
Don't Fear the Reaper? The Zombie University and Eating Braaaains

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Abstract: This article explores the role and function of neoliberalism in higher education, particularly in its manifestations after the Global Financial Crisis. Theories of managerialism are overlaid not only with questions about the purpose and role of higher education in the economy, but also the renegotiation of power and identity after 2008. Ulrich Beck's zombie concept is reactivated and applied to the university. The paper moves through a discussion of the zombie and Beck's zombie categories and concepts, and then concludes with a section applying these ideas to higher education.

Keywords: Higher education studies; zombie university; neoliberalism; zombie concept; zombie category; Ulrich Beck

But let us accept that the grand narratives are indeed gone ... The stakes are higher, the dangers are greater, duplicity more necessary than ever. An engaged critical and teaching practice must circumvent the deadening effect of contemporary institutions – market and bureaucratic – and the even more insidious forms that creep in on the back of these. Breaking the normative rules of the institution can never be a sufficient condition for creating value inside it, but in an ever-widening diversity of circumstances, it is often a necessary condition.

Jonathan Dollimore (2011, p. 199)

Dead ideas. Concepts long disproven. Theories critiqued by generations of scholars. Economic systems that never worked - and still do not – suck oxygen from scholarship and time from career clocks. These dead ideas walk into lecture theatres and along corridors. They perch in emails. They whine through performance management reviews. They sing in strategic plans

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and moan through risk registers.

Universities have been taken over by the walking dead. Not scholars. Not teachers. Not researchers. Not writers. ‘Managers’ run meetings, confirm minutes, asterisk items, organize catering for away days, impose Key Performance Indicators, facilitate retreats, write vision statements and configure milestones.

Welcome to the Zombie University. This article explores the role and function of neoliberalism in higher education, particularly in its manifestations after the Global Financial Crisis. Theories of managerialism are overlaid not only with questions about the purpose and role of higher education in the economy, but also the renegotiation of power and identity after 2008. Ulrich Beck’s zombie concept is reactivated and applied to the university. This is a theoretical paper and my overarching goal is expansive and ambitious. I diagnose the shambling sickness in our institutions to commence a reimagining. The resonance with Benedict Anderson’s most famous book title (1983) is intentional. As with Anderson, I place attention on language and institutions, with the goal of realizing a different trajectory. The paper moves through a discussion of the zombie and Beck’s zombie categories and concepts, and then concludes with a section applying these ideas to higher education.

Zombie Studies

It’s probably always been true that you have to find your way through or around formal education in the search for what really matters.

Jonathan Dollimore (2011, p. 190)

Before moving to the zombie concept, it is important to pass through the antechamber of Zombie Studies. Zombies are a recent entrée in popular culture. Derived from the lowest of low culture – horror films, gaming and comic books – they are part of a suite of claustropolitan popular culture (Redhead and Brabazon, 2014) that proclaims the end of the world. Zombies are to horror what *Bold and the Beautiful* is to romance: tacky and excessive. Best captured by Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and updated successfully in comedic forms like *Shaun of the Dead* and in brutalist high popular cultural form via *The Walking Dead*, the white walkers also make key appearances in *Game of Thrones* and even in *Breaking Bad*. Gus continued to walk after flesh exploded off his bones. Such examples occupy the post-apocalyptic future, with the past walking through – and decaying in – the present. It summons a world where the dead live amongst us, and want to kill us.

Beyond its Haitian history of slavery and rebellion (Lauro, 2015), and at the level of metaphor, a zombie is more than a corpse enlivened through witchcraft. It can refer to a lifeless person after a night out or a cocktail – composed of rum, liqueur and fruit juice – consumed to excess on that night out. It describes a computer under the control of a remote user, legislation that returns to the legislature with no chance of passing, a non-vegetarian and – perhaps unkindly – a woman lacking intelligence that is dating a clever man and sucking out his brains.

Popular cultural texts have extended this range, through *The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue* and *Zombies from Outer Space*. As Shawn McIntosh confirmed,

The unique balancing act that zombies represent between control and enslavement, strength and weakness, us and them, and group versus individual identify offers a window into better

understanding why we enjoy the horror genre in particular and how we perceive ourselves and certain aspects of popular culture in general (2008, p. 1).

The death of a zombie is brutal, killed through brain trauma. From this violent attack on the already dead, the intimacy of a bite creates another zombie. Death is enacted through violence. The contagion is spread through intimacy. This simplicity – death and sex – means that the zombie trope activates understandings of politics and consumerism in unusual ways. Simon Orpana noted that “the zombie reproduces through consumption, not procreation” (Orpana, 2011, p. 153). Through such a mode of reproduction, particular attributes have been lost: language, logic, reasoning and an integrated response to sensory experiences.

