

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO SURVIVING THE **ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE**

<http://ojs.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/iasza>

Interdisciplinary approaches to surviving the Zombie Apocalypse Conference

October 28-29, 2016, University of Windsor

ZOMBIES THEY WALK AMONG US! RETHINKING CONSUMER CAPITALISM

PAGES 88-97

Jim Murphy & Josie E. Richards

*M.A. Phil., M.A. Comm. & So. Just., B.A. Comm., Media &
Film. Murph1r@uwindsor.ca*

*M.A. Phil., B.A. [H] Psych. University of Windsor, Canada
Richar11@uwindsor.ca*

ZOMBIES THEY WALK AMONG US! RETHINKING CONSUMER CAPITALISM

Jim Murphy & Josie E. Richards

*M.A. Phil., M.A. Comm. & So. Just, B.A. Comm., Media & Film.
M.A. Phil., B.A. [H] Psych. University of Windsor, Canada
Murph1r@uwindsor.ca
Richar11@uwindsor.ca*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper will be to describe how one would survive the zombie apocalypse from a philosophical perspective. This paper will draw on first generation critical theorist, Theodore Adorno to explicate the position. According to critical theory, the zombie apocalypse is already upon us. For Adorno, contemporary individuals in Western society live under the conditions of consumer capitalism. These individuals are manipulated by advertisements and the mass media into believing that the ideal way to relieve their inner frustrations is to mindlessly purchase goods and services that reflect their inner longings. Due to this constant manipulation, young people are ill-equipped with the tools required to think critically and evaluate both their own behaviours and the messages generated by advertisements. These individuals retain their human forms, but do not employ their mental faculties to engage in what truly makes them human (i.e. free, critical thought). Therefore, they are zombies in a figurative sense. This paper will propose that the only way to survive a zombie apocalypse of this sort would be for individuals to wake up and think critically for themselves about the socio-economic forces that manipulate the world in which they live. By becoming a free thinking, critical individual, a zombified person will awake human once again.

Keywords: *Capitalism, Commodity Fetishism, Conformity, Critical Theory, Critical Thought, Education, Narcissism, Philosophy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In George A. Romero's 1978 classic zombie film "Dawn of the Living Dead," zombies are satirically portrayed wandering mindlessly around the mall. For this paper, we try to take this satire a bit more seriously by putting some theoretical weight behind it. We argue that many of us living under the conditions of late capitalism are zombies. Drawing on both Haitian Vodou religious/mythological concepts, as well as Western philosophical ones, this paper will show that consumers are zombies to the extent that they shop, not because they actually need things, but as a result of

manipulation by advertising. In order to avoid this condition and survive the apocalypse of zombie consumers, we need to be educated to think critically about our attraction to consumer culture and the social forces behind this attraction, which subject us to constant manipulation.

The zombie myth comes to us from the culture of Haitian Vodou. The common understanding of Voodoo comes to us from the Haitian Vodou religion. As opposed to the more familiar ‘movie zombies,’ Haitian zombies are not necessarily dead. Haitian zombies are the focus of this paper because of the way in which Haitian Vodou ideas of the soul can be taken up in a philosophical discussion.

2. THE HAITIAN VODOU CONCEPT OF THE SOUL AND ITS RELATION TO ZOMBIES

Believers in Vodou understand the soul to be a duality. The first part is responsible for basic biological functions such as breathing, heartbeat, and other organic or metabolic life processes. This part of the soul is considered to be the large part of the soul and is known as the ‘gros bon ange,’ which translates literally to ‘big good angel.’ The second part of the soul, known as the ‘ti bon ange,’ or ‘little good angel,’ is responsible for personality, character, and willpower (Kette, 2010). Here, it will be referred to as the ‘small part of the soul.’ This distinction between the large part of the soul and the small part of the soul can be understood as the distinction between the mind and the body. The mind is the small part of the soul, and the body is the large part of the soul.

There is a legend that says if one dies of unnatural means, the soul of the deceased becomes vulnerable to necromantic manipulation by sorcerers who are known as ‘bokors.’ A bokor is not associated with the official religious ceremonies of Vodou; rather they are known to cast spells upon request (often for a fee). Using dark magic, the bokor can separate the large, biological part of the soul from the small, mental part of the soul, and then reactivate the biological part. This creates a living, mindless zombie, with no will, personality or character of their own despite the fact that they still have a heartbeat, can breathe and can perform all of the other metabolic processes of the body that keep them alive. Legends say that the bokor keeps the small part of the soul trapped in a ceremonial vessel, which grants him

power over the reanimated body. Often the zombie is forced to do manual labor, perform ceremonies, attack enemies, and so forth.

