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INFECTION, MEDIA, AND CAPITALISM:

From Early Modern Plagues to Postmodern Zombies

STEPHANIE BOLUK AND WYLIE LENZ

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the shift in fictional representations of plague and viral infection in relation to technological, medial, and economic developments. Ben Jonson's play The Alchemist and Daniel Defoe's novel A Journal of the Plague Year revolve around historical visitations of plague in London. This study takes London as its constant variable; the city governs our choice of texts. They negotiate anxieties of the early modern era as mercantilism gives way to the process of accumulation tied to the developing free market as theorized by classical political economy. Two recent motion pictures, set during fictional London outbreaks, display a similar preoccupation with transforming economic spaces. In these texts, however, the relatively young figure of the viral zombie stands in place of and performs a function similar to the more venerable plague. Shaun of the Dead and 28 Days Later both serve as vehicles for expression of the ever-accelerating viral nature of global capitalism. By adopting a transhistorical approach, we demonstrate the relationship between media and plague that emerges, as the fact of infection generates not only a surrounding rhetoric of plague but also a veritable plague of rhetorics. In keeping with recent plague scholarship, this approach emphasizes the close kinship between plague and textuality by treating plague as a text to be read on the individual and political body and the structure of plague writing itself as a mirror of its subject, proliferating with a serial contagiousness.

Textual accounts of epidemic infection from that of Herodotus onward have developed a common discourse and a set of tropes that cut across centuries and cultures. As Elana Gomel summarizes, "This pattern comprises panic, dissolution of socioeconomic structures, and despair, succeeded by a makeshift return to normality once the disease has run its course" (408). The discourse of plague surrounding both individual bodies as well as the body politic is circumscribed by the nature of infectious disease. Yet, at the same time, this pattern has not prevented plague from functioning as a polysemic

signifier. René Girard's seminal essay "The Plague in Literature and Myth" (1974) describes how despite this "strange uniformity" amongst plague texts, the plague "metaphor is endowed with an almost incredible vitality" (833, 835). Indeed, the plague as metaphor has become even more prevalent than the disease itself, whether we speak of the pandemics of the medieval and early modern periods or contemporary illnesses such as AIDS, SARS, or H1N1. Since the early modern period, textual articulations of anxiety regarding biological infection have simultaneously operated as expressions of otherwise largely unspoken anxieties arising in response to the interconnected changes wrought by the onset of modernity generally and the spread of capitalism specifically. Genre and media transformations facilitated by technological innovations often associated with the development of the capitalist marketplace, what Terry Harpold has termed the "conceits of the upgrade path" (3), have produced expressions of these economic anxieties and network fears in ways that directly address the specific medial context in which they are situated. This essay will explore these issues by comparing complementary texts dealing with infection: two early modern plague narratives and two postmodern zombie films, all set in London, so that the city itself serves as a constant variable in our study.

Ben Jonson's play *The Alchemist* and Daniel Defoe's novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* revolve around historical visitations of plague in London. They negotiate anxieties of the early modern era as mercantilism gives way to the process of accumulation tied to the developing free market as theorized by classical political economy. Two motion pictures, set during fictional London outbreaks, display a similar preoccupation with transforming economic spaces. In these cinematic texts, however, the relatively new rhetorical figure of the viral zombie stands in place of and performs a function similar to the more venerable plague. *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), directed by Edgar Wright and co-written by Simon Pegg, and *28 Days Later* (2002), directed by Danny Boyle, both serve as vehicles for expression of the ever-accelerating viral nature of global capitalism. This essay explores how in these texts infection and capitalism exist in a dialectical relationship: the success of the free market can be measured by the scope of its figuratively infectious spread; that spread produces an increasingly integrated world; and that integration produces a means for the acceleration of literal infection, which in turn brings about a crisis in capitalism. By adopting a transhistorical approach, this essay will demonstrate the important relationship between media and plague that emerges as the fact of infection generates not only a surrounding

rhetoric of plague but a veritable plague of rhetorics. The communicability of texts becomes inseparable from the communicability of plague. This approach is in keeping with recent plague scholarship (Cooke, Gilman) that has placed emphasis on the close kinship between plague and textuality, treating plague as a text to be read on the individual and political body and the structure of plague writing itself as a mirror of its subject, proliferating with a serial contagiousness.