When Ulrich Beck mentioned the zombie concept in a 2000 interview (Rutherford, 2000), it was prescient if under-formed. Zombies were filmic. The camera was drawn to the flesh eaters. The authors were drawn to vampires, Frankenstein’s monster and mummies. *The Night of the Living Dead* is important in creating the narrative and iconography of zombies. Released in 1968, that year of incomplete revolutions, assassinations and the White Album, it was ambivalently anti-establishment. For Romero’s zombies, they carried the 1960s fears as they walked. But the zombies continued to travel beyond this decade through low pop via music videos like Michael Jackson’s “Thriller,” zombie porn (Jones, 2011) and video games. The zombie walk, which began in Toronto and has spread to other cities, involves a large group of people splattering blood on their bodies, ripping frocks and trousers and shuffling along urban streets. The only literary sojourn was the oddly unsuccessful mashup, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which – when returning to film rather than literature – increased its profile and success (Grahame-Smith, 2009). Popular culture, at its best, is andragogical and can lead the theory (Brabazon, 2013). Often it is high popular culture – *Breaking Bad*, *Twin Peaks* and *True Detective* – that triggers academic writing. Occasionally, a philosopher like Žižek writes about low pop, including *Kung Fu Panda* (2013). In my article, zombies are not a trendy or quirky example. The zombie forms, embodies and concretizes the theory.

Zombie narratives have two endings: all zombies are killed or all humans are killed. These binaries are punctuated by a perpetual displacement of this ending. Every post-apocalypse signals a rebirth (Sorensen, 2014). Zombie time is cyclical, not linear. *28 Days later* was followed by the sequel *28 months later*. There is also the question of power. The zombies – the dead – hold the living to ransom and perpetual fear. This necropower reflects on the meaninglessness of contemporary life, medicated through online shopping, nutribullet advertisements and Kim Kardashian’s Instagram account. Toni Negri and Felix Guattari stated that, “politics today is nothing more than the expression of the domination of dead structures over the entire range of living production” (1990, p. 30). Zombie structures compress our flesh.

While travelling to this apocalyptic endpoint, *The Walking Dead* occupies this liminality. An ever shrinking band of humans defend themselves from walkers who can only be killed through decapitation. Corpses have life through their desire to feed on the living. It is clear that – via asking questions about life and death – philosophers would be drawn to the walkers. With the increasing philosophical interest in zombies, such as Wayne Yuen’s edited collection *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now* (2013), they offer scholars key information about post-work beyond the global financial crisis. As Si Sheppard revealed, “what can zombies tell us about what we really need to know: how to get by after the total collapse of modern post-industrial civilization?” (2013, p. 208) In my article, I align Sheppard’s question to the post-industrial university and ask what has happened to brains in these theoretical times.

Zombies have not remained satiated in low popular culture. They are on the move through metaphors and tropes, discovered in politics, high theory and economics. The zombie turn may be justified or explained – casually rather than causally – by the war on terror, the global

financial crisis or Fox-news fuelled fear of a pandemic (Creed, 1993). Zombies have a function in popular culture, and this function also spills into cultural theory and philosophy (Greene and Silem Mohammad, 2006). In disciplinary terms, cinema studies, popular cultural studies, videogame studies, philosophy, literature sociology, men's studies and women's studies are all interrogating the undead. Together a tentative, shambling but fascinating Zombie Studies is emerging. The undead enable thought experiments about bodies, consciousness and identity.

Culturally, the role of zombies in our present is complex to track and difficult to categorize. When formulating periodization, dates and eras for this discussion, I apply Eric Hobsbawm's categorization of the 20th century (1994). He argued that the short twentieth century spanned from 1914-1991, from the start of the First World War to the whimpering conclusion of the cold war. Noting accelerated modernity, I suggest that the short twenty first century spanned from 2001-2008. The year 2000 was not a gestalt moment. September 11, 2001 signalled an end to the long twentieth century and the start of a distinctive xenophobia, a war on an emotional state (terror) and the removal of shoes at airports. It was 2008 that signalled an end to the illusion of American power, growth, security, real estate capitalism and finance capitalism. The film *28 Days Later* showed how systems – like medicine, the military and money – collapse at speed when questioned and threatened (Carroll, 2012). This particular year – 2008 – signalled the start of the zombie apocalypse as a metaphor, metonymy, trope and description for the collapse of economic, social, cultural and political order. The only possible escapes were and are consumption of goods and consumption of intimacy (Luque-Castillo and Ortega-Ruiz, 2011). We rapaciously consume goods, emotions and people, experiencing micro moments of pleasure, and then flick or scroll to the next micro moment where we can feast on the love, loss or embarrassment of others. In Zombie Studies, death is gamified, but so is life. Families are transitory and unstable. Wifi is hunted as if it is oxygen. Therefore, the next stage of this article transforms zombie from a noun and into an adjective, to explore Ulrich Beck's zombie concept.

Zombie Categories and Concepts

The intellectual and the professional sides of our being are in conflict. And if they are not they should be.

