this situation, it is imperative to rethink the power of parasitism.

One way to accomplish this task is to *make noise*, while taking the precaution of avoiding the noise made by the host, which is already familiar to the parasites. In fact, the host actually controls its guests, not by taking away the food from them but by making noise. As Serres explains: “The city rat gets used to it, is vaccinated, becomes immune.”²⁶ This is the procedure through which the parasites are parasitized—by means of repetition. The host plays the same tune over and over again, as if it were an unconscious power of habituation which functions via hypnotic repetition, and thus the parasites embody a specific mimetic pattern inoculated by the host. In view of this, it is due to mimetic repetition that the parasites become part of the host. However, Serres points out that such domination is canceled in the very moment in which the parasitized population makes noise in feedback.²⁷ “Noise nourishes a new order.”²⁸ Specifically, in order to be free, the parasites must make “white noise,” an expression that Serres coined to refer a sort of background noise. Put simply, the white noise is a space between the guest and the host where the parasite interferes, that is, the realm where new relations can be forged through connections and disconnections *hôte à hôte*.

Consequently, by making white noise, the guests break the previous relationship of mimetic dependence with the host. They are tired of listening to the same tune all the time and do not want to hear the invitation of the town rat anymore. Inversely, “the rats invite themselves to dinner, and that makes noise.”²⁹ Thus, the parasites make their own noise to interrupt the continuity of the host’s mimetic model. “The country rat becomes the interrupter, like the noise. The broken relation is that of the city rat and the guest, that of the city rat and the noise.”³⁰ This being the case, it can be concluded that the noise developed by the country rats constitutes a new kind of mimesis. Do not forget that these rats are the parasites, or virulent zombies, that have freed themselves from being parasitized by the system. Here there seems to be the possibility of setting up a distance, via noise, from the hypnotic power

25 Serres, *Parasite*, 8.

26 Serres, *Parasite*, 14.

27 Serres, *Parasite*, 52.

28 Serres, *Parasite*, 127.

29 Serres, *Parasite*, 192.

30 Serres, *Parasite*, 53.

of *mimetic pathos*, thus developing the potentialities of the *pathos of distance* outlined above. This oscillation between the hypnotic power of pathos and the emergence of a critical distance is at the center of the theory of posthuman mimesis. So, this mimicry is not simply the homogenizing pattern spread by the host—which recalls the hypnosis of the first stage of zombification as well as the bite of the second stage—which perversely induces the guests to eat next to. On the contrary, mimicry now becomes viral inasmuch as the parasites infect the host in a way that subverts its influence. Serres states that the parasites incline the system and make it fluctuate: The parasite does not even have to speak; it resonates. It makes noise, like the gnawing rats. It produces toxins, inflammations, fever. In short, it excites the milieu. It excites it thermically, making noise and producing a fever. It intervenes in the networks, interrupting messages and parasiting the transmissions.³¹

It is of utmost importance to understand the action of the parasites as an infectious disease that attacks the host and disturbs its normal functioning by disrupting mimetic hospitality. Not casually, Serres claims that sickness is parasitic. In his own words: “Sickness is a parasitic noise that intercepts a function; it is a noise that mixes up messages in the circuits of the organism, parasiting their ordinary circulation.”³² At this point, Serres makes a revealing statement: Parasitism is not only to eat *next to* the host, but to eat *inside* the host. We now have a complete picture of parasites’ double nature, which suffers the host’s perverse logic but at the same time develops a new mimetic politics intended to subvert the host from within. In these circumstances, the parasites are able to disorganize Leviathan by dismantling its imitative tendency.

3 How Do You Make Yourself a “BwO”?

A BwO is made in such a way that it can be occupied,
populated only by intensities.