PLAGUE AND THE THEATER

The Alchemist was first staged in 1610, almost immediately after the end of a sixteen-month period during which the theaters of London were closed due to a violent visitation of the bubonic plague. Unlike many Elizabethan dramatists, Jonson focuses on current issues and uses local settings to satirize aspects of contemporary society. Still, plague and the threat of infection remain largely unaddressed directly by the characters in their dialogue. (Since the economic livelihood of the theater depended on public performance, companies would likely have avoided drawing attention to the hazardous nature of the playhouse, as it was thought that plague spread orally [Cooke 47n10]). In a moment of self-reflexivity, Jonson's characters explicitly discuss the impact of plague on the theater, when Mammon makes a promise "to fright the plague / Out of the kingdom in three months," and Surly replies, "And I'll / Be bound, the players shall sing your praises" (2.1.69–71). In this way, *The Alchemist* acknowledges its status as a piece of theater, and that theater takes place at a site of contained spectacle; any threat appearing on stage remains safely cordoned off from the lives of the audience.

Because Jonson restricts the plague's infection of his narrative to the edges of otherwise comedic action, he avoids prompting his audience to dwell on the literal threat of plague and thus become distracted from the figurative meanings of infection. As Cheryl Lynn Ross observes, "Most of the characters who approach the alchemist are anxious for profit rather than cure" (440). Rather than provoking overt expressions of fear over illness and death, a visitation of plague in London not only provides the dramatic setting, but it also serves to set the plot in motion. Like the rest of the city's aristocratic class, Master Lovewit has fled to the country, leaving his servant Jeremy to assume control over the house during this carnivalesque period of social upheaval. Critics of the play have observed that plague stands as a metaphor for a moral infection, as all the characters have clearly been touched by

the contagion of avarice. One might push this broad interpretation further, adding greater material and historical specificity by arguing that the play not only satirizes selfish and hypocritical acquisitiveness, but also presents a figurative model for thinking about the impending social and economic shifts initiated by capital accumulation at the onset of the modern era.

The visitation offers an opportunity for profit by those members of society who normally would not command such benefit from their own labor, leading to a potential social leveling of the sort promised by advocates of a free market economy. Girard observes that the chief crisis accompanying plague is the crisis of “undifferentiation”—the “destruction of specificities” (833). Plague acts as a social leveler, infecting regardless of any class, racial, or national distinction. It ignores borders and destroys the perceived demarcations between self and other. In the case of Jonson’s play, the entrepreneurial agency demonstrated by Jeremy alludes to those contemporary social changes that those with a vested interest in the socioeconomic status quo perceived as worrisome and in need of containment.

While Jeremy’s actions cause rifts in the established order, he remains in the end little more than an uppity servant resubjugated by his master. Subtle, the titular alchemist, displays behavior far more provocative, in part because even while he fails in his immediate endeavor to gain economic advantage, he escapes at the play’s end and remains free to renew his efforts at a future point in time. Ross notes that “Civic authorities considered ‘masterless men,’ a new element in a changing economic system, as harbingers of disease and as plagues themselves” (445). Nominally, of course, Subtle is a rogue from London’s outer liberties, a site of industrial production, so one might be inclined to identify him with the emerging industrial proletariat. Certainly, he is an outsider who has penetrated the city during a time of social confusion. His actions within the play, however, seem to be those of a distinctly bourgeois entrepreneur. Just as capitalism upsets the position of a nonproductive nobility and gentry by facilitating the rise of the bourgeoisie, this particular visitation of plague upsets the social order. The plague violates physical and social boundaries, reorganizing the structure of economic relations.

The situation of Jonson’s characters implicitly addresses the promise of capitalism: while theorists of classic political economy argue that capitalism eliminates the illegitimate perpetuation of the nonproductive gentry and thus gives everyone an opportunity to accumulate wealth, in fact this new economic order favors the bourgeoisie. This promise is seductive, even contagious. In referring to Mammon, one of Subtle’s clients who hopes to profit