Jonathan Dollimore (2011, p. 199)

Ulrich Beck's critique of society and culture welcomes cosmopolitanism rather than claustropolitanism. The zombie concept emerged from this cosmopolitanism project. It first appeared in interviews with Beck in 2000, often used interchangeably with zombie categories in this early period. The earliest reference I have found is in a Beck interview with the scholar of masculinity, Jonathan Rutherford, in 2000 though his book *The Art of Life: on living, love and death* (2000). At this point, "zombie categories" were present rather than "zombie concepts." Rutherford described this term as a combination of "sociology and horror" (2000, p. 37). This was an evocative and prescient description that extended beyond Beck's application at this time. In this originating interview, Rutherford offered a clear definition of the term.

There is a paradox. Changes are occurring faster in people's consciousness than in their behaviour and social conditions. This mixture of new consciousness and old conditions

has created what he [Beck] describes as Zombies categories – social forms such as class, family or neighbourhood, which are dead, yet alive (2000, p. 37).

This was a clearer definition than Beck offered. But he did list the key zombie categories: “family, class, neighbourhood” (2000, p. 37).

JR: Zombies are the living dead. Do you mean that these institutions are simply husks that people have abandoned?

UB: I think people are more aware of the new realities than the institutions are. But at the same time, if you look at the findings of empirical research, family is still extremely valued in a very classical sense. Sure there are huge problems in family life, but each person thinks that he or she will solve all those problems that their parents didn't get right (2000, p. 38).

Beck is situating ‘family’ in his cosmopolitan sociology project. Zombie concepts were merely a by-product of that wider cosmopolitanism world view. Cosmopolitanism was a way for Beck to overcome what he termed “methodological nationalism” (2002a, p. 18), which referred to “internal globalization, globalization from within the national societies” (2002a, p. 17). For Beck, the nation creates a “monologic imagination” that excludes otherness, while the “cosmopolitan perspective” includes “the otherness of the other” (2002a, p. 18).

As the concept was used by other scholars, the nation state within globalization became the key example. Again, and particularly considering the Global Financial Crisis and the treatment of Greece by the globalizing forces of capital, Greece's nationalism is more than a zombie concept. However, my focus in this paper is not dwelling on the disappointments and inconsistencies in the concepts of family or nation in cosmopolitan sociology, but shifting the interpretation to consider the zombie university in claustropolitan sociology. What I do recognize and apply from Beck is how these zombie categories moved from the 19th century and continue to live in our present. More importantly, they mask the changing context (Cremin, 2012, p. 50). Although these zombie concepts have lost their social purpose, ‘we’ gain from their perpetuation. They are terms of safety, understanding and compliance.

From this foundational interview, through 2001 and 2002, Beck's concept developed. The concept seems to have emerged from his work on “reflexive modernity” as he stressed the plurality of poststructuralism (Beck, 2001, p. 261). He described “a multiplication and pluralization of modernities in the making” (2001, p. 262). Beck argued that from these modernities is emerging, “a new kind of capitalism, a new kind of labour, a new kind of everyday life, and a new kind of state are in the making” (2001, p. 262). Such an interpretation does not carry negativity or critique. When Beck moves from this separation of modernities into the zombie categories, there is no inflection or concern for this change.

I think we are living in a society, in a world, where our basic sociological concepts are becoming what I call ‘zombie categories.’ Zombie categories are ‘living dead’ categories which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu. In this situation I don't think it's very helpful only to criticize normal sociology, and to deconstruct it. What we really need is to redefine, reconstruct, restructure our concepts and our view of society (2001, p. 262).

Beck is disconnecting a version of modernity from the nation state, but also Westernization and Europeanization. While such a critique was offered by Edward Said decades earlier (1978), Beck has revealed the heuristic power and propulsion of periodization.

These are evocative if ambiguous phrases, tropes, theories and argument. The role of risk – from terrorists or bankers – in these unintended consequences has also been probed by Beck (2002b). Developing his concept in the aftermath of September 11, he probed the relationship

between risk and control, noting the unevenness of global risks (2002b, p. 42). He also offers a slither of commentary on neoliberalism. He states, “in times of crises, neoliberalism has no solutions to offer” (2002b, p. 48). Further, he offered a warning that “human dignity, cultural identity and otherness must be taken more seriously in the future” (2002b, p. 48). Such statements may have had intent, urgency and bite in 2002. However, this prediction was not delivered. Human dignity has been denied from those from whom capital can be extracted, denied or ignored.

Beck recognized globalizing change. His analytical error was to enfold this realization into cosmopolitan sociology. He did not see that cosmopolitan sociology was in itself a zombie category, eaten alive by claustropolitanism. Beck located the scale of change, but not how to correct or manage it. He logged that “the development of new concepts and the redefinition of sociology is for me a matter of political importance” (Boyne, 2001, p. 53). He was correct in such an imperative, but he used such a realization to reinforce cosmopolitan sociology. He missed the paradigm shift.