GILLES DELEUZE AND FELIX GUATTARI, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Serres describes the host as a maternal womb that nurtures the guests (“Would you say that the mother’s breast is the child’s prey? It is the child’s home”),³³ ultimately transforming them into parasitized individuals, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari seem to share a similar approach. In particular, they use the

31 Serres, *Parasite*, 144.

32 Serres, *Parasite*, 197.

33 Serres, *Parasite*, 7.

example of the mother's breast. Interestingly, far from being a hostile device set up by the host, they claim that the mother's breast constitutes a "partial object" that connects and disconnects affective flows between "desiring-machines" (mother's breast, milk, baby's mouth). Deleuze and Guattari therefore provide an innovative approach to rethink subversive investments in line with the feeding allegory, and raise the need to become a handyman, that is to say, a set of desiring-machines permanently connected and disconnected. In their words: "A machine may be defined as a system of interruptions or breaks (*coupures*)."³⁴ As a result of such discontinuous dynamics, which brings to mind country rats' parasitic mimesis, Deleuze and Guattari note that the desiring-machines make background noise, as was the case with rats. This noise is produced by the permanent short-circuited mechanism of these machines: "Desiring-machines work only when they break down, and by continually breaking down."³⁵ A parallel can thus be drawn between viral zombies, parasites, and, finally, desiring-machines.

The reason for the noise must be found in the interstice between the desiring-machines, where Deleuze and Guattari located three syntheses: "connective synthesis," "disjunctive synthesis," and "conjunctive synthesis." The first synthesis produces the attraction and repulsion between partial objects and desiring-machines. The second reintroduces the flows into a connective chain (and ... and ... and) and vehiculates them toward new ruptures (or ... or ... or). Finally, the third synthesis embraces the outcome of the process, which is a residuum, a waste product of the consumption of the machines' activity. The result is a larval subject that is born from this new concept of consumerism understood as energetic eating:

It is a strange subject, however, with no fixed identity, wandering about over the body without organs, but always remaining peripheral to the desiring-machines, being defined by the share of the product it takes for itself, garnering here, there, and everywhere a reward in the form of a becoming or an avatar, being born of the states that it consumes and being reborn with each new state. "It's me, and so it's mine."³⁶

Such a fleeting idea of subjectivity addresses a weak and dispersed ontological detritus that is notoriously diverse, fragmented, and recycled. If we take into

34 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 38.

35 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 16.

36 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 16.

account that Deleuze and Guattari insist on the catatonic state of zero degree which is proper to this subject, then it is easy to bring zombies up again. Like George Romero's zombies, the subject that appears in the last synthesis constitutes a powerful alternative against massive consumerism, which is the metaphor for the host's parasitism (*to eat next to*).

However, the larval subject is more closely related to the viral zombies of the third stage of zombification. Indeed, considering that the detritus of the desiring-machines works by connecting and disconnecting, its nature is that of viral transmission, which entails a renewed idea of parasitic consumerism (*to eat inside*) that can be traced in the third synthesis:

The contents of such moments of "consummation," moreover, are derived from the connections and disjunctions generated by the previous syntheses. ... a subject emerges alongside the desiring-machines to "consume," to enjoy or suffer, part of what has been produced. ... Here the subject in fact only arises in the consuming appropriation and consummating recognition of the results of desiring-production, yet it tends to construe itself as an autonomous entity capable of taking possession of products of the processes that in fact constitute it.³⁷

This phenomenon could be analyzed from the point of view of the country rats that invited themselves to dinner because they preferred to make their own noise, thus parasiting the host's parasitism. Such is indeed the main consequence of eating inside the host: The parasitism developed by the rats turns against the host's parasitic method. It is thus no coincidence that Michel Serres took rats to conceptualize his theory about parasites, inasmuch as rats have been traditionally related with infestations and plagues. Rats are parasitic by nature. Such small animals are the waste product of a bigger one, but they embody the potential destruction of the beast that feeds them. Leviathan has created its nemesis. That is why it tries to eliminate the risk by giving itself to be eaten, by letting the rats eat next to. Like zombies, rats are first of all the result of the mimetic consumption spread by the host, however they show resistance against its cannibalistic procedure. Only when rats make noise and zombies become viral, that is, *parasitic*, is the host dismantled.

It is in this context that the viral zombies become the larval subjects of the last synthesis, a catatonic force that interrupts the chain of consumption of

37 Eugene W. Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 34.

energetic drives and introduces a new form of mimesis that breaks meaning and representation:

Syntheses produce divisions. Let us consider, for example, the milk the baby throws up when it burps; it is at one and the same time the restitution of something that has been levied from the associative flux (*restitution de prelevement sur le flux associatif*); the reproduction of the process of detachment from the signifying chain (*reproduction de detachement sur la chaine signifiante*); and a residuum (*residu*) that constitutes the subject's share of the whole.³⁸

In relation to the organic disruption suffered by the socius that we have referred to as Leviathan, it is relevant to highlight that Deleuze and Guattari coined the term "Body without Organs" (BwO) to explain the general disarticulation that the larval subject spreads within any significant structure, because, as they say: "The full body [without organs] does not represent anything at all."³⁹ In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), the second volume of *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Deleuze and Guattari wrote a chapter titled "How do you make yourself a BwO?," in which they gave the main guidelines for the destruction of the organism.

