

## XXXombies: Economies of Desire and Disgust

Steve Jones

The undead have infected numerous media forms recently, including prime-time television (*The Walking Dead*), videogames (*Dead Island*, *Left 4 Dead*), comic books (*Chaos Campus*, *Marvel Zombies*), classic literature (*Pride, Prejudice and Zombies*), and stage musicals (*Fleshed Out*, *Musical of the Living Dead*). It is ironic that the living dead should be so persistently profitable given that zombies have been commonly interpreted as symbols of consumer capitalism's damaging effects (see Bishop, 2010; Harper, 2002; Loudermilk, 2003). Those issues are particularly pertinent at present, since the current boom in zombie-media is situated against a backdrop of global economic crisis. Indeed, numerous thinkers have used the zombie plague as a metaphor to describe international recession's detrimental impacts on society (Giroux, 2011; Harman, 2012; Nelms, 2012). It is paradoxical that despite their salience as emblems of financial disaster, the living dead have become icons for consumer capitalism's continued success. During this period of economic crisis, zombies have been voraciously devoured by audiences.

This enigmatic quality is one of the zombie's defining characteristics. The zombie's popularity *per se* is as counter-intuitive as the creature's ability to be simultaneously living and dead. As Kristeva (1982: 3) famously posited, corpses epitomise the abject: that which must be denied, buried and hidden. Animated cadavers ought to be doubly dreadful since they refuse suppression. The zombie's cultural ubiquity appears to contradict the notion that resurrected corpses are superlative archetypes of disgust. However, it is notable that revulsion itself has inspired much intellectual fascination of late. As many scholars have observed, since the early 2000s there has been a marked rise in interdisciplinary scholarship devoted to issues of disgust (Kendall, 2011: 1; see also Chapman and Anderson, 2011: 62; O'Carroll et al., 2011: 237) and affect (see Ash, 2012; Koivunen, 2010; Paasonen, 2012: 12). The zombie-boom—which foregrounds putrid bodies—is commensurate with this recent turn towards issues of disgust and corporeality.

The themes of economic crisis and disgust are bridged in contemporary zombie-media. As never-sated consumers, zombies embody forms of "irrational consumerism" that are popularly (if erroneously) perceived to have caused the economic crisis (on the latter, see Sennett, 2009: 164). In this discourse, consumerist "greed" is akin to hedonistic gluttony, and so it is unsurprising that the "resultant" economic decline has been explicitly referred to in the lexis of "disgust" (see Garcia, 2011: 55; Lybeck, 2011: 23). The zombie represents this combination of avarice, grotesquery, and collapse insofar as their ceaseless quest to devour human flesh typically leads to societal ruin. Zombie-media is also implicated as part of the repellent consumerist system precisely because the zombie is the desirable cultural commodity *du jour*.

21<sup>st</sup> Century zombiedom is characterised by balances between desire and disgust in other ways. Since the late 1990s, zombies have become increasingly sexualised (see Jones, 2013; McGlotten and VanGurdy, 2013). At its most literal, this trend has resulted in zombie-horror films that feature porn performers, such as *Bloodlust Zombies* (2011, starring Alexis Texas) and *Swamp Zombies* (2005, starring Jasmine St. Claire);<sup>1</sup> horror movies that portray zombies having sex, including *Lust of the Dead* (2012) and *Life is Dead* (2012); and zombie-themed hardcore pornography, such as *GrubGirl* (2005) and *LA Zombie* (2010). These various combinations of sex and undeath are disquieting. Depictions of amorous zombies may inspire moral disgust because they carry necrophilic connotations (see Jones, 2011). Several films such as *The Stink of Flesh* (2005) and *Zombie Women of Satan* (2009) meld zombie-lust and human passions by depicting human-zombie intercourse. In

these cases, human sexual desire is unambiguously ugly: it blinds the living participant to their horrific, base urges and also to the corpse's decay. More broadly, all carnal cravings are limned as disgusting in these sexualized zombie narratives. Undead libido is inseparable from the zombies' passion for anthropophagy. In these films, desires ultimately manifest in repulsive, physically destructive conduct.

