

New Economies of Exchange and the Zombies of Industry

Brent Bellamy

In so far as the process of exchange transfers commodities from hands in which they are non-use-values to hands in which they are use-values, it is a process of social metabolism. The product of one kind of useful labour replaces that of another. Once a commodity has arrived at a situation in which it can serve as a use-value, it falls out of the sphere of exchange into that of consumption.” — Karl Marx

Karl Marx’s turn of phrase ‘new economies of exchange’ signals a moment early on in his description of the unfolding logic of capital when the circulation of commodities is shown to produce no value on its own. As Joshua Clover reminds us, the sphere of circulation cannot operate without the sphere of production,² and thus, mapping the movement of commodities and the origins of their value remains an important sticking point when considering the work of culture today, especially in transitioning and postindustrial cities such as Liverpool in the UK and Banff in Canada. It comes as no surprise, then, to find a recent zombie sci-fi novel – a hybrid genre that historically imagines the revenant and violent return, allegorical or not, of colonised and racialised bodies – thinking through the complicated flows of culture, labour and goods today.³

In *World War Z* (2006), Max Brooks represents the global circulation of commodities through the figure of the zombie – the return to life of pre-apocalyptic bodies – and the standard zombie narrative – which replaces an old, industrial form of the social with a new one. Probing the limits of how we depict the changing face of labour and value, Brooks emphasises the fact that the dominant forms of labour today imbricate bodies and services through bioengineering, pharmaceuticals and financial speculation on demographic statistics, highlighting the point that postindustrial doesn’t mean post-value or post-production.

World War Z begins at the end as Max Brooks, the name of the author and his fictive reporter, conducts a series of interviews in the wake of ‘The Zombie War’. These interviews are leftover artefacts from a document also written by Brooks (the character): the United Nation’s Postwar Commission Report. In antagonism to the factual report, the interview style of the novel attempts to sketch the totality through the sheer accumulation of points of view, patching together a global perspective of the War over the course of ten years. These perspectives effectively provide a mapping of the appearance and the movement of the infected. The accounts that make up the bulk of the text are unified by the interviewer, who, as we learn in the introduction, has already compiled a study based on facts and figures of the zombie outbreak. The disease that causes it is given a number of different names throughout the novel, but the most prominent one at this point in the narrative is ‘African Rabies’. The collected interviews frame temporal categories: discovery, reaction, survival, migration, retaliation and, finally, all-out war. Instead of forming a unified whole, these snippets of narrative trace out the fractures and fragments of the global economy: they represent, for example, the illegal movement of bodies in South-East Asia, black-market medical operations and the lightening-quick marketing of ‘Phalanx’ a false-vaccine, placebo-medication.

The interviews early in the book render the geographic spaces where zombies first emerge as heavily populated zones, often with a thriving black market for smuggled bodies or body parts. Tracing the movement of infection begins to make visible those ports connected by invisible lines of circulation, what Allan Sekula and Noel Burch call ‘the forgotten space’.⁴ These interviews lay bare modes of capitalist circulation in which infected but not yet zombified individuals pay to be smuggled out of the Asian subcontinent to countries in the West. As smuggler Nurvy Televaldi says, ‘I was an importer: raw opium, uncut diamonds, girls, boys whatever was valuable from those primitive excuses for countries. The outbreak changed all that. Suddenly we were besieged with offers, and not just from the *liudong renkou* [China’s ‘floating population’ of homeless labour].’⁵ Here, the novel figures the logic of circulation as nearly identical to our own.

The flood of valuable commodities (i.e. organs from the recently dead) manifests the ruin of the value form in the shape of a crisis. Fernando Oliveira, an MD who specialises in importing organs, explains the shift from surplus to crash:

You remove the heart not long after the victim's died ... maybe even while he's still alive ... they used to do that, you know, remove living organs to ensure their freshness ... pack it on ice, put it on a plane for the Rio ... China used to be the largest exporter of human organs on the world market. Who knows how many infected corneas, infected pituitary glands ... Mother of God, who knows how many infected kidneys they pumped into the global market. And that's just the organs.⁶