This is relevant inasmuch as the desiring-machines and partial objects deal with the BwO throughout the three syntheses. In the process, the BwO serves as an element of anti-production that breaks the sequence of consumption, so it ultimately manages to avoid the constitution of a homogeneous system, that is, an *organism*:

The body without organs, the unproductive, the unconsumable, serves as a surface for the recording of the entire process of production of desire, so that desiring-machines seem to emanate from it in the apparent objective movement that establishes a relationship between the machines and the body without organs.⁴⁰

Deleuze and Guattari's invitation to become a BwO took inspiration from the Surrealist artist Antonin Artaud, who really invented the concept. In particular, Artaud is well known for his incursion into avant-garde cinema as the scriptwriter of Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928). But he was also an actor himself and played parts in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* by

38 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 41.

39 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 85.

40 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 11.

C. T. Dreyer (1928) and Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927). Above all, he has become famous for being the creator of the Theater of Cruelty, a radical movement of avant-garde theater that promoted the elimination of conventional representation techniques. Thus, plays Artaud wrote, such as the irreverent *The Cenci* (1935), are full of disturbing and shocking scenes that pretend to break the continuity of sense and provoke a reaction in the audience. Equally disconcerting is the influence of Balinese theater's eccentric mimicry, which Artaud was especially interested in, as well as the unnerving gesticulations of schizophrenia that he himself suffered and used in his theater. Artaud shows in many drawings and harsh poems the idea of dysfunctional organism whose mimetic consumption is meaningless, disorganized, and almost *cruel* with the host. See, for instance, Artaud's famous poem quoted by Deleuze and Guattari: "No mouth. No tongue. No teeth. No larynx. No esophagus. No belly. No anus."⁴¹ The organism has been dismembered. The host has finally been destroyed. This is why Deleuze and Guattari found in Artaud the perfect residuum of the third synthesis.

Deleuze and Guattari claim that the enemy of the BwO is none other than the organism, because it is constantly trying to control the body that suffers from being organized, this is to say, transformed into an organism. Deleuze and Guattari insist that the body is disorganized by definition. However, the organism wants every single organ of the body under control, every partial object subjugated so as to run smoothly and make the system work. That said, the BwO attempts by all means to disorganize the organism. "The BwO howls: "They've made me an organism! They've wrongfully folded me! They've stolen my body!""⁴² This could be the shout of the country rats after realizing that the host attempted to parasite them, to make them eat next to it. This would be a cry of protest in the form of white noise, given that, as parasites, the rats made every effort to counteract the mimetic replication transmitted by the host. Therefore, the mimetic mechanism set up by the organism is doomed to fail because, as we know, the desiring-machines are continuously falling apart, connecting and disconnecting, a task that is performed by the parasites. So, the larval subject, as a residuum or viral zombie, ultimately becomes a parasitic BwO.

41 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 8.

42 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 158–59.

4 Coda: The Intruder inside Me

Thus, then, in all these accumulated and opposing ways,
my self becomes my intruder.

JEAN-LUC NANCY, *Corpus*

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the BwO could be described as a cancer that destroys the organism from within. In this sense, remember that Serres pictured sickness as parasitic. Another way of putting it is that the BwO proceeds like a plague of country rats, or a multitude of viral zombies, that eats the host and corrodes its organs. Taking mental illness as a metaphor, it might be seen as the experience of people suffering from Cotard's delusion, who think that they are dead and their internal organs are putrefying. Symptoms include hypochondriacal beliefs such as paralyzed organs, the smell of rotten flesh, or the sensation of having worms under the skin. That is why this disorder is known as "walking corpse syndrome." Be that as it may, becoming a BwO is then a question of becoming a living dead. In such a scenario, viral zombies appear to be the perfect agent of disorganization, because they disarticulate the immunization spread by the host. To a certain extent, the living dead seem to be infiltrators. A cinematographic example of this would be *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956). Yet, the virus of zombification is not exactly an infiltrator, for the simple reason that the infectious agent does not merely come from outside and infect the organism. Properly speaking, the contagious disease comes from outside, but the infection develops inside, provided that the malicious agent is the organism that receives the virus. That is to say, the virus of zombification grows inside precisely because it is at war against the infection spread by the host. In short, the enemy of the host is actually within the host itself.