Sociologists are using zombie categories. Not only do they obscure the emergence and potential of cosmopolitanism, but also blind us to the new global risk regime we are living in (Boyne, 2001, 56).

Beck deployed the concepts of ‘household’ and ‘family’ to make his case. He was right. Those categories are tired, overworked, colonized by conservative political forces and so ideological that they are rendered difficult for scholars to use in a way that is relevant and useful. Liotta and Shearer argued that Beck determined a concept to be in a zombie state if it “emphasize[s] the state and thereby fail[s] to engage the multiple and interdependent processes of change we now face” (2008, p. 9). This is an important realization, and the affirmation of cosmopolitanism in Beck’s work starts to be revealed. The zombie concept, for Beck, is tethered to ‘the state’ and therefore is rigid, dominating and a problem. Cosmopolitan sociology has a tendency towards anti-statism, through its commitment to community, multiculturalism and organic and authentic connections between groups. But this rendering of the state is narrow and can bleed into a critique of public health, public education, regulation and governance. This mode of anti-statism created the political space for neo-liberalism. Once the state was removed from regulation and management of public good, the flow and mobility so welcomed by the cosmopolitan sociologists such as Ulrich Beck, John Urry, Scott Lash and Anthony Giddens was used to move capital without regulation but block the movement of people by twisting the labelling from ‘refugees’ to ‘asylum seekers.’ These theorists have produced remarkable theorizations of both modernity and globalization, but the problem is that they were wrong theoretically and politically. They missed the changes to global capital caused through a lack of regulation and therefore had no intellectual resources to understand the Global Financial Crisis.

While the zombie concept could have been a Beck throwaway, it continued to bubble through the academic literature. It has been used in an array of disciplines and contexts, including health (Neville, 2013). It started to be applied to the theorizing of production and consumption. (Antonio 2015) But something odd happened on the way to and through the Global Financial Crisis. The zombie exploded as a trope, theory, concept and metaphor. The following table captures the mentions of zombie, the zombie category and the zombie concept in Google Scholar for each year spanning from 2000-2014. [see Table 1]

Table 1: No. of mentions of “zombie”, “zombie category” and “zombie concept” in Google Scholar, 2000-2014

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Zombie	785	932	1120	1080	1560	1710	1890	2620	2600	3820	4210	4720	5260	6650	6750
Zombie category	248	250	306	365	475	466	588	744	789	1050	1240	1370	1400	1730	1920
Zombie concept	375	424	560	644	858	905	971	1260	1370	1700	1910	2320	2370	3050	3260

Beck’s zombie categories and concepts started to gain an intellectual traction through the discipline of sociology. Yet his critique of the state in that project was lost. Paul Chan configured a strong definition of the term that cut away the cosmopolitan project. He stated that, “like zombies, there are social concepts that are dead and yet kept alive in their use by scholars to describe the growing fiction of traditional social institutions” (2013, p. 1059). This definition confirms that some concepts are ‘dead,’ yet Chan suggests that scholars are the perpetrators of the zombie behaviour. In other words the concepts would have remained dead, but academics are still using terms as if they have meaning. The perpetuation of old ideas in a dangerous and contagious form by researchers is the innovative interpretation implemented by Chan. Activating Chan’s analysis, in the third section of this paper, I apply Beck’s work to one traditional social institution: the university. Zombie habits are the basic functions – the mechanics – of being a human. Humanity is built on the zombie behaviours. If applied to a university, the meetings, the agendas, the performance management processes are zombie behaviours. Higher learning and teaching must transcend them. The key question is, can they be freed from the horde or are they crushed in the zombie embrace?

How was the zombie concept applied and transformed after the GFC? Beck described it as a form that is familiar, taken for granted, naturalized and assumed, but within that form is weird, odd, irrational, unpredictable and toxic content. Beck particularly applied the zombie concept to class. This seemed appropriate in the early 2000s, as postfordism, underemployment and digitization transformed the role and place of labour power (Berry, 2008). But it has since been applied to race, capitalism and universities. It is based on the sociological separation of the first and second modernity. When reading Johannes Williams’ *Conversations with Ulrich Beck*, published in 2004, Beck used digitization as a proxy for a wider social model. He stated that, “we occupy a world of transportation and communication networks in which social and physical space have diverged” (Beck and Williams, 2004, p. 23). This moment of digitization, often described as deterritorialization, has been reconfigured through disintermediation, reintermediation (Brabazon, 2014) and the re-emergence of analogue places via geosocial networking.

One danger in the zombie(d) society is to language: citizens and scholars think they/we know what is going on when particular words are used. We return to underlying assumptions and assume a shared history and consensual agreement. Yet these assumptions mean that a zombie concept is used in neoliberalism – or other discursive systems – and is able to infiltrate a broader and wider discussion before there is interpretative dissonance and recognition that the term has been twisted, warped and infiltrated. This has been seen in and through the word ‘public,’ particularly when attached to ‘health,’ ‘education’ and ‘services.’