from the upheaval caused by the plague, Rebecca Totaro says that his “words become a positive contagion and enticing bait for a plague-time audience” (114). In a move that explicitly conflates plague and its cure with capital accumulation, Mammon claims that the elixir he hopes to obtain from Subtle will simultaneously bring wealth and banish the plague (although only after the onset of the plague has granted him access to the elixir in the first place). He boasts of the elixir, “‘Tis the secret / Of nature naturized ’gainst all infections, / Cures all diseases coming of all causes” (2.1.63–65). He further promises to behave benevolently following what is in essence the necessary period of primitive accumulation, saying “I’ll give away so much unto my man, / Shall serve th’ whole city, with preservative” (2.1.73–74). Just as “elixir” literally refers to both a cure for illness and an alchemic potion that transmutes base metals to gold, “preservative” here has an equivocal meaning, since it could refer to either cure or money. At this point, Surly, the play’s most skeptical and perceptive character, interrupts, asking whether Mammon will distribute this cure in the same way “As he that built the waterwork, does with water?” (2.1.76). Surly’s quip allegorically speaks to a general incredulity regarding the promise of capitalism to benefit all of society.

The Alchemist is a comedy and, as such, ends with a wedding and a restoration of social order; the play assures the audience that wealth will remain with the master class. While Subtle proves himself adept at capital accumulation, the wealth he acquires ultimately reverts to Master Lovewit, owner of the house. Still, this reassurance is not unqualified, in that some changes cannot be reversed. “Lovewit does not return London to its original, pre-plague [or, one might say, pre-capitalist] state; he does not restore Subtle’s booty to its rightful owners. Instead, he appropriates it himself” (Ross 449). Furthermore, when Lovewit effectively puts an end to the schemes set in motion by Jeremy and Subtle, Mammon laments that “Not I, [but] the Commonwealth has” (5.3.407) lost hope for a better future to be found in capital accumulation—thus the success or failure of the bourgeois capitalist is conflated with the success or failure of the state.

PLAGUE AND THE NOVEL

Like Jonson, Defoe reacts to a specific visitation in his writing. Contrary to the comedy of *The Alchemist*, Defoe’s novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a dark tale of London’s 1665–66 outbreak of plague. The infection does not lurk around the edges of the text; instead, it takes center stage, as it were. Likewise,

plague's utility as a construct for thinking about the spread of capitalism becomes more explicit. The circulation of capital becomes the instrument of plague, as it spreads in the marketplace and trade routes. Likewise, Defoe's protagonist H.F., a businessman dependent on the circulation of capital, becomes a figure of the plague, navigating the city and operating, as Gomel has argued, within a liminal space between living and dead (411). This living deadness, both of capital as well as Defoe's protagonist, extends to the specific media properties of print and the emerging genre of the novel. Here, Walter Ong's interpretation of writing as an act of re-animation, a dead object capable of resurrection in new contexts, becomes particularly telling. These three core aspects of *Journal of the Plague Year* deeply interpenetrate the work, investing it with a kind of living dead logic.

It is no coincidence that Defoe chooses a businessman as the narrator of his fictional account. As Jonson did before him, Defoe focuses on the changes in social labor relations, although he pushes the theme even further. With the passage of more than one hundred years between the first performance of Jonson's play and the publication of Defoe's novel, socioeconomic conditions have changed. Most obviously, the middle class has grown. Rather than offering characters who comically ape the aspirations of the bourgeoisie (only to receive their comeuppance), Defoe creates in his narrator H.F. a realistically bourgeois protagonist in possession of a trade (as a saddler), a shop, and servants. When the plague infects London, H.F. cannot afford to abandon his shop in the same way the gentry have the collective liberty to close their houses and retreat to the country. Fittingly, his reasoning for remaining in London conflates economic and moral imperatives (even as he ultimately concludes that fleeing is the only way to avoid the plague). As H.F. explains, the importance of "carrying on my Business and Shop" triumphed over "the Preservation of my Life" (11). He identifies "Business" as the only sufficient reason to go about in public during a time of plague and thus risk infection (6). So being a member of the middle class necessarily entails increased risk of infection. To engage in capitalist enterprise is to submit to a condition of living death; unable to evade catastrophe, the businessman must operate with crisis as a precondition. The plague first penetrates London through trade, so the only way to escape infection is to escape trade.