So how does one become a consumer zombie? Obviously, it is not by means of a bokor's magic. It is instead due to the capitalist mode of production, and its effects on the human psyche facilitated by advertising.

3. COMMODITY FETISHISM

For Karl Marx, the capitalist mode of production causes a distortion in social relations known as 'commodity fetishism.' Ideally, a community produces useful goods as a means of maintaining the life processes of the community (i.e. to satisfy the basic material needs of the community). Marx explains that man was not given by nature sharp claws or warm fur to ensure his survival. Instead, man was given reason to craft useful objects from nature (Marx & Engels, 2003). Without the food we grow, the clothing we make, and the shelters that we build, we would not be able to maintain ourselves physically. As well, the production of these goods constitutes meaningful social bonds and relations among the individuals in the community, which connect individuals to the community's life processes.

A commodity is a subset of useful objects, which are produced for the purpose of trade or exchange. Theoretically, once the supply of a useful object surpasses a community's demand for it, production of this object is oriented towards trade or exchange with other communities. In a nutshell, all of the extra items produced can be exported for trade, provided the benefits of export outweigh the cost. Commodities are therefore associated with calculations of profit, rather than the satisfaction of human needs (even though the satisfaction of human needs is always part of it).

The distinction between useful goods and trading goods is taken up by Marx in "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret" as 'use value' and 'exchange value' respectively. The use value of an object is the use that the object has in the quotidian lives of people. For example, the use value of an apple – what it is used for – is found in eating. The use value of the apple concerns the life processes of the community since apples help sustain individuals within the community physically

Exchange value, on the other hand, is the value that an object has in exchange. This is the value that a product has in relation to other commodities or exchangeable products. For example, under certain conditions, in which everyone in

our hypothetical community has enough apples to eat, three apples may be exchanged for one watermelon grown in the next town over (assuming that our community has a shortage of watermelons along with an abundance of apples). This three to one ratio is the exchange value of apples in relation to watermelons. (Marx, 2002).

Under the conditions of the capitalist mode of production, the life processes of the community no longer constitute the purpose of production. Instead, manufacturing is dominated by commodity production. As discussed, commodity production is directed not by the needs of the community, but by calculations of profit and cost. While commodity production has always existed, it has come to dominate the economy under the conditions of capitalism. This is true despite the fact that many people in capitalist societies do not have their basic needs met.

When the production of commodities supersedes the material needs of the community, we find the distortions in the social relations of the community known as ‘commodity fetishism.’ The term ‘fetish’ refers to ceremonial objects and statues that are thought to have supernatural powers. This distorts the true nature of the object as manmade, and makes it appear autonomous in relation to its human producers, and therefore outside of their control. For Marx, commodities are fetishized or distorted when exchange value imbues the product of an individual’s labour with an autonomous power outside of his control. Undistorted, the products of labour appear as useful goods for maintaining a community’s life process. However, distorted by commodity fetishism, an individual no longer sees a world of useful objects that they are in control of; instead, they see alien products imbued with what appears to be a life of their own.

This distortion can be demonstrated with an example using the large North American pharmaceutical corporations (better known as ‘big pharma’). These organizations do not produce products in order to care for sick people in society. While their products may or may not do this, it is nevertheless not the purpose of producing medication. Instead, these corporations do it for profit. If a medication is not profitable to produce, regardless of how many lives it will save, it will not reach the market unless it is subsidized by a government or insurance company. Otherwise, the medication will be available only to the rich, since making medication for the poor would impact their profit margin in a negative way. These companies

only care about the community to the extent that there is money to be extracted. While the drugs big pharma produce are legal, they seem to have the same relationship to the community as those organizations in the street that produce illegal drugs such as crack, crystal meth, and heroin. We can also see how it follows that big pharma in all likelihood has an interest in keeping people sick, or perhaps instead we can say that they have more interest in life-long expensive treatments rather than cures. Therefore, big pharma is an example of the distortions caused by the dominance of commodities over the life processes and material needs of the community.