These organs chart the infectious breakdown of the fantasy generated by the surplus of organs found in bodies that are soon to be zombies: once these organs are transplanted, their peculiar use-value becomes something that the receiving patient did not anticipate. In the words of Marx, 'Once a commodity has arrived at a situation in which it can serve as a use-value, it falls out of the sphere of exchange into that of consumption', which is both completely expected (i.e. the organs will do their work in pumping, filtering and revitalising blood) and a terrible, zombifying surprise. Further, this collapse plays out on a global register: as a pandemic narrative, *World War Z* represents the contact points where one infected body, or body part, encounters another. (The opening sequence of Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* of 2011 is a cinematic version of this.)⁷ The novel itself attempts to represent the social totality in the form of circulation not in the global market, but in the shadow economy currently employing, according to a recent *Forbes* article, over 1.8 billion pre-apocalyptic labourers.⁸

Having tracked the spread of disease, the novel turns to contemplating what Naomi Klein calls 'disaster capitalism'.⁹ One interviewee, Breckinridge 'Breck' Scott, decides as soon as the panic starts in the US to put a vaccine on the market. He markets a rabies vaccine as a zombie vaccine, calling it 'Phalanx', which people start buying *en masse*. Scott accounts for the quick success in terms of risk management, explaining that a cure would be far less successful, because you would have to be sick in order to require it, but a vaccine is preventative. 'It wasn't even the idea of safety anymore, but the idea of the idea of safety!', he exclaims, continuing:

It protected them from their fears. That's all I was selling. Hell, because of Phalanx the biomed sector started to recover, which in turn, jump-started the stock market, which then gave the impression of a recovery, which then restored consumer confidence to stimulate actual recovery! Phalanx hands down ended the recession! I ... /ended the recession!¹⁰

Scott's awareness, and insistence, on capitalism as a deeply cultural phenomenon situates his account within the motif of miraculous returns; his marketing and the regaining of market confidence stand out more prominently than the millions of resurrecting bodies that form the basis for his capitalisation.

From the shipyards in India, where ships were once broken down for parts and now are flocked to by refugees in order to take to sea, to the island of Cuba, which emerges as the dominant world power in the wake of the war, to the communities architecturally designed to be zombie proof – buildings on stilts, retractable ladders, walls and watchtowers – *World War Z* struggles to rebuild new modes of social organisation in the face of a social totality understood not through the mode of production but through circulation and exchange figured as contagion. Indeed, what is produced and reproduced in the novel is not capital but zombies, each one a spitting image of a former labourer in pre-apocalyptic times. Perhaps we could read the intersection and relation of the disparate interviews as a form of fragmentation itching to be brought back together to form a larger view of the social totality. But what is so compelling about the novel is that it effectively challenges the representability and manageability of the world *as globe*. The question is not about the origin of the zombies, but about the real remainder of *World War Z*, the real contradiction between capitalist circulation and production. The novel leaves us with a chilling lesson about the post-industrial: new economies of exchange cannot emerge without raising their own zombies of industry.

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2 'The inability to think value in terms adequate to the critique of political economy – to grasp the moving contradiction of the value form, of use and exchange, production and circulation – proved a near-absolute limit to understanding the historical situation.' Joshua Clover, 'Value|Theory|Crisis', *PMLA*, 127.1, 2012, p.113.

3 See Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, Zero Books, Ropley, Hants, 2011, and my review, Brent Bellamy, '*We Are Apocalyptic*', *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, Sept, 2011, p.13–16.

4 *The Forgotten Space*, dir. Noel Burch and Allan Sekula, Wildart Film, 2010.

5 Max Brooks, *World War Z*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2006, p.12.

6 Ibid., p.27.

7 I have written elsewhere about *Contagion*'s attempt to grasp the social totality through a spatial dialectic similar to *World War Z*. Brent Bellamy, 'Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion*', *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Issue 6.1, Spring, 2013, p.119–223.

8 Marco Rabinowitz, 'The Rise of the Shadow Economy: Second Largest Economy in the World', *Forbes*, 7 November 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/benzingainsights/2011/11/07/rise-of-the-shadow-economy-second-largest-economy-in-the-world/>, accessed 4 June 2013.

9 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Picador, New York, 2008.

10 Brooks, op. cit., p.58.

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