Regarding this inside-outside dynamic, people tend to think that danger comes from abroad, a threat commonly visualized as a multitude of invaders who attack our frontiers as well as our social values, which represent civilization and freedom as opposed to foreign savagery. Such a model is, indeed, that of an external virus that threatens the healthy organism. This simplistic idea has fueled fear of the Other and has propagated distrust of people who come from abroad, be they terrorists, immigrants, or refugees. Hopefully, zombies can change this paradigm. George Romero showed that the menacing force of evil hordes was born inside civilized society as a result of its own values. Later, in the third stage of zombification, the fear of the Other became the fear of being the Other. In sum, the wolf does not attack the flock of sheep coming out of the depth of the forest; the wolf is already within the fold. Then, it is time to rethink the traditional idea forged in moralizing fairytales: The evil lives

outside. See, for instance, the comic series *The Girl from the Other Side: Siúil, a Rún* by Nagabe, that reframes the topic through the story of a little girl abandoned in the no-man's land of a world split between the Outside and the Inside because of a pandemic curse spread by touch. The Outside is the forest where the cursed live, transformed into horrible beasts, and the Inside, the walled city where humans live in safety. However, it is the people from the Inside who hunt other citizens if they are suspected of being infected.

It should therefore be borne in mind that the virus lives within us, so it does not make any sense to build a separation wall to protect the healthy people from the infected population. This model vanished along with one of its most famous examples, the Greek island of Spinalonga, which by the middle of last century stopped being the last open-air prison for leprosy patients in Europe, very similar to Poveglia, the Venetian island historically used to isolate people during plagues.

In this respect, it is known that Michel Foucault differentiated two main categories of Great Confinement: Lepers were expelled from the town, whereas plague patients were confined in specific sites within the city walls. Not casually, the parasite eats inside the host. Likewise, the BwO is considered carcinogenic. Thus, the virus comes from inside. Indeed, from the very moment that the country rats traveled to the city, the guests no longer come from outside. We are our own virus, destroying the normal functioning of the organism. Therefore, it is not properly an infiltrator but an *intruder*. This is, in particular, the intruder that Jean-Luc Nancy experienced when he was told that a transplant was needed: "My heart became my stranger: strange precisely because it was inside. The strangeness could only come from outside because it surged up first on the inside."⁴³ As J. Hillis Miller puts it: "My argument is that the parasite is always already present within the host, the enemy always already within the house, the ring always an open chain."⁴⁴ So Nancy's body reacted against the organism, his organs were on strike against the host, as it were.⁴⁵ In this sense, he realized that "the intruder is nothing but myself and man himself."⁴⁶ The virus of zombification inoculated Nancy with the fear of becoming the Other:

43 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 163.

44 Miller, "Critic," 446.

45 For more insights about plagues and the social body—pathological conceptions of organic community—in Nancy, see Jean-Luc Nancy and Nidesh Lawtoo, "The *CounterText* Interview: Jean-Luc Nancy. Mimesis: A Singular-Plural Concept," *CounterText* 8, no.1 (2022): 23–45.

46 Nancy, *Corpus*, 170.

An intruder is in me, and I am becoming a stranger to myself. If the rejection is very strong, I need treatments to help me resist human defenses. (This is done by means of an immunoglobulin drawn from a rabbit and then assigned, as its official description specifies, to this “antihuman” use, whose surprising effects—tremblings almost convulsive—I remember very well). ... There has never been just one intrusion: as soon as one is produced, it multiplies itself, is identified in its renewed internal differences.⁴⁷

The labor of the parasites is truly hard. On the one hand, they must destroy the host, but on the other hand, the host cannot live without parasites. Such a reciprocal exchange casts some doubt on the viability of the parasitic subversion.