One such escape is expressed through H.F.'s (and, implicitly, Defoe's) proto-Romantic nostalgia for a precapitalist, rural-pastoral economy and its modes of self-provision when he includes lengthy reports of laborers who fled the city (while providing only the barest details of those members of the

leisure class who have retreated). Although H.F. speaks from the perspective of a metropolitan shopkeeper, anxieties regarding the spread of capitalism and systems of wage labor inform the novel's subtext. The book's longest anecdote (100–21)—itself a novel in miniature within the longer example of the emergent novelistic form—celebrates the self-sufficiency practiced by workers who use their skills to survive out of town, and outside the market system: “They came into a Condition to live without any assistance or supplies from the Towns; and it was well they did, for the Country was soon after fully infected” (118). Indeed, the novel begins with an acknowledgment that infection spreads along the routes of exchange and situates itself within the marketplace.

There are many points at which the movement of plague and capitalism coalesce, with the language of plague and market exchange coinciding in unexpected ways. H.F. speaks of infection in 1722 in terms of the “sovereign” or “invisible hand of God” (178, 191) and the “finger of god” (190), prefiguring Adam Smith’s 1776 metaphor of the “invisible hand” at work in a free market in *Wealth of Nations*. Regarding the spread of the plague and the functioning of the free market, one sees a similarly deterministic, even fatalistic rhetoric: the natural laws are in place (whether from God or human nature), and human beings must work within these laws, as any violation will lead to social disaster. Or, to take a more subtle example, we may trace the uses of the multivalent word “token.” Tokens were signs of the plague: inspectors search for “Tokens of Sickness,” those telltale dark red spots that developed around the chest and stomach of the infected (*Journal* 6). The word, however, also refers to money, a meaning H.F. evokes when he speaks of walking through “*Token-House-Yard* in *Lothbury*” (69), so named for “the location of a mint that coined royal farthing tokens” (69n7). H.F. merges the two meanings when he explains that “those Spots they call’d the Tokens were really gangreen Spots, or mortified Flesh in small knobs as broad as a little silver Penny” (154). This conflation is an inversion of what occurs in *The Alchemist* when “elixir” is used to denote both cure and money. Although *physical* money is considered dirty and potentially tainted with plague (H.F. tells of shopkeepers soaking their money in jars of vinegar before touching it), these puns reflect the way in which the plague, despite its capacity as social leveler, remained a heavily classed disease. In both texts, the leisure class, which could afford to do so, flees London and the infection. Wealth ensures health, since capital and therefore the means to travel were the most effective (if not the only) preservative. By contrast, the laborers in Defoe’s

anecdote demonstrate the extreme hardship the poorer classes faced when they risked flight.

Defoe's narrative is delivered directly to the audience by print technology, in contrast to Jonson's performed play. As Antonin Artaud has observed, "the theater, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative" (27). Defoe's chosen medium of the novel, when compared to a theatrical performance, both lessens and heightens the threat of contagion. On the one hand, books are read individually, and solitary acts provide safety from literal infection. On the other hand, while a play remains restricted to the stage, the books themselves (and the ideas they contain) penetrate the home in a figurative infection. And as Ernest Gilman has observed, this figurative infection also carried with it the threat of literal infection as it was thought that "the book itself might be a source of contagion, 'plague' harboring the plague" (97). At the beginning of *A Journal*, when he describes the new outbreak of plague, H.F. conflates the spread of news via print media with the spread of the plague. In so doing, he acknowledges his ambivalence regarding print: "We had no such things as printed News Papers in those Days, to spread Rumors and Reports of Things . . . so that things did not spread instantly over the whole Nation, as they do now" (5). Instead, H.F. explains, prior to the rise of newspapers, "such things" were "handed about by word of mouth only" (5), a process that allowed such rumors to gradually die off. The imagery with which Defoe begins *A Journal* evokes the blurring of the biological and media-based forms of plague from the outset. In the past, rumor had been directly tied to plague through the miasmatic theory of transmission; for Defoe, this miasmatic operation is remediated into textual form.

Paula McDowell has traced Defoe's investment in establishing the authority of print over unreliable (and feminized) modes of oral communication in *A Journal*. Although this debate cannot be reduced to a simple ameliorative model of media development, in which print culture replaces orality, Defoe not only argues for the relative value of print, but, through H.F., he makes a more specific claim for the legitimacy of the *novel*, a print form that emerges with the rise of the middle class. Even while he scrupulously admits to the limits of his direct knowledge of some of the anecdotes he relates, H.F. maintains that his story is meaningful for its audience "*whether my Account be exactly according to Fact or no*," asserting that its status as fiction does not detract from its value (100, emphasis added).

