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A Feminist Zombie Manifesto

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This video essay examines zombie cinema through feminist posthumanism, challenging the genre's patriarchal and racialized structures. Through analyses of *Day of the Dead*, *28 Days Later*, and *The Girl with All the Gifts*, it reframes zombie narratives as sites of resistance, reconstruction, and transformative futures centered on marginalized identities.

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Creator's Statement

This video essay is inspired by and responds to Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry's article "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism" (2008). Lauro and Embry analyze the zombie's dual role as both oppressed and resistant figures in the history of global capitalism. They proclaim that the zombie/*zombii*, as "a consciousless being" and boundary-defying *antisubject*, is "the only imaginable specter that could really be posthuman" and signals the collapse of advanced capitalism (88). Lauro and Embry's vision of posthumanism entails the eradication of subjectivity and individualized identity, rendering gender irrelevant in their zombie analogy—"the zombie presents a posthuman specter informed by the (negative) dialectic of power relations *rather than gender*" (91, my emphasis). While I am intrigued by *subjectless* and *genderless* posthuman possibilities, it is important to recognize that the cinematic zombie narratives, with their promise of destroying all the reigning systems of advanced capitalism, are still structured by or passive to patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies (see Ruthven, Harper, Bennett). For the zombie to become a truly liberatory posthuman specter—one capable of dissolving boundaries of gender, race, and other identity categories—its narrative must actively confront and subvert dominant structures. The feminist zombie manifesto, therefore, reclaims gender and race as essential frameworks for imagining a posthuman future.

The video follows Rosi Braidotti's assertion that "[e]xposing anthropocentric arrogance and the violent exploitation of non-human others is a core value for posthuman feminism" (70). "Non-human others" encompass all living and non-living entities that are marginalized or harmed by human-centered frameworks. While Lauro and Embry's zombie posthumanism emphasizes dystopia and deconstruction (marked by the total erasure of humanity), zombie feminist posthumanism envisions

a transformative shift from deconstruction to reconstruction. This progression places socially and culturally marginalized and Othered identities at its center.

Day of the Dead (George A. Romero, 1985), *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), and *The Girl with All the Gifts* (Colm McCarthy, 2016) exemplify this evolution at pivotal moments in cinematic history. These films stand out for their subversive narratives, strong female leads, and emphasis on interracial solidarity. *28 Days Later* is notable for being the first British horror film to include a Black female lead. *The Girl with All the Gifts* most closely aligns with feminist posthuman advocacy for marginalized and Othered identities through the triumph of its protagonist, Melanie (Sennia Nanua), a hybrid species that transcends human limitations. Adapted from M.R. Carey's 2014 novel of the same title, the film notably reconfigures character identities—Melanie from white to black and Miss Justineau's from black to white—and shifts the narrative perspective solely to Melanie. These deliberate changes foreground and celebrate Black leadership in shaping a posthuman future, advancing the zombie genre into the realm "Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before" (Mafe).

Lauro and Embry describe zombie narrative as "anticathartic" because "[t]he zombii's dystopic promise is that it can only assure the destruction of a corrupt system without imagining a replacement" (96). The "anticatharsis" or lack of resolution applies to most zombie films, including *Day of the Dead* and *28 Days Later*, which end with survivors awaiting rescue and a return to human civilization. Such an ending suggests a humanist rather than a posthuman future, which means "everything—humanity, government, and most likely capitalism—has survived the attack" (Lauro and Embry, 107). In contrast, *The Girl with All the Gifts* breaks from this pattern, presenting Melanie's triumph and her vision for a new world—one that rejects humanist restoration in favor of posthuman reconstruction. At this point in the cinematic zombie narrative, such reconstruction affirms that values like care, compassion, and empathy remain essential and worth preserving.

Aesthetically, the video essay is designed to evoke pleasure for female spectators through curated imagery and sound, and "the oppositional gaze" (hooks, 115). Describing *28 Days Later*, Diana Adesola Mafe writes, "the pleasure of watching the soldiers' graphic downfall is ultimately (whatever the viewer consciously acknowledges this fact or not) pleasure in the destruction of a patriarchy" (31). The video essay seeks to recreate this viewer experience. Specifically, the use of split screens highlights the protagonists' resistance to patriarchal violence, while scenes featuring bloodied female figures in action (Serena and Melanie) reclaim the "monstrous feminine" as a symbol of revolt and transformation. Rather than evoking fear or revulsion, these images inspire empowerment and admiration, challenging the conventional portrayal

of Black female monstrosity in horror cinema. The male voices of violence in the second segment give way to female voices of care and compassion in the final segment, presenting *posthuman becoming* as a hopeful and uplifting experience.

The video essay begins and ends with the image of Miss Justineau in a sealed mobile lab. Traditionally, cages and chains symbolize the oppression of the "Others." Zombies are chained and caged, like Bub in *Day of the Dead*, or an infected Black soldier in *28 Days Later*, or the child "hungries" in *The Girl with All the Gifts*. At the end of *The Girl with All the Gifts*, the "hungries" are free, whereas Justineau is confined in the cell-like medical lab for her protection. Her voluntary confinement signifies the reversal in power dynamics between humans and non-humans and a rejection of anthropocentrism. Justineau's acceptance of this new order enables her to join Melanie in shaping a posthuman future. This moment serves as a powerful feminist statement on humanity and progress. Of course, the final voice must belong to Melanie—the Black girl leader—declaring the transition from human to posthuman.