In the next section, we show that commodity fetishism produces a zombified individual.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF COMMODITY FETISHISM

Due to the alienation of individuals from the world of manmade products and the community life processes that these products support, individuals experience a loss of control over their own lives and the world around them. Robert Witkin writes that “capitalism is portrayed by Marx as a system that progressively destroys the individual’s sense of himself as participating in ordering, shaping and making his world” (Witkin, 2003, p.4). Where man should feel most in control (considering these products are the ones that he makes himself) he feels weak and powerless.

These feelings of impotence are furthered by the mind-numbing unskilled labour individuals are forced into doing by bureaucratic corporations and large-scale factories that dominate the work-world in capitalist societies. And, because of the domination of capitalism in the markets of our society, individuals are dependent on this system of commodity production for their continued survival. We must all find a job and make money if we are to go on living. Therefore, individuals are dependent for their own survival on the system that distorts reality and exploits them.

For Theodor Adorno, these feelings are associated with what he characterizes as ‘ego-weakness.’ Ego here simply means ‘sense of self,’ and is analogous in many ways to the small part of the soul. As discussed above, the small part of the soul is responsible for personality, character, and willpower. Adorno claims that what is “often demanded today and which is – I admit – unavoidable, matches, in a most problematic way, if I’m not mistaken, the phenomena of ego-weakness” (Adorno &

Becker, 1983, p.29). Ego-weakness is a psychological consequence of commodity fetishism. Feelings of impotence and pressure to conform will inevitably have a weakening effect on one's sense of himself or his ego.

We argue here that this weakness has the effect of turning the individuals suffering from it into consumer zombies. While the small part of the soul here is not completely removed, this weakness of the mind makes individuals suffering from ego-weakness vulnerable to manipulation by external forces; this is similar enough to zombies vulnerable to manipulation by a bokor. However, this manipulation is not magic. We will show that it is the result of advertising tapping into the pent-up feelings of frustration and impotence that individuals under capitalism subconsciously deal with.

In "Theory of Pseudo-Culture," Adorno claims that capitalist societies have a problem with narcissism. When we scroll through our Facebook feeds, we find it difficult to disagree with him. Adorno argues that narcissism is how individuals "compensate for social powerlessness" (Adorno, 1993, p.32). This social powerlessness is characteristic of capitalist societies. Narcissism is generally understood as a pathological and somewhat obsessive overestimated sense of one's self. For Adorno, this produces an attitude of "being in charge, of having a say, of conducting oneself and considering oneself an expert" (Adorno, 1993, p.130) even and especially when reality would say otherwise. Indeed, the reason it is so widespread in capitalist societies is because people here have so little control over the political and economic conditions that determine their lives.

This narcissism is manipulated by advertisers when they tell consumers that they are important and that they matter. This manipulation serves the purposes of the capitalist mode of production. Advertisers imply to a frustrated individual that 'you can be important' and 'you can matter and have a say' if he or she buys certain products. These products make people feel as if they have status or importance, even when they do not. Brand name clothing features the brand name so prominently on articles of clothing so that whatever status this brand carries will be communicated to all who see one wear it. In so doing, the narcissism built up by the frustration and disappointment of capitalism can be satisfied by buying products at the mall.

Advertising manipulates the weakened psychological conditions created by capitalism. By doing this they can control the consumer behaviour of individuals,

thereby rendering them consumers zombies. In this way, advertising works like a bokor. “The system of production thus manipulates and controls the psyches of those who must make it work both as producers and as consumers” (Witkin, 2003, p.5). A zombie is a passive consumer, one who does not think about the reason for purchasing decisions; this person has been manipulated by advertising and the mass media to behave in a predictable way.

5. EDUCATION AS THE SOLUTION

So how do we fight back against our current predicament? If we take a philosophical standpoint when answering the question, a viable answer would be to fight back with education. The key to de-zombifying individuals living under consumer capitalism is to educate individuals in such a way that they learn how to identify manipulation tactics and instead think for themselves. The key is an education in critical thought. Here, we will discuss Adorno and Becker’s solution for restoring zombified individuals with autonomous minds. To begin, we will start with Kant, as Adorno and Becker’s solution build on his theory.