Therefore Beck’s throwaway phrase that the nation is a ‘zombie concept’ has been mobilized in the understanding of an array of social systems that he did not predict. The reduction in national sovereignty through the rise of neoliberalism means that corporations

have enacted what Rob Nixon referred to as “evasive geopolitics” (2009, p. 444). Assumptions about the rationality of economics and the logic of markets mean that the analytical tool kit is lacking for understanding the shape and texture of either events or social structures. John Quiggin realized that, “the zombie ideas that brought the global financial system to the brink of meltdown, and have already caused thousands of firms to fail and cost millions of workers their jobs, still walk among us” (2010, p. 2). The assumption of growth and rationality in capitalism is an ideology of reality that widens both inequality and injustice. Colin Cremin’s work has, like Quiggin, taken on the acidic corrosiveness of zombie categories and concepts circulating in daily life. Directly critiquing Beck, Cremin stated that “we are not in liquid modernity, reflexive modernity, a new economy or risk society” (2011, p. 3). He believed that “the financial crash was predictable” (2011, p. 25). Perhaps he is correct. Importantly the neglect, disrespect and marginalization of regulation and governance provided a context for a financial collapse to emerge. What Fred Botting called “zombie debt” was a sign of morbid consumption patterns (2013). For Botting, these toxic debts killed the economy. He did not believe that vampires were sucking the life out of society. Instead, it was zombies that had ingested toxic debt and yet kept walking as if industrial models of production and consumption were in place. This collective of Global Financial Crisis theorists critiqued austerity policies (Blyth, 2013) and used a gothic lexicon to make their point. Austerity has become a word that – after the Global Financial Crisis – has signalled the next stage of neo-liberalism, anti-statism and political amnesia to blame those who were blameless (Jones, 2013). For Kerry-Anne Mendoza, austerity was both a strategy to “demolish” the welfare state that led to a rise in the “zombie economy” (2015). She argued that the GFC not only signalled the failure of neoliberalism but served to accelerate it. Austerity remains – as Mark Blyth described it – “a dangerous idea” (2013). The focus on austerity meant that the reasons for the Global Financial Crisis were not diagnosed, discussed or analysed. Instead, austerity became the band aid for a gaping wound caused by the automated weaponry of neoliberal finance capitalism. It neither covered nor salved the situation.

Zombie University

We have the potential to be intellectuals – or, if that sounds too pretentious for our empirical tradition, then free-thinkers committed to the activity of a critical intelligence. Jonathan Dollimore (2011, p. 199)

The key application of Beck’s concept that I summon in this paper is the zombie university. When the word ‘university’ is used, it still carries familiarity – like the zombie’s body – yet when investigating the contents, they are not only surprising, but toxic, dangerous and contagious. Researchers and teachers recognize the form. The buildings and websites are captioned Sydney University, Manchester University or the University of British Columbia. The assumptions about the institution, some from Cardinal Newman, C.S. Lewis or an array of university-based films like *Good Will Hunting*, flood our meaning system. But this form has been taken over, destroyed, killed and reinhabited by deadly content. The institution has been transformed in the last twenty years by non-researchers and non-teachers. The ideologies of

vocationalism and digitization have carried scholars and students to the zombie university. We think we know what we mean by universities. We cling to this belief. But it is already dead. It is a zombie category and it is still walking.

Zombies are poststructuralist in intent. They fragment and crush binarized models of thought. They challenge the parameters of life and living. Most importantly, they play with the clock. Linear time is no longer a guide through the zombie apocalypse. The past, present and future all live, breathe, walk, eat and kill. There is always a zombie moment where the non-zombie has to choose to kill the mother, father, husband, wife or child that has become infected, or join them in zombieland. Death and love twist, recoil and recalibrate. This is the decision we must make in a university. We sit through the meetings. We nod. We allow phrases like “efficiency dividends” to wash over us. Yet when sitting through these meetings, are we becoming zombies, infected by the bite of banality, mediocrity and compliance? The managerialism in universities is part of the wider institutional bureaucratization. The minutia of processes and procedures are meant to be alienating for the workforce. David Graeber realized that the impact of bureaucratization is not simply banality but,

Given a choice between a course of action that will make capitalism seem like the only possible economic system, and one that will make capitalism actually be a more viable long-term economic system, neoliberalism has meant always choosing the former (2015, p. 129).

This execution of a choice through masking choice means that “technical rationality” (Olivier, 2014, p. 15) such as skills, vocationalism and a list of graduate outcomes are the tracked attributes from students, rather than learning and knowledge. This is a zombie university. It eats brains. It works from the assumption that the valuable is measurable.

For within these zombie university, those of us who are not the undead, who have not been transformed into drooling walkers looking for brains to eat, have a choice. Therefore, it seems appropriate to return to Jonathan Rutherford for a diagnosis of the context in which this choice is made. Rutherford explored the relationship between economic growth and wellbeing, with particular attention to education.