Is the parasites’ struggle ultimately reinforcing the host? Georges Canguilhem, in *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966), argues that sickness is actually an expression of health so the pathological is far from being an abnormality, in fact it is foreseen by the organism itself. In Canguilhem’s own expression, illness constitutes an organic norm. That said, is viral infection contributing to the continuity of the organism? Remember that the host creates its parasites. In this situation, would it be possible to become a BwO? All is not lost yet. Parasites can make white noise, they can eat inside instead of next to, and consequently, sickness can interrupt the host’s mimetic pattern. “It is a characteristic of disease that it interrupts a course; in fact it is critical.”⁴⁸ There is still hope for the victory over Leviathan. “Health and Disease fought over man the way Good and Evil fought over the World.”⁴⁹ Not in vain, Serres says that *The Parasite* (1980) is a book about Evil. And speaking of Evil, Jean Baudrillard, in *The Transparency of Evil* (1990), explains “viral hospitality” as the coexistence between microbes and humans in a way that goes beyond the host’s hostility:

Between the race of microbes and the race of humans there exists a total symbiosis and a radical incompatibility. One cannot say that the microbe is other to man: the two are never opposed in their essential natures, and they do not confront one another in any real sense; they are linked together, however, and this interlinking is, as it were, predestined: no one (neither men nor bacilli) can imagine things being any other way. Nor is

47 Nancy, *Corpus*, 167.

48 Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 138.

49 Canguilhem, *Normal*, 103.

there any clear line of demarcation, because this link is reproduced over and over ad infinitum.⁵⁰

To conclude, it could be said that parasites have developed a new *pharmacology*. In this sense, zombies—in other words, mimetic parasites—might be understood as a therapeutic patho-*logy* that, in view of its internal duplicity as both pathological and as a diagnostic logos on *mimetic pathos*,⁵¹ could serve, thanks to the *pathos of distance*, as an antidote, or *pharmakon*, to the mimetic pathologies that plague contemporary subjects. This new pharmacology of life is then based on a malicious agent that is not such malevolent. As Baudrillard puts it: “So if the parasite is ‘evil,’ it is so initially in this latter sense as an irritant, a ‘bad thing,’ but not ‘evil’ in the fully moral sense.”⁵² Parasites are not evil but cruel, in the sense of Artaud. They can be extremely irritating to the host. In effect, since the virus is intended to disorganize the host’s replicating procedure, the parasites become really annoying guests. The role played by the parasites is then similar to that of viral zombies, which is not to eat humans but to challenge the status quo. The objective is to break the chain of significant codes and disconnect holistic meaning. The parasite has two options at hand: to eat next to the host, or to eat inside the host. The first option transforms the guests into mimetic agents, however the mimicry of the second is real parasitism. As such, it might *incline* the host. “Often this inclination has no effect. But it can produce gigantic ones by chain reactions or reproduction. Immunity of epidemic crisis.”⁵³ Finally, it can be stated that viral parasitism in posthuman mimesis is crucial. It is a matter of mimetic practice, a very special *teckné*, almost a technology of life, as Michel Foucault would say: mimicry as ethico-aesthetic paradigm. The question then is of how to produce a BwO, how to repeat the Different. Thus, we are ultimately talking about *biopolitical mimesis*, with the focus on the need of rethinking parasitism as a subversive attitude, because we cannot forget, as Isabella Winkler states, that “the parasite is an

50 Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London, New York: Verso, 1993), 162.

51 “Mimesis is thus always Janus-faced, operating simultaneously on both the side of reason and unreason, *logos* and *pathos*, pathologies and patho-*logies*—that is, critical discourses on mimetic pathos.” Lawtoo, “Posthuman Mimesis,” 110. For more information about this duplicity and the influence of Nietzschean logos, see Lawtoo, *Phantom*, 6–8.

52 Steven D. Brown, “Michel Serres: Science, Translation and the Logic of the Parasite,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 19, no. 3 (2002): 1–27, 24.

53 Serres, *Parasite*, 191.

excellent mimic.”⁵⁴ This is, in sum, what viral zombies, that is to say, mimetic posthumans, mean.

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54 Isabella Winkler, “Love, Death, and Parasites,” in *Mapping Michel Serres*, ed. Nirán Abbas (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 226–42, 227.