In order to negotiate these wastelands of consumption, desire, and disgust, this chapter is focused on a micro-trend within the subgenre: zombie films based around strip-clubs. The broad patterns outlined above converge in *Zombie Strippers!* (2008), *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!* (2008), *Big Tits Zombie* (2010), and *Zombies Vs Strippers* (2012). The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first establishes the issues of disgust and desire in greater detail, concentrating on recent scholarship regarding revulsion, corporeality and sex. The latter half of the section will explore relationships between performance, desire and monetary exchange in the context of strip-clubs. This first section converges on the notion that maintaining desirable fantasies often entails negating uncomfortable realities. The second section is devoted to the case-study films. Here, I explore how zombie incursion disrupts the strip-club's fantasy-context, laying bare the constructed conventions on which fantasy is founded. The zombie invasion reveals that the strip-club's fantasy is contingent on masking the realities of corporeal disgust, for example. These underlying tensions are articulated in an exaggeratedly visceral fashion. The third section will explore another tension that is shrouded by the strip-club's sexual fantasy-context: strip-clubs are commercial businesses. In these films, that reality is exposed by drawing parallels between global economic crisis and zombie apocalypse. In each case, the strip-club businesses are devastated as part of the broader societal catastrophe caused by zombie outbreak. These films are not simply allegories for economic decline, however. Financial ruin illuminates the human tendency to adhere to fantasy-based desires, even when faced with horrific realities. These films explore relationships between desirable fantasies and disgusting realities. Zombies catalyse that investigation by disrupting the status quotient.

Finally, a caveat regarding what this chapter does *not* aim to do. Although the case-study films feature only female ecdysiasts in heterosexual strip-club settings, gender politics will not be dwelt upon. While some empirical feminist research into stripping is addressed in the next section, this chapter attends to *particular representations* of stripping rather than passing comment on stripping *per se*. These films offer stereotyped portraits of strip-clubs that are as fantastically unreal as the zombies themselves. Furthermore, disgust is employed to highlight aspects of desire and human corporeality, not to forward a moral judgment about stripping itself. I also do not endorse the patriarchal bias towards seeing female bodies as unruly, unpredictable and repugnant compared with male bodies (see Borg and de Jong, 2012: 1; de Melo-Martin and Salles, 2011: 163). In this chapter, corporeal disgust denotes human fallibility. Regardless of whatever gender inequalities are represented within the case study narratives, each zombie horde is a mixed gender grouping. Zombiedom is a leveller, demonstrating that all humans are equally susceptible to death.

### **Disgust, Sex, and Desire: Masking Realities with Fantasies**

Zombies are fundamentally repulsive because they are animated cadavers. As Menninghaus (2003: 1) posits, the "decaying corpse is...*the emblem of*" disgust. However, it may not be immediately clear *why* corpses inspire such revulsion. One reason is that the carcass—the embodiment of death—is a reminder that humans are mortal creatures. Korsmeyer's (2012: 753) observation that disgust is rooted in "physical vulnerability and mortality" certainly supports this explanation (see also Nussbaum, 2010: 321). Still, it is unclear why corporeality should inspire disgust, since we are aware of our susceptibility to injury and death. Repulsion reactions do not stem from sudden revelations

about our mortality. Reminders of physiological fragility trigger disgust reactions because they disrupt a seductive fantasy: the active denial of mortality. The undead hypostatize that disruption. These animated corpses do not simply remind the living of their fragility. Zombies personify the inescapable nature of mortality by actively seeking to kill the living. Zombies are doubly disturbing because they are corpses, and yet are immortal. That is, they are both a reminder of human mortality, and simultaneously do not die themselves. In contrast, the living are reduced to their capacity to survive the zombie onslaught.

The living dead are not threatening because they are physically powerful however, but rather because they are conduits for pestilence. Fear stems not from the zombies themselves, but from human susceptibility to infection. Thus, another reason zombies are inherently repulsive is that disgust is rooted in disease avoidance (see Borg and de Jong, 2012: 2; de Melo-Martin and Salles, 2011: 162). Furthermore, disgust is closely associated with distaste, and is principally designed to protect organisms from orally consuming contaminants (see David and Olatunji, 2011: 1142; Niemelä, 2010: 270). Since zombies usually spread contagion by gnawing their prey and ingesting their flesh, zombies pertinently evoke this instinct.

Mastication is only one form of intimate contact closely associated with disgust. Sex too is commonly allied with pathogenic infection and interpersonal pollution (see Chapman and Anderson, 2011: 63; Tybur et al., 2011: 343). Sex entails the exchange of various bodily fluids such as semen, vaginal juices, sweat and saliva, which elicit disgust because such liquids facilitate the spread of pathogens (see Stevenson, Case, and Oaten, 2011: 79). Moreover, others' genitals may similarly trigger disgust responses because of their proximity to excretory zones (see McGinn, 2011: 193; Miller, 2009: 101-105). These cues are so powerful that Borg and de Jong (2012: 1) question "how people succeed in having pleasurable sex at all". Continued propagation evinces that humans somehow manage to surmount these bodily horrors. Fantasy again plays an essential role in conquering corporeal reality here. As recent studies demonstrate, pleasurable sex is possible because disgust responses are reduced by desire (Borg and de Jong, 2012: 6; Stevenson, Case, and Oaten, 2011: 80). In such accounts, desire is a form of denial.