Education plays a central role in producing the new modes of consumption and production. Schools, colleges and universities have been subjected to continuous organizational change in an attempt to gear them to the labour market and knowledge economy. Universities, schools, healthcare and welfare have been turned into quasi- or proximate markets. Targets are used to replicate the incentives of price and competition, performance management stands in for the incentive of profit. The ethic of professionalism and trust is degraded and replaced by ‘accountability’ to the market based criteria of efficiency, ‘value for money’ and productivity” (2008, p. 8-9).

Deindustrialization, alongside casualized and temporary jobs that were later enfolded into the term precariat (Standing, 2013), resulted in cultures of bullying, humiliation and vulnerability with (higher) education the only panacea. Rutherford makes the point that the greater the inequality, the greater the violence, because “people are deprived of the markers of status and so are more vulnerable to the anxieties of being judged by others” (2008, p. 11). In universities, this change has been rapid. Stanley Aronowitz wrote *The Knowledge Factory* in the year 2000. His argument was that a management class, group, tier or stream had emerged in universities. These were the men and women who had failed or underperformed in teaching and research and entered management, ruling over those who had success in the spheres in which they had failed. Through the subsequent 16 years since this book was published, and built on his sociology of higher education, the university is now a zombie concept. Strange ‘realities’ are

accepted as normal. This under-performing, anti-intellectual group has introduced terms, phrases and practices like key performance indicators, strategic plans and performance management. In other words, this is a zombie university. A higher education establishment has been infected and replaced with processes and practices that operate in a bank or corporation. This knowledge factory enabled the Zombie University, seemingly without uproar, protest or critique. Imagine the following scenario.

Women make up 64% of Pro Vice Chancellors, 65% of Deputy Vice Chancellors and 77% of Vice Chancellors in Australian universities.

The above scenario was invented. Actually – inverted. Yet there is no outcry or questioning. This is normal. Men run universities.

Men make up 64% of Pro Vice Chancellors, 65% of Deputy Vice Chancellors and 77% of Vice Chancellors in Australian universities.

The Zombie University has naturalized a mode of institutional organization. From a university history that validates the white, the colonizer, the heterosexual, the procreative and the male, the contextualized critique from postcolonialism, feminism, men's studies and queer studies has not marked or transformed our institutions. Indeed, the scale of the injustice through its denial and displacement is stark.

Marina Warner has written some high profile critiques of the modern university (2014). The problem with this critique is that only in the 2010s did the toxic conditions of higher education emerge in an institution like Essex. The traditional universities have lived in a bubble while the post-1992 universities, in the case of England and Wales, and the former colleges of advanced education in Australia have been managing the disrespect, marginalization, ridicule and arbitrary rules for decades. The Zombie horde attacked the lowest and most vulnerable universities first, only recently needing fresh meat at the elite edge of the sector.

For example, the Vice Chancellor at the elite University of Adelaide has killed lectures (Dodd, 2015). For Vice Chancellor Bebbington, lectures are “obsolete.” With “everything” online, students do not and he argues will not attend lectures. His replacement is “small group discovery experiences.” *The Financial Review* described it as a “learning revolution” (2015). This is a post-expertise zombie university. Small group discovery experiences already exist. They are called tutorials. They used to be intertwined with care and respect with lectures, each fulfilling a different function in the learning. The Vice Chancellor is even looking to abolish academic's Office Hours, replacing them with a roster system where any academic can offer assistance to any student, regardless of the subject. The problem – if there ever was one - has never been lectures. The problem has been ill-prepared and incompetent lecturers. Great lectures are incredibly difficult to develop. They are founded on outstanding appointments by internationally leading scholars who are committed to the next generation of learners. If universities were to casualize their staff, then it would be very difficult for an underqualified, under motivated and underpaid person to wield the expertise of an outstanding scholar. But in this post-expertise zombie university, digitization (once more) will supposedly rescue universities from academics who insist on reading, writing and maintaining standards of excellence. Students can receive ‘content’ online and learn from each other in “small group discovery experiences.”

This is an act of risk displacement, moving the responsibility for learning from the collective – and the university – and to the individual. This is a desire to displace responsibility. Andrew Bowman et al. stated that,

Corporate business is about ... passing risk, while avoiding social responsibility and the obligation to provide reasonable quality, sustainable, everyday economic services at accessible prices (2014, p. 28).

The university has a far greater array of stakeholders and accountabilities, beyond shareholders and profit. Risks are differently constituted. The risk is not a loss of the brand, but poor quality learning and teaching for generations of students. The “financialization” (Sotiropoulos, Milios and Lapatsioras, 2013) of the university, means that the social risks are undercut by economic risks. Individualizing learning also individualizes failure and displaces blame from a managerial system that casualized undergraduate higher education.