Walter Ong's influential study, *Orality and Literacy*, lays out the remarkable cognitive differences between oral and writing cultures, and the deeply

embedded typographic biases that structure literate consciousness—biases in which McDowell demonstrates that *A Journal* actively participates. Ong notes that “[o]ne of the most startling paradoxes inherent in writing is its close association with death” (81). Offering up a genealogy that traces the history of this relationship beginning with “Plato’s charge that writing is inhuman, thing-like, and that it destroys memory,” he concludes that “The paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers” (81). Ong thus frames one of the central structuring relations of writing as the operation of the living dead. Writing may be resurrected or reanimated, but its intractability—the inability of writing to change its mind, to respond to its surroundings—surrounds it in an aura of deadness. A text is a lifeless object that continually circulates within what Ong terms the “lifeworld.” This paradoxical status of writing as undead undergirds the virality of the emerging technology of print and the devastation of plague. Appropriately, then, H.F. is the spokesperson for this medium, as his status as plague witness already places him in a liminal position between life and death (a point developed later in this essay). Just as plague and rhetoric can mutually contaminate one another, inscription technologies can manifest themselves as a kind of zombie, producing discourses of the living dead.

THE ZOMBIE AS PLAGUE

Despite Defoe’s fears, the plague never reappeared in London after the late seventeenth century with the same ferocity as it did in 1665. His writing serves as a bookend to the most devastating period in bubonic plague’s history. As biological disease has become increasingly manageable with the progress of modernity, new forms of infection have taken the place of plague as instruments for representing the anxieties that accompany other aspects of that progress. As Girard explains,

the plague, as a literary theme, is still alive today, in a world less and less threatened by real bacterial epidemics. This fact looks less surprising now, as we come to realise that the properly medical aspects of the disease never were essential; in themselves, they always played a minor role, serving mostly as a disguise for an even more terrible threat that no science has ever been able to conquer. The threat is still very much with us, and it would be a mistake to consider the presence of the plague in our literature as a matter of formal routine. (845)

This condition—the presence of a persistent, “even more terrible threat”—in turn facilitates the invention in the twentieth century of a wholly fictional infectious threat as an embodiment of the fears that for so many centuries were personified by a previously inexplicable plague (this inexplicability being the source of its metaphoric plenitude). The zombie functions thus. It serves as an iconic image through which the fantasy of humanity on the threshold of apocalypse is perpetually restaged. The figure becomes a metaphoric vessel standing in for the real viral terrors of contemporary society. Zombies, like plague, are great social levelers and their model of contagion is one dependent on a social model of interpenetration and connectivity.

In cinema, the contemporary zombie and the rhetoric of plague are never far removed from each other. Most basically, a description of a plague victim could likewise be applied to the now-familiar shuffling, groaning zombie: “Buboes force the victim into crooked, misshapen stances to relieve the pressure and lessen the pain: the legs are splayed, the arms uplifted, the head turned away to one side. Protruding unmistakably, they declare the disease of the sufferer to be written on the body, there for all to read” (Cooke 19). While the figure has historical roots traceable to the zombie of Afro-Caribbean *vodou* culture, the plague zombie is a twentieth-century phenomenon, a new monster emerging at the moment when modern science was unmasking the mystery of pestilence. The genealogy of this *viral* zombie begins with George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). This film effectively liberates the monster from its folkloric origins, so that it becomes an even more terrifying force as it is no longer a focalized villainous figure serving as the wellspring of evil, but an infectious, automatic horde. The zombie emerges as an ideal replacement for the plague: the infectious spread of this fictional and personified virus becomes as metaphorically vital, fungible, and multivalent as the bubonic plague itself once was. Infection by zombie is just as arbitrary, inescapable, and devastating as infection by plague.

In the early modern works we have examined, plague and capitalism form a dialectic in which the source of plague is explicitly tied to trade routes, public markets, and economic exchange. What was imported and distributed as a result of capitalist exchange would, ironically, also result in capitalism’s undoing—imploding it from within by producing a collapse, albeit temporary, of economic structures. In the same way these plague works describe a relationship between the spread of plague and the spread of capitalism, so too does the viral zombie serve as an allegorized figure of capital. In one respect, the zombie-as-critique-of-capital motif is an argument

that has been well rehearsed by scholars,¹ and the critique of consumption and contemporary life is made explicit in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Zombies are pure desiring machines—they are creatures composed entirely of excess desire. They hunger for flesh, but their undead status means they do not require food. This excess, first exemplified in Romero's films, is didactically harnessed as a metaphor for consumption since the sole purpose of the zombie is to satisfy an urge unmotivated by any physical need. The Romero zombie is a different entity from the voodoo zombie, but both forms stress a relationship to alienation—one is focused largely around the issue of slavery, while the more recent cinematic zombie² is a contradictory figure that embodies both the dialectical struggle of capitalism against itself as well as a kind of proletarian revolution. The threat the zombie poses is an exaggerated threat of the dismantling of social and economic institutions brought on by plague. Just as plague has a polysemic rhetorical structure in which it expresses cultural contradictions, so too does the zombie express these conflicted anxieties toward the virality of contemporary late capital. The capitalist position is that capitalism solves the problems it creates: that capitalism entails its own solution. The Marxian argument is that capitalism leads to the end of capitalism—that it entails its own demise. These competing theories of economic history—one static, the other dialectical—are embodied in the eschatological implications of the zombie.

Since the introduction forty years ago of the Romero-inflected figure who replicates by transmitting the affliction through bite or blood, the spread of zombies in the media has become as infectious as the zombie itself. In recent years, there has been an explosion of zombie works across multiple media ranging from survivalist horror (the *Resident Evil* and *Left 4 Dead* series) to satires (*Fido*) to psychological explorations of the figure of the zombie (*Land of the Dead*). There is an almost compulsive structure of repetition to the epidemic-like multiplication of films, series, remakes, homages, and parodies. The contagious nature of the zombie is reflected in this serial, intertextual structure of filmmaking. With this proliferation, the political and symbolic connotations of the zombie have similarly expanded to the extent that films such as *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* do not use the zombie as a metaphor, but serve as explicit, self-reflexive explorations of zombie-as-metaphor. One could argue that the proliferation of zombie films is not exclusively due to the popularity of the figure, since its iterative potential could be attributed to its ontological status as a form of plague writing. The zombie film participates in what Jennifer Cooke has described as the "episodemic" structure of plague narratives (24).

Gomel argues that plague “is governed by the logic of repetition. The chain of death grows by addition of more and more identical links” (409). While a backwards glance demonstrates the way zombie films fit snugly within the genealogy of plague writing, one can also retrofit plague narratives with zombie ideology. Gomel describes H.F. and other fictional narrators of pestilence in a way that imbues their position as plague witnesses with a kind of zombified status. Plague witnesses such as H.F. are:

suspended between life and death, historians among the graves. Moving through the world of death, they are “as if among the dead themselves,” and yet at the same time they speak for the remnant of the living. Straddling the boundary between life and death, they lose their individuality to become the voice of the plague-stricken community. Even if this community dwindles to a bare minimum, there is still the possibility of its survival—and by the same token, the possibility of yet another flare-up of the disease. The narrator’s collective voice represents the duration of pestilence, its refusal of final closure. (411)

H.F.’s liminal status among the living and the dead and the way his role as chronicler results in a loss of individuality convert him into a figurative zombie. Moreover, as a survivor he implicitly contains the possibility of a sequel in the way the remaining survivors of zombie films gesture toward the possibility of more films. The living represent a “refusal of final closure” through the suggestion that yet another outbreak might occur.

THE ANALOG ZOMBIE

Shaun of the Dead and *28 Days Later* both take early-twenty-first-century London as their setting. To situate a cinematic narrative of zombie infection in London is to locate it within the city’s history of plague. These motion pictures both feature Londoners attempting to escape a zombie pandemic, and in doing so they update the trajectory of the early modern plague texts we have already discussed. Additionally, as with *The Alchemist* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *28 Days Later* and *Shaun of the Dead* serve as potent contrasts to each other, both due to the way in which they respond to the cultural context of England as well as the specific conditions of their respective mediums. Whereas *The Alchemist* and *A Journal* demonstrate important medial differences when contrasting the representation of plague in theater and in print, a comparison between analog film and digital video in *Shaun of the Dead* and *28 Days Later* also demonstrates a critical transformation in the figure of the plague zombie.

Shaun of the Dead portrays a zombie uprising seen from the perspective of an appliance salesman who is simultaneously trying to reconcile with his discontented girlfriend while finding purpose in his highly automated life. In stiflingly routine fashion, Shaun works, plays video games with his roommate Ed, and drinks at a pub. In this film, oblivion is the key trope. The humor as well as the didactic message is predicated on the characters' obliviousness to their surroundings, so that the film wears the symbolic parallel between humans and zombies on its sleeve. This argument is made visually explicit through the use of two mirrored tracking shots of Shaun walking through the city before and after the zombie crisis. In the first tracking shot, a comedic tension exists because the viewer expects zombies to appear at any moment. In the second, Shaun himself is so oblivious that he fails to notice that everyone in town has become a zombie. Although a zombie film might typically set up an "us" versus "them" dichotomy between the living and the living dead, the standard didactic message exposes this position as false consciousness. (During an especially pedantic moment in *Dawn of the Dead*, Romero's zombie film set in a shopping mall, Francine asks Peter as they overlook the zombie-infested plaza, "What the hell are they?" to which Peter replies, "They're just us, that's all.") This chiasmatic relationship, in which the dead are alive and the living are all but dead, illustrates the perils of a postindustrial consumer society.

The zombie narrative not only invokes the well-established tradition of plague writing, but through the cultural contradictions that surround these tortured and abject figures, it articulates a variety of anxieties toward twentieth- and twenty-first-century capitalism. What the two tracking shots in *Shaun of the Dead* encapsulate are two poles of contemporary crisis that Susan Sontag expresses in her essay "The Imagination of Disaster" when she writes, "Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror" (224). *Shaun of the Dead* pithily expresses this sentiment. Yet, despite its apocalyptic allusions, it is a comedic parody of zombie films and, as a result, ends with a happy, if tongue-in-cheek, resolution. Serving as a *deus ex machina*, the military swoops in at the eleventh hour to rescue Shaun and Liz (after the rest of their party has been killed), and a miracle cure is found, simultaneously saving London and resolving the problem of low-wage labor and social alienation. The ending of *Shaun of the Dead* serves as an ironic redemption of the mundane. As the characters literally ascend upwards on a freight elevator toward safety, the film exalts the hetero-

normative coupling of the two survivors. No longer dissatisfied with the unremitting banality of their life, they have embraced their social position.

The zombie functions as a signifier replete with cultural contradictions. On the one hand, the zombie destroys the conditions under which capitalism can function—a feature that is often dramatically demonstrated in films through money scattered in the street. On the other hand, this polysemic zombie serves as a figure for capitalism itself. It can be read as the fulfillment of a millennial vision of capitalism as an “end of history.” The zombie apocalypse may signal an end to human progress, but the reign of undifferentiated zombies is perpetual—and one fueled by creatures kept in a stasis of permanent desire. Yet, at the same time, the zombies embody Marx’s notion that capitalism will destroy itself from within by enacting a proletarian revolution that introduces a new, classless society. In the case of *Shaun of the Dead*, this revolution is interrupted and the zombies are once again subordinated to the interest of capital. In a “Remembering Z-Day” newscast, zombies are referred to as “ideal recruitment for the service industry” and are seen onscreen collecting grocery carts in a parking lot. Exploited as a pool of free menial labor and sensationalist entertainment, zombies are transformed from social threat to perpetual motion machines able to be used without being used up. The zombie as slave labor works to create a streamlined and frictionless capitalism. This gesture recalls the way in which Jeremy and Subtle’s capital gains are redirected to their “rightful” source at the conclusion of *The Alchemist*. In both comedies, plague results in the reestablishment of financial stability and the status quo as a direct consequence of the crisis.

Shaun of the Dead reflects the rise in zombie works that attempt to think past the apocalypse. While the dystopian future of a world that has been decimated by a zombie disaster has been thoroughly imagined, *Shaun of the Dead* projects a future in which the horror is domesticated and integrated into quotidian living. The “zombies are us” message of many zombie horror films is brought to an even finer point with works that situate the zombie in contemporary middle-class life. At the film’s end, the zombies have come to occupy a social position that is something of a mixture between pet and slave. Hence, in the same way certain economic sectors of London persist and operate amidst the raging plague in *The Alchemist* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, this film shows individuals adapting to life in which the zombie threat is permanently among them. With the borders between health and disease impossible to maintain, society is transformed to one in which, as Giorgio Agamben writes, the