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Biography

Li Zeng is a Professor of film at Illinois State University. Her research interests include representation of history in visual culture, women and gender studies, horror, and

Asian cinema and television. She has published book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals, including *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *Asian Cinema*, *Visual Anthropology*, *Critical Arts*, and *Adaptation.* Her recent videographic essay, "Ghost of Gaslight," was published in *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture.*

Review by Desiree Garcia, Dartmouth College

This is a compelling and provocative video essay that, at its least, challenges the text on which it is based, Lauro and Embry's "A Zombie Manifesto," and at its most, centers the place of women and race in the discussion of the zombie film. The choice to contrast *The Girl with All the Gifts* with earlier iterations of the subgenre, *Day of the Dead* and *28 Days Later* in particular, is a useful one for demonstrating how recent films employ women (and girls) as agents of social change and hope. The author's use of split screen juxtaposition and spatial montage in the first two parts of the essay is effective at delineating the dialogue between earlier films while the shift to full screen in the third part signals a stylistic departure as well as a conceptual one.

Both the dynamics of gender and race are at work in the texts Zeng has chosen to analyze. Highlighting this fact is one of the author's most important contributions to the study of zombie cinema. Whereas Lauro and Embry insist that the zombie is the incarnation of "the dialectic of power relations *rather than gender,*" Zeng argues that not only is gender important, but the social construct of race has also shaped the evolution and meaning of the genre. Cinema, as a representational medium, is shaped by production contexts that are themselves rooted in the hierarchies of race and gender. Zeng's first two parts of the video essay communicate this through multiscreen, side-by-side images of zombie films that privilege whiteness and cast women as victims of both men and zombies. Zeng makes explicit the interrogation of gender, from women's suffering at the hands of patriarchy in the earlier films to their powerful agency in the later ones. But rather than focusing on gender and race separately, Zeng constructively puts them into the same conversation, exploring their overlapping dynamics in the history of zombie cinema. Doing so allows Zeng to identify an alternate ending to the zombie film, one that is led by the survival of the non-human Other, in the shape of Melanie, the young black girl at the center of *The Girl with All the Gifts*. Melanie is a recuperative figure who, in alliance with her white female friend Justineau, has successfully destroyed patriarchy and tells a new story about how to live in the future.

The video essay effects a contemplative evolution of what is otherwise a violent and unsettling genre by shifting focus to the intersectional power of a multiracial community of women. Zeng's insightful foregrounding of the power of stories in *The Girl with All the Gifts* asks us to reflect on zombie storytelling more generally. We must reckon with the zombie film's popularity, a story that moviegoers desire to see and

hear again and again. Through her audiovisual interpretation of these films, Zeng underscores how zombie narratives are ultimately stories of race and gender, with a potential for envisioning a posthuman world with marginalized Others at the center.

Review by Ashley R. Smith-Campbell, Ithaca College

Revising and expanding on the framework of posthumanism presented in Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry's "A Zombie Manifesto," Li Zeng's "A Feminist Zombie Manifesto" posits a vision of "feminist posthumanism" inspired by Colm McCarthy's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016) and the collaborative partnership across ethnic (Black/white) and species (zombie/human) divides that the film imagines. Zeng's video essay begins by claiming the centrality of race and gender as considerations within her theory of a feminist posthumanism. For Zeng, placing an emphasis on the perspectives of those who have been dehumanized by white patriarchal anthropocentrism and its attendant ideologies offers the best possibility for imagining a future free from the constraints of such systems.

In the essay's first segment, labeled "Expose & Confront," Zeng cleverly employs split screens and associative image pairings to underscore the inherently corrosive and self-destructive power of patriarchy and the militarized state that are exacerbated by the advent of a zombie apocalypse in George A. Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) and Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002). While selecting both texts for the presence of their agential and assertive female leads, Zeng opts to highlight scenes depicting verbal and physical confrontations between the female protagonists and the films' human male antagonists, underscoring the extent to which a white male cis-het patriarchy poses a greater risk to these women than the flesh-eating zombies the humans are meant to be unified in their fight against.

In both films, patriarchy and martial force are shown as relegating women to the status of second-tier citizens who are nearly as dehumanized as the reanimated living dead, alluding to a social class kinship between woman and zombie. This alignment is underscored in the essay's second segment, "Dismantle," in which Zeng presents passages from *Day of the Dead* and *28 Days Later* that show the films' female characters and zombies united in their rebellion against the patriarchal state's imposed oppression.

In the essay's final segment, "Reconstruct," *The Girl with All the Gifts* is contrast against these two earlier works, illustrating how McCarthy's film recognizes and fosters the alignment between woman and zombie and explores the productive potential that could exist in a willful human decentering of the self in favor of cross-species partnership. In doing so, Zeng's "Feminist Zombie Manifesto" comes to echo themes shared in

contemporary horror theory by scholars such as Barbara Creed, whose discussion of "Feminist New Wave Cinema" highlights the feminist aspects of recent horror film as being at least partially defined by its female protagonists' compassion, their turning away from anthropocentrism, and their willingness to work in defense and support of the "Other." Thus, Zeng's manifesto is hopeful in response to the prospective falling away of the old white patriarchal guard and celebrates the possibility that a loss of ego rather than cognizance—demonstrated by human deference to and partnership with other living (and living dead) things—might offer a path toward humanity's discovery of a better self.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.