This is a university of mediocrity, compliance and conformity. It sucks the excellence, the challenge, the awkwardness and the alternatives out of learning. Form (modality) is irrelevant and content (knowledge) is uploaded by educational designers into pre-existing applications. Academics with their content – which in some discourse may be called knowledge – is dangerous. It is much safer – and cheaper – to employ educational designers to load content, often developed by casual staff, into online templates like Blackboard or Moodle.

Zombie teaching and learning has been with us since the late 1990s when digital technology and casualization of educators entered a deathly embrace. Such a system is founded on and perpetuated by the managerialism predicted and described by Stanley Aronowitz in *The Knowledge Factory*. With the men and women who could not manage research or teaching now leading those who can, the only way such a system can operate is if ‘managers’ pretend that a university is the same as any other ‘business.’ It does not matter that they have failed or underperformed as an academic. A leader in content expertise - knowledge - is not required because they are academic managers. They are like bank managers, but instead of counting money, they are counting students.

Certainly, there were profound problems with the patronage structures in the older universities. But the solution to those problems is increased regulation and transparent governance, rather than neoliberal ideologies of deregulation and anti-statism that have been proven – time and again – to fail. Let me provide an example. I will not name the university, but monitor the appointment of a Zombie Dean. No advertisement for this post ever appeared. There was no interview or public lecture to evaluate their performance, or transparent process to make appointment. Simply, one morning, a Zombie Dean appeared in an Australian University. Here is the transcript of the announcement, with redactions on the identifiers. It was released on June 29, 2015, for a July 1, 2015 commencement.

Subject: Appointment of Executive Dean

Message: I am very pleased to announce the appointment of Professor XXXX to the role of Executive Dean.

Professor XXXX has been a valued academic staff member at XXXX since XXXX when she joined the University on a secondment from XXXX.

Professor XXXX holds a Graduate Diploma and a Masters in XXXX, both from the University of XXXX. She has recently submitted her PhD at XXXX.

Professor XXXX has acted in the role of Executive Dean on several occasions ... Her experience in the role and the Faculty have been important contributing factors to the substantive appointment.

Please join me in congratulating XXXX on her appointment.

This appointee was not a professor before this announcement. So not only were the processes usurped for a Deanship, but for a professorship. Because she had 'acted' in the role, that was the qualification to grant this post. This is a zombie employment process. The notion that experience of other universities, research or teaching excellence would be valuable to an executive dean is not considered. Excellence and achievement are zombie concepts.

The irrationality of neoliberalism is clearly revealed in such cases. The excuse to not hire women, indigenous scholars, scholars of colour and researchers and teachers with impairments during the patronage mode of the university was that they were lacking the qualifications and experience. Now that these groups have gained this experience and expertise, through widening participation and availability of higher education, the institutions have to summon new excuses – beyond merit - to continue to hire men and the occasional woman that believe in their political perspective. Intriguingly, to enhance and enable this ideology, they have to remove competition and the market from the selection process. So the proliferation of executive search firms, pretending universities are hiring a CEO, direct appointments to posts without any tethered advertisement, process, transparency or procedure have proliferated. Universities have always been institutions of patronage. White men hired other white men who went to Cambridge or Yale or Sydney or British Columbia. But this mode of patronage has changed. There is intent and will in the hiring of underqualified people with experiences so far outside of high level scholarship that there is no connection between their professional lives and teaching and learning in a university. Such appointments are justified because they are 'about' management, and management supposedly requires no expertise in content and context.

I will provide one example of my argument. I realized there was 'a zombie problem' when reviewing the RMIT (RMIT University) website and seeing a Vice Chancellor described as Mr Bean. I thought it was an unkind joke. Upon further research, I discovered he was a Mr Bean, Mr Martin Bean. He was not Dr Bean. He does not hold a doctorate and has never been a professor in any university in the world. Indeed – without a doctorate, I was expecting to see a MBA. Instead, Mr Bean holds a Bachelor of Education from the Sydney University of Technology. He was the Vice Chancellor of the Open University, which is also rather surprising, and he was described as "the first non academic" to hold the role. His previous work experience includes Microsoft and MOOC development.

How is this appointment possible? Why – when a university needs to innovate (which often means introducing untested technology to reduce costs) – is an academic dismissed as irrelevant and untested and a former worker at Microsoft valued and appointed? This appointment embodies anti-intellectualism, anti-standards and anti-scholarship. How did it happen? RMIT – like many of our universities – decided to appoint a businessman to the often ceremonial role of chancellor. This role is not ceremonial when appointing Vice Chancellors. Even the *Financial Review* reported the oddity of this Vice Chancellor appointment.

RMIT chancellor Ziggy Switkowski says that when he and his fellow members of the university council selected Bean for the top job last year "we didn't set out to be different for the sake of being different".

But neither were they "discomforted by the fact that he was not a conventional or traditional appointment".