In a short essay titled *What is Enlightenment*, Kant discusses man’s current predicament. He sees individuals as being trapped in a state of immaturity, and he says that individuals ought to become enlightened. Enlightenment for Kant is “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage” (Kant, 1996, p. 11), with tutelage being defined as the inability to make use of one’s own reason without direction from another. Tutelage can be categorized as a by-product of laziness and cowardice, Kant writes, “if I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides on my diet” (Kant, 1996, p. 12) why would I ever need to think for myself, if everyone can do it all for me? Tutelage is something that has been created, almost like a social construct, and results in a scenario where the majority of individuals lead a lazy and scared existence. In this situation, individuals are unable to use their own reason because the small part of their souls, or the ‘*ti bon ange*’, has been weakened by the capitalist mode of production and is now controlled by the bokor of advertising. These individuals, rather than thinking for themselves or questioning the world around them, have the mass media think for them and prescribe to them actions to engage in, as well as trends and fads to partake in.

Kant, in his essay, does not explicitly make the connection between enlightenment and the institution of education, though it is not hard to imagine how it would all come together. Applying Kant's ideas about enlightenment to education is where Adorno and Becker take up their position.

In a radio discussion entitled *Education for Maturity and Responsibility*, Adorno and Becker discuss the failings of the current education system. They critique the adaptive goals that are advocated in education and offer a reformation based on students becoming enlightened, free thinking individuals. An education of this sort would have teachers teaching various subjects to their pupils while also understanding that the pupils will one day surpass them in terms of their acquired knowledge and understanding.

Adorno and Becker write that ideally an education that encourages both free and critical thought would require its "teachers [to understand] that their main task consists of making themselves superfluous" (1999, p. 27) to their students at just the right time. Adorno describes through Freud that when individuals are young, they identify with an external authority figure. This is a necessary part of the maturation process because at this point the individual does not have the capacity to lead an autonomous life. As a child, an individual internalizes the value system of their authority figure, make it their own, and then learn in a very painful process, that there are faults within that value system. Once this realization has occurred the individual, now grown, can detach their self and create their own value system within themselves, for themselves, rather than relying on an external authority figure. By doing so, individuals are able to become free thinking, mature, autonomous individuals.

On Adorno and Becker's account, the mature individual is realized when a person can reject an external authority figure in favor of their own internal one. It would follow that Adorno and Becker seem to suggest that it is in high school and/or and higher learning institutions that the capacity for autonomy appears within the individual, as the individual finally has the potential to ground their autonomy within themselves. It is important on their account to have an authority figure when the individual is in the process of maturation, i.e., primary school because rejecting authority before the capacity for maturity can be realized leads to what they term as 'pseudo- maturity.' The position that Adorno and Becker take suggests that all

that needs to be done on the part of education is to open people's minds to become aware of the ways in which society and other overarching figures work to manipulate them. In this, one can learn to be critical and think for oneself.

6. CONCLUSION

In relation to the zombie apocalypse, the only way to survive it is to reclaim one's humanity, meaning the small part of the soul. It is this portion of the soul that makes us human, so to reclaim our humanity it must be strengthened. The 'ti bon ange' can be strengthened by engaging in critical thought. Individuals need to learn about the world they inhabit and acquire their own set of values by which to judge that world which would then allow them to critically engage with that world instead of being alienated from it.

A critical education would allow individuals to reflect on what is being prescribed to them through advertisements and the mass media. Once the 'ti bon ange' has been strengthened, the advertisement industry, as a bokor, will no longer be able to take hold and control the minds of the individuals by sending them to the mall in order to mindlessly consume and alleviate their frustration towards the world from which they are alienated. For example, an individual engaging in critical thought would question the consumption practices advocated by consumer culture and capitalism. That individual would then be able to make rational and well thought out decisions about whether they ought to engage in bokor prescribed behaviors or instead to resist and engage in autonomous action. Hence, these once zombified consumers will be humans once more, because the small part of their souls, their ti bon ange will function as it should.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W. (1993). *Theory of Pseudo-Culture* (1959). *Telos*, 1993(95), 15-38.
- Kant, I. (1996). *Practical Philosophy* (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant).
Trans. MJ Gregor. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 11-22.
- Thomas, K. (2010). Haitian zombie, myth, and modern identity. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 12(2), 12.

- Marx, K. (2000). The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1, 163-77.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2003). Capitalism and the modern labor process. In R. C. Scharff & S.
- Val Dusek (Eds.), *Philosophy of technology: the technological condition: an anthology*, 2, 74-87.
- Witkin, R. W. (2003). *Adorno on popular culture*. Psychology Press.