Such repudiations are intrinsic to human psychology, perhaps because disgust stimuli are rooted in embodiment. Resultantly, sexual desire is paradoxical: physical bodies are objects of desire, but only because fantasy allows us to bypass how repulsive bodies are in reality. Sexual repugnance encapsulates this complexity. Disgust stimuli provoke recoil, but are simultaneously mesmerizing. Like zombies—who are both horrific and also objects of cultural fascination—others' genitals are sources of disgust, and yet are a locus of desire. Indeed, sexual desire appears to be amplified to counteract corporeal disgust.

One example of that compensatory augmentation is that many people are willing to pay money to glimpse naked bodies. Strip-clubs are entirely oriented around that desire. Strip-clubs are not designed to offer sex itself (see Frank, 2005: 497; Liepe-Levinson, 1998: 9). Indeed, distance is integral to the fantasy insofar as the client can only engage with the stripper voyeuristically. Although exposing the ecdysiast's body is vital to stripping, the patron pays to witness the process of *revealing*, not just what it revealed. In this context, nudity is exhibited, but the performance is evacuated of physiological fragility and corporeal messiness. The latter is what sexual desire is designed to bypass, but since bodily contact is eschewed in stripping, all that remains is desire. This objectless desire encapsulates how absurdly untenable the balance between lust and disgust is. Since sexual desire enables humans to deny how repulsive bodies are, sexual desire for the body is always-already directed towards what bodies are not.

The strip-club's "clean" fantasy is contingent on creating formal distances that allow the clients to evade corpo[-]reality. In order to support that fantasy, the strip-club is divested of reality in other ways. The club setting is commonly presented as a vacuum, an escape from real world pressures (see Frank, 2005: 487). Within its confines, the patron can pretend to exchange the daily grind for "bump and grind". The performers also typically adopt personae, distancing their activities in the club from their real lives outside of dancing (see Regehr, 2012: 149). Indeed, as Frank (2005: 496) observes, most patrons respond favourably to *unreality*, and are disturbed if the dancer fails to maintain distance between their persona and their real life (see also Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009: 31).

These forms of role-play and denial are necessary to mask an awkward reality: that the interaction between dancer and customer only takes place because it is financially beneficial for the stripper. Performer and client are both fully aware of that fact, yet both act as if that is not the case during their engagement. Even though the fantasy is contingent on monetary exchange, the presence of cash jeopardises fantasy. More than just being a disturbing reminder that ecdysiast and customer are brought together by economics, cash threatens to disrupt the fantasy-context because it belongs to the reality outside of the strip-club.

As the next two sections will demonstrate, several recent movies represent these disturbances by spotlighting how fragile fantasy-constructions are. In each case, zombies embody that which is veiled by desire in the strip-club: bodily disgust and financial motivation. Those elements are *a priori* inherent to the strip-club. The zombies expose and magnify tensions that arise from masking realities with fantasies. In doing so, zombies translate the strip-club's economies of desire into economies of disgust.

### **Zombies Versus Strippers: Fragile Fantasies, Collapsing Conventions**

The four case studies utilised here—*Zombie Strippers!*, *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!*, *Big Tits Zombie*, and *Zombies Vs Strippers*—all centre on strip-clubs that are besieged by the undead. The causes of pathos vary in each narrative. In *Big Tits Zombie*, the dead rise after one dancer (Maria) inadvertently recites a demonic incantation. In *Zombie Strippers!*, a virus-infected soldier (Byrdflough) enters the strip-club and bites the club's headline performer, Kat. Although the virus is contained within the club—spreading among the strippers and clientele—the disease originates from medical experimentation and military intervention. In *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!*, the epidemic stems from a batch of tainted drugs, which are consumed by a prostitute who works adjacent to the strip-club. The undead defile any patrons who arrive to frequent the strip-club, and eventually storm the club itself. In *Zombies Vs Strippers*, the infection's origins are not explained: the zombie uprising is a national crisis. Notably, in all cases, pestilence is not limited to customers or ecdysiasts exclusively. Thus, contamination should not be misconstrued as metaphoric condemnation of stripping itself. Contagion connects the strip-club to its surrounding social contexts, and the locale provides a focal-point for the narrative.

That narratological emphasis draws attention to that which is upset by the living dead: the strip-club's usual operations. The very presence of anthropophagic corpses in this setting is intuitively disturbing. The zombie's disgusting, rotting body is at odds with the strip-club's ethos of celebrating desirable bodies. The latter is based upon numerous instituted assumptions: the notion that certain bodies are sexy and others disgusting; that one expects to see only particular behaviours exhibited in strip-clubs; that cadavers ought to remain hidden from view, and so forth. By contravening these

expectations, the zombie draws attention to how artificial those conventions were in the first instance.

More specifically, the undead elucidate the strip-club's function as a fantasy-space. For example, strip-clubs offer sanctuary for untainted protagonists in *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!* and *Zombies Vs Strippers*. In both cases, the notion that strip-clubs offer patrons escape from everyday pressures is transformed into necessity: the club is a stronghold that seemingly provides protection from the living dead. The club's function as escapist fantasy-locale is established, made strange by exaggeration, and then debunked. For instance, in *Zombies Vs Strippers* Spider initially hosts a lock-in party for the employees in his strip-club. The club is thereby established as an escapist pleasure-space. On becoming aware of the zombie infection, the club is reframed as a sanctuary that the protagonists depend on: Spider declares that "we're all safe here in the "[Tough] Titty" as long as we stick together". Eventually Spider realises that the opposite is true, referring to the club as a "trap". Spider's volte-face reveals how entrapping fantasy is, since fantasy necessitates denying reality.

Similarly, the carnage that eventually ensues in *Big Tits Zombie's* strip-club is belied by its name: the "Paradise Theatre". Indeed, a gateway to Hell opens in the club's basement in the film's final reel, unambiguously overturning any sense that the club is a "paradise". The strip-club's fantasy-constructions are also subverted in more subtle ways. For example, during the opening credit sequence *Big Tits Zombie's* strippers perform a dance routine to-camera. As such, the camera mimics the club-customer's voyeur-position. That point-of-view is swiftly retracted, however. Once the routine is over, the ecdysiasts look dismayed. A reverse-shot reveals that the strip-club is unpopulated. Clearly the dancers would have realised that the room was empty from the outset, since they were facing that space. Conventionalised camerawork is employed to misdirect the film's viewer: an ostensible identificatory position is established, and then that construction is revealed to be devoid of substance. From this early stage in *Big Tits Zombie*, stress is placed on the constructed positions that performers and audiences adopt in order to facilitate fantasy. Moreover, that fantasy is a falsity: it is comprised only by convention (camera-position), and is starkly undercut by reality (the empty room).

This undercutting is supported by recurring allusions to expectation, performance and falsity as the narrative progresses. When the zombie plague is reported on television news—a context conventionally associated with factual information—the ecdysiasts presume the broadcast to be fictional. Having mistaken reality for feigned performance, the dancers are left ill-prepared for the onslaught that follows. The opposite is true of Lena's declaration that the zombies are "too active to be dead" and so should "[j]ust act like corpses" during the film's climax. Lena identifies that conventional expectation does not match actuality, but cannot resolve that incongruity. Such discordances are conspicuous because they remain unsettled.

The film's aesthetic is equally performative, highlighting the movie's artifice. The trashy title *Big Tits Zombie* is characteristic of a B-movie sensibility that is equally performed via the visuals: the title sequence is subject to post-production filters that mimic worn, scratched celluloid. This aesthetic choice stands out both because it is not repeated elsewhere in the movie, and also because it jars with the film's highly artificial computer-generated special effects. These aesthetic fissures are characteristic of *Big Tits Zombie's* playful methodology, which entails exposing the conventions and contradictions on which fantasy is founded.

In *Zombie Strippers!* the same issues are approached from a different angle. Early in the film, the headline performer's dance is filmed in a conventional manner: audience point-of-view shots are intersected with close-ups on Kat's face and torso while she disrobes. Fellow strippers Jeannie and Lilith are presented in the same manner during their routines. Once this normative mode of framing

the ecdysiasts has been instituted, Kat's jugular is torn out by a zombified soldier (Byrdflough). As soon as Kat reanimates, she returns to the stage. During this routine, the shots are positioned from behind the crowd instead of from the client point-of-view. The camera's distance from her body conveys the audience's apprehension. This formal shift suggests that Kat's zombiedom—made apparent by her bloody neck-wound—disturbs the club's foundational fantasy. On completing her routine however, the crowd roar with joy, and Kat's encore is presented in the previously established, close-up mode.

This reframing formally inaugurates the club's new erotic order. As the film progresses, an ever-growing crowd of men flock to see decomposing undead dancers. Living performers such as Jeannie are booed offstage by hecklers who taunt "get off. You're trash". Although corpses are usually abject because they represent humans-as-waste, the opposite is true once contagion takes hold of *Zombie Strippers'* club. The living strippers are suddenly relegated from the personification of fantasy to "trash", while the zombie ecdysiasts are prized in spite of their putrefaction. This radical inversion of "sexy" and "disgusting" demonstrates how unstable desire is.

In the club-setting, desire amounts to little more than a set of scripted responses. Those conventions are established prior to infection in *Zombie Strippers!* For instance, one client poses the interpellative question "great tits, huh?" to fellow onlooker Davis. Davis's response—"yeah, but what does it mean?"—may be pertinent, but his reaction does not fit the strip-club's script, and is met with confusion. In the club setting, the stripper's bodies are admired. The fantasy is expected to occlude queries regarding what motivates desire. Davis's unsettling reply is echoed in a parallel sequence later in the film. Watching the decaying zombies onstage, one patron declares them to be "beautiful". His companion is initially puzzled ("yeah?"), but after looking back at the monstrous ecdysiasts, he concurs ("yeah, beautiful"). The dancers also assent to this redefinition of sexiness. Lilith, Sox, Gaia and Jeannie all allow themselves to be bitten, and the two remaining uncontaminated performers (Jessy and Berenge) both express a desire to be "beautiful" like their undead peers. "Beauty" is readily redefined to encompass its opposite (disgust) because that assessment is constituted only by social agreement, not by content. In *Zombie Strippers!*, the living dead's presence in the strip-club underlines how insubstantial and fragile fantasy is, because fantasy is detached from reality.

The disparity between the zombies' rotting bodies and the customers' arousal defies expectation, exposing how distant fantasy is from actuality. On one hand, the clients appear to be oblivious to the strippers' pathos. For instance, one patron (Jimmy) is delighted when the undead Kat takes him backstage for a lapdance. When Kat bites off Jimmy's penis, his friends mistake Jimmy's screams for sexual triumph, and chant his name. In this case, the men seem to be unaware of the dangers posed to them, or are blinded by desire. On the other hand, one customer later refers to "the dead flesh of a stripping zombie", indicating that the men realise the ecdysiasts are deceased. Clearly desire is defined by the strip-club's conventionalised structure, not the dancer's bodies. Whoever the clients see dancing on stage—however decomposed—is a fantasy-object by proxy of that convention. In Jimmy's case, Kat's neck wound does not disturb him as much as her breaking of convention does. It is only when Jimmy is taken backstage and touched by Kat that he becomes intimidated, nervously mumbling that "this isn't so much fun anymore". That is, Jimmy's traversal from audience to backstage, from looking to being touched disrupts the fantasy because it interrupts the strip-club's protocol.

Each of these zombie movies revolve around inversions of the strip-club's usual formalised routines, which are founded on voyeuristic desire rather than bodily interaction. In *Big Tits Zombie, Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!* and *Zombies Vs Strippers*, the strip-club's etiquette is countermanded via inappropriate, damaging forms of intimate contact (biting, clawing). In addition, zombies routinely

disregard the club's established boundaries by storming the stage and entering backstage areas. *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!* and *Zombies Vs Strippers* culminate with performers being savaged onstage by zombie hordes. In *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!*, the climactic sequence is presented as a monstrous reimagining of the club's conventions. The same song that accompanied Dallas's strip-routine prior to the outbreak is repeated as she uses the stripper's pole to fend off the living dead. One undead ex-patron (Hank) holds cash out to Dakota while the ecdysiasts fight for their lives onstage. Moreover, as is the case with *Zombies Vs Strippers* and *Big Tits Zombie*, two dancers have their tops removed and are doused with blood in climax of *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!* In these instances, the strip-club's conventional iconography—nudity, cash, the pole, an excited crowd—are transformed from fantasy-facilitators into signifiers of horror.

### **Econo-Meat: Buying into Disgust**

Notably then, the living dead do not bring entirely new horrors to the strip-club. Rather, their disruptive presence reverses, exposes or magnifies already-present elements that are usually cloaked by fantasy-desire. For example, when performers such as Jasmine (*Zombies Vs Strippers*) and Darna (*Big Tits Zombie*) are infected, their physiological fallibility is antithetical to the untouchable fantasies they previously incarnated onstage. In some cases, that corpo[-]reality is overblown. In *Big Tits Zombie*, for instance, the undead ecdysiasts' bodies are not just unsettlingly mortal: they are monstrous. Nene's vagina grows teeth and breathes fire, while Darna's body erupts into a mass of tentacles, for example. These disgusting transformations are as hyperbolic as the impervious fantasy personae their customers previously lusted after. The inversion from unattainable fantasy-figure to ghastly zombie underscores just how exaggeratedly unreal the former state was.

More generally, zombified dancers represent inversions of performer-qua-fantasy and stripper-qua-possession. The ecdysiast's conventional role as "consumed" is reversed by the zombie dancer, who is a consumer *par excellence*. In *Zombie Strippers!* for instance, Lilith directly objectifies the clients, referring to them as "meat". This inversion amplifies a reality of the patron-performer relationship that is usually concealed within the strip-club's fantasy-space. The strippers are consumers inasmuch as they seek to harvest the customers' cash. In these films, that reality is commonly portrayed as disturbing, since it imperils the club's conventional fantasy. For example, during an after-hours conversation with fellow ecdysiasts in *Zombies! Zombies! Zombies!*, Dakota posits that dancers exploit those who are "stupid enough or horny enough to pay". Her tirade is antithetical to the alluring fantasy she sells within the club-setting.

Even though this reality must be occluded in order to facilitate fantasy, the clients in these films also recognise that stripping is driven by economics. For instance, Richard proclaims that performers will "say anything to keep a man in this nest long enough to bleed his wallet dry" in *Zombies Vs Strippers*. His assertion is imbued with fear, translating the strippers' aim (to earn a living) into a nightmare of endless gluttony. Undead ecdysiasts embody precisely that terror because they literally "bleed" the patrons. The stripper's fantasy-destroying financial motives are hypostatized as skin-tearing atrocity. In this respect, zombie strippers are dancers as seen through the lens of the customer's worst fears.

The strippers' worst fears are offered in almost identical terms. The zombified clients personify customers' desires at their most ugly. During *Zombies Vs Strippers'* finale, headline dancer Sugar announces that the "stripper's golden rule" is that it "doesn't matter whether or not you like the customer". The term "customer" is accompanied by shots of zombies storming the building. Sugar's rule echoes Richard's fear that performers only feign interest in their patrons to obtain money. Here, however, the clients' desire to "consume" ecdysiasts' routines is mirrored by zombies' desire to

feast upon flesh. In *Zombie Strippers!*, the customers are faced with the hideous reflection of their cravings. The living audience happily cheer while watching undead dancers, but run screaming when previously infected patrons escape from a cage in the club's basement. In direct contrast to their lustful celebration of the undead performers, the living clients are terrified by their counterparts. The zombified customers' putrid bodies and bloodlust elicit horror because they hypostatize the ugliness of the living patrons' desires.

Although both strippers and clients are monstrous in these films, the individuals themselves are far less disquieting than disparities between fantasy and reality are. One key source of discord is economic: money brings customer and ecdysiast together in fantasy-exchange, and yet that reality must be veiled in order to facilitate fantasy. Cash is the zombie-like threat that *a priori* jeopardises the strip-club's fantasy. In the zombie-invaded strip-club, that abhorrent potential manifests as literal destruction, both of fantasy and of persons. Furthermore, the zombies' economy of disgust replaces the strip-club's conventional cash-fuelled economy of desire. Dollar bills are substituted by new forms of currency: torn flesh, spilled bodily fluids, and uncontrolled rapacity. When supplanted by the peril of living death, money is divested of its power. The zombie incursion makes strange the allure and potency money formerly held in the club. Money previously led the strip-club's participants to enact insubstantial routines comprised of conventional behaviours. Compared with the fight for survival that replaces it, money's sovereignty is rendered absurd.

In this sense, the destructive epidemics affecting these strip-clubs evoke economic ruin. These four films are each set against a contemporary backdrop of global economic crisis that itself has been typically described in the lexis of "fear" (see Saunders and Allen, 2010: 41; Swedberg: 2010: 95), "horror" (see Herbertsson, 2010: 546; Mai in Berkowitz, 2012: 74), and even "apocalypse" (see Hahn, 2009; Williams, 2012: 121). The zombie bridges between consumer-capitalist desire and economic decline: the living dead are destructive consumers who create widespread disarray. The zombie horde's exponential growth symbolises a broader fear: the inability to impede economic crisis. Each individual zombie personifies disorder via their lack of both motor skills and behavioural self-control. Furthermore, each decomposing carcass emblematises socio-economic decay.

These zombie movies also evoke recession in literal ways. Each film ends with the strip-club disbanding, either because the strippers or the club-owners have expired. Moreover, the strip-clubs and/or their dancers are burdened by the horror of economic precariousness prior to zombie-invasion: consequently, the business's eventual collapse seems inevitable. For example, *Big Tits Zombie's* club-owner cites "recession" in his announcement that the strip-club must close. Before lead protagonist Lena arrives at the club, she is told that the spa business opposite the "Paradise Theatre" failed, resulting in the owner committing suicide along with his family. In this context, recession is pervasive and is linked to death. Indeed, the family's demise is inextricable from the death of the spa business itself. The spa remains as a monument to the deceased, haunting the landscape: its shell is akin to the undead's lifeless, husk-like presence. Additionally, Lena notes that the spa's gruesome history will damage the strip-club's popularity. Lena's assessment implies that mortality (corporeal fragility) and bankruptcy (economic reality) both disturb stripping's escapist fantasy.

Those connections between economics and death recur throughout the narrative. *Big Tits Zombie's* performers accidentally raise the dead because the strippers are without work; they discover the book of demonic incantations while bored and exploring the club's basement. Darna is the first to be killed by the undead because she returns into the cellar to retrieve a crate of cash she finds there. Her personal adage—"I love money"—is translated into pure horror as she is consumed by ghouls. In her final moments, her bloody, dismembered hand continues to grip the cash that she so desired. The zombies are not simply a retributive force, however. Darna is not plainly greedy, as she reveals

in her dying words: “My poor brothers and sisters. I need money for them”. Darna strips for monetary gain, but her motivation remains hidden until the zombie attack. The undead’s disruptive presence exposes realities that underpin the fantasy-surface.

Other films overtly link economic desire as a disgusting, corruptive force. In *Zombies Vs Strippers*, the living dead’s endless appetite for flesh is paralleled with monetary greed. Spider, the club-owner, is forced to shut down the “Tough Titty” because the business is in debt. However, the onset of zombie-plague causes numerous individuals to seek sanctuary in the previously clientless club. Placing economic desire before compassion, Spider agrees that Richard can enter the officially closed club because Richard is willing to lay out a \$300 cover charge. Spider’s callous opportunism is in-tune with the already desperate world surrounding the club. In the film’s opening, a homeless man (Pete) puts it to Spider that people on the streets are so hungry that they are “eating each other”. Spider presumes that Pete’s assessment is figurative, but eventually learns that he is referring to the zombie apocalypse. That Pete mistakes the undead for a wretched, impoverished human populace accentuates how close those two states are to one another. In *Zombies Vs Strippers*, economic desperation drives people to act in inhumane ways. Spider’s willingness to exploit their grave circumstances characterises money’s allure as potentially dehumanising, and therefore morally disgusting.

*Zombie Strippers!* similarly portrays money as a contaminant. Club-owner Ian sees the zombie infestation as an opportunity to profit, regardless of the human cost. The point is summated in a montage sequence which overlays shots of: a) decomposing strippers dancing for a baying crowd of living men; b) the zombies biting customers; c) the zombified patrons being caged in the club’s basement; d) Ian gleefully rubbing his hands; and e) cash floating through the air. The layered imagery denotes that these five elements are inseparable. Yet Ian’s callousness is established prior to outbreak. For instance, when one novice ecdysiast leaves the stage mid-performance, Ian barks “[g]et back out there right now or you’re dead to me”. In his terms, the dancers’ worth is purely economic. There is no difference between being deceased and being valueless in his account. His avarice is more ghoulish than the zombies’ desire for flesh. Ian’s greed is also deadening insofar as it leads him to reduce both performers and clients to disgusting amalgams of commodity and waste product.

As with *Zombies Vs Strippers*, in *Zombie Strippers!* the club-owner’s outlook is situated by the macro-context of economic chaos that impels such attitudes. In the film’s opening, a mock news report announces “[g]as prices rise to \$23 per gallon, leading to record quarterly earnings for oil companies of 989 trillion dollars” and “Brangelina adopts Ethiopia”. In the following sequence, scientists reveal that they created zombies out of “poor lost unfortunates who’ve had no other choice but to sell themselves to scientific experiments: the homeless; illegal immigrants; the American middle class”. The contrast between “middle class” desperation and “989 trillion dollar” earnings is indicative of financial pandemonium. The scientists do not distinguish between different tiers of the economic hierarchy. Financial ruin appears to have caused the conventional class structure to fold. Living death literalises that boundary-failure. Furthermore, the zombie’s disgusting corporeality and endless gluttony characterise economic imbalance as “crisis”.

The chaotic quality of this collapse is illuminated by the strip-club setting. Even before pestilence impacts on the club, parallels are established between strippers and zombies. The scientists transform those who “sell themselves” into undead super-soldiers, who are driven by “uninhibited, raw survival instincts”. This lexis is overtly matched by the ecdysiasts’ attitudes towards dancing for money. Kat refers to dancers as “warrior[s]” who rely on “raw survival instinct”, because, as fellow performer Sox observes, the stage is a site of “war”. Rather than vilifying strippers for “selling themselves”, the comparison draws attention to a host of implications. First, the parallel between

zombies and ecdysiasts culminates in their amalgamation. Moments after Kat's dialogue underlines the equivalence between dancers and zombies, she mutates into the first zombie performer. The titular hybrid-creatures collapse two categories ("zombie" and "stripper"), and that melding heralds broader boundary-breakdowns. Second, the scientists' conflation of class groupings is paralleled by the collapse of strip-club conventions. The latter are carefully constructed illusions based upon monetary exchange, just as the class system is. Both are dissolved in *Zombie Strippers!* The scientists' failure to sustain rhetorical distances between class categories is reflected by undead strippers breaching the physical distance that conventionally separates ecdysiasts and customers. Third, by conflating financial struggle, "war", and the battle to survive zombie onslaught, *Zombie Strippers!* depicts a world defined by conflict. In this context, stripping is painted as a constant fight to overcome the realities of economic exchange and corpo[-]reality.

These three implications are issued, but are not resolved within the narrative. They remain dialectical, evoking an atmosphere of turmoil that encapsulates the horrors of economic crisis. Tumult does not simply derive from the living dead then, but rather from socio-political realities that surround the strip-club. These realities are always-already part of the strip-club's closed fantasy-space: the zombie infestation just elucidates those connections. Once exposed, distasteful realities take over, replacing desirable fantasy with disgust. It is remarkable that the club's clients and workers managed to deny those realities in the first instance. More alarming than the strip-club's devolution is how long it takes for the club's inhabitants to face reality. Even the zombies' gruesomeness is less unsettling than that human tendency to privilege desirable fantasy over reality.

### **Conclusion: Disgust as Disruption**

These films are not simply "about" global recession. Rather, economic crisis is one articulation of turmoil. Zombies are inherently unsettling, and not only because they contaminate the living populace: the undead disrupt simply by existing. Since they are dead, zombies do not belong among mortals. The living dead epitomise Douglas's (2002: 50) contention that dirty matter is "out of place". Because zombies are putrid and brutal, they certainly do not befit the strip-club context, where sanitised sexiness and ordered behaviours rule.

In these films, zombies incarnate disgust. Their decaying bodies are repulsive. They equally embody desire inasmuch as they insatiably consume. Their presence in the strip-club setting inverts the fantasy of contactless, insubstantial engagement on which stripping is founded. Prior to outbreak, the customer's desire allows them to bypass the disgusting bodiliness of sexual congress, the messiness of social pressure, and the awkwardness of monetary exchange. The undead disrupt fantasy's operation because constructs such as conventionalised behaviours are meaningless to the zombies. The same disruptive capacity divests money of significance: cash is a "promise to pay" that only gains meaning by social assent.

The living dead expose how fragile such social agreements are. The strip-club setting denotes that fantasy and desire are crucial to maintaining social stability since the characters are brought together by those fantasies. However, stripping is simultaneously asocial insofar as the fantasy is maintained by performative personae, escapism, and a lack of physical interaction. Zombies overturn those constructs by instigating bodily contact, and reducing humans to meat-objects. In the zombie-infected strip-club, the living must forsake fantasy or die. Zombies thus highlight aspects of human life that are prerequisites for the enjoyment of fantasy, such as base-level survival instinct.

Although zombies are unreal, their presence paradoxically causes fantasy (that which is desired) to yield to reality (that which *is*). One such reality is material: humans are physically vulnerable. Zombies expose that reality by tearing into fragile human flesh. Concurrently, zombies reflect that reality by *being* rotting human cadavers. Another reality is rooted in greed. Many of the living in these films opt for selfishness in the face of necessity. Zombies again personify that trait via their ceaseless, destructive self-indulgence. The undead are at once “out of place”, and are “us”.

The zombies do not just lay bare that which we are, however: they also signify that which we *desire not to be*. One reason fantasy might be alluring is because it allows the fantasiser to evade disgusting realities. A second possibility is that reality is so disgusting that it has to be avoided: fantasy is a *necessity*. That does not mean that fantasy is easy to maintain. In fact, since it entails actively denying reality, fantasy is difficult and strained. Furthermore, fantasy is as fallible as the mortal body. Fantasy collapses around the protagonists in these films precisely because their desire to believe in fantasy leaves them ill-equipped to deal with reality. While one is distracted by fantasy, one denies that which disgusts: reality itself.

As numerous scholars have contended, disgust is significant because it provides insight into our assumptions about the world (see de Melo-Martin and Salles, 2011: 161; Korsmeyer, 2012: 760; Niemelä, 2010: 267). Zombies are apposite conduits for such exploration because they are simultaneously so repulsive and yet appealing (as the popularity of zombie-media denotes). As Kendall (2011: 3) observes, some forms of disgust analysis “swiftly conver[t] the intense phenomenological experiences relayed by disgust into a fixed and neatly contained moment”. The zombie is one creature that refuses to stay “dead” in this sense, reinvigorating rather than containing that which it unsettles. Most disturbingly, the zombie is a pertinent reminder that what rises from the grave, that which epitomises disgust, is us.

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1. This chapter's case study films feature performers who are principally associated with the adult entertainment industry, including Adriana Sephoria (*Zombies Vs. Strippers*), Sola Aoi (*Big Tits Zombie*), and Jenna Jameson (*Zombie Strippers!*).