One thing that impressed Switkowski – a former CEO of both Telstra and Optus – was Bean's business experience. "I find he speaks a language I speak," he says (Dodd, 2015).

Academics in all disciplines deploy specialist vocabulary. Yet this language of scholarship was not relevant in this case. Switkowski simply appointed someone who “speaks a language” he speaks.

Mr Bean justifies his lack of qualifications as helping him understand the students enrolled in RMIT.

As it happens, RMIT is a university full of people who are like Bean's younger self. And he thinks his academic background, or lack of it, gives him an understanding of what higher education is like for the more than a quarter of RMIT's 82,000 students who are part-timers.

"I've lived it myself; it very much shaped my impression of what it's like to be part of a university when you're not a traditional student," Bean says. Not many of his vice-chancellor colleagues could say the same.

And he thinks that, in the long run, it may be cheaper for universities. "My instinct is that, like every other sector where technology is disruptive, it's likely that it becomes more cost-effective over time, but I do not have the evidence to back that up yet," he says. "In any sector where you can provide a better product or service at a lower cost, you're on a winner and I suspect that's what we've got here" (Dodd, 2015).

The notions that universities have the right and the responsibility to be institutions of higher learning, sites of aspiration where the best minds of one generation instruct the next, have been lost here. This is what Guy Standing described as “the spectre of teacherless universities backed by panopticon techniques” (2013, p. 159). Within such a system, the completion of a basic undergraduate degree many decades ago has been rewarded because contemporary students completing an undergraduate degree will have a relationship with their Vice Chancellor. He holds “an understanding of what higher education is like.” This is the equivalent of stating that a patient – after seeing a general practitioner – has “an understanding” of the health system and is ready to lead a hospital. The future of this diminished university is ‘disruptive technology,’ filled with what David Harvey described as “pseudo busy-work” (2014, p. 279).

There will be a cost for the loss of standards, excellence, aspiration and achievement in higher education. Guy Standing, after diagnosing the relationship between globalization and finance capitalism, revealed the consequences on schools, further and higher education.

This commodification of education is a societal sickness. There is a price to pay. If education is sold as an investment good, if there is an unlimited supply of certificates and if these do not yield the promised return, in terms of access to good jobs and high income with which to pay off debts incurred because they were nudged to buy more of the commodity, more entering the precariat will be angry and bitter (2013, p. 72).

Cost and value have been confused. This is a profoundly anti-intellectual movement. The people who have been successful in scholarship are dismissed by this management culture *because* they have been successful in scholarship and therefore will not understand contemporary students. Mediocrity in qualifications is the credential to manage. This is the zombie university. It is a denial of the flesh, blood and bone of academics and administrators.

I finish with the final fight in the final scene in the *Zombie Apocalypse* movie. Yes, universities have shown interest in the zombie apocalypse. On October 1, 2009, the University of Florida's Academic Technology Support Services Website published “Zombie Attack: disaster preparedness simulation exercise #5.” A profound critique of management practices,

it applied processes and procedures to an irrational situation: the zombie apocalypse. (Boluk and Lenz, 2011) They assessed how neo-liberal management would handle this catastrophe. It involved a lot of meetings, strategic plans and vision statements. I experienced something very similar. I had organized an accessibility workshop for event management and tourism to be held at Charles Sturt University (Brabazon, 2015). The NSW Premier and Cabinet sent a staff member and a colleague to provide training in our regional location: Bathurst. Months of planning went into the session and representatives attended from the Bathurst business community, local government, early childhood services and the University of the Third Age. It was an attempt to integrate gown and town, university and regional city, so as to improve the accessibility for our institutions and events.

The university chose this day to run a pandemic scenario to test the institution's readiness to manage a contagion. From staff, this exercise very quickly became renamed as preparing for the zombie apocalypse. My task was to manage an array of visitors to the university, many in wheelchairs. Maybe it is just me, but probably the zombies will have enough to occupy them in Sydney, rather than shambling over the Blue Mountains to Bathurst. It was the invention of a crisis, to test for a contagion that did not exist (Mirowski, 2013). Following on from Tony Judt, it is clear that "our disability is discursive: we simply do not know how to talk about things anymore" (2010, p. 34).

As we back away from the Zombies crawling over Mount Victoria, we recognize that it is time to intervene. If we do not, then these zombie deans and vice chancellors will form a zombie horde of management in higher education. They will swarm and kill us. Perhaps they already have. They have filled our brains with nonsensical phrases like "beyond world leading" and "risk management". Qualifications are now optional, blocking the execution of a clean neoliberal policy without thought or consequences. Why the qualifications matter is not on their own terms. Qualifications confirm that a person has been externally checked and verified that they have reached a standard of scholarship. Refereeing occupies a similar role in the rest of our academic careers. The major question to ask of these zombie university managers is why they have prioritized ideology over institutions. The answer is that brains – intelligence – is frightening. It signifies a victory of evidence over agendas and information over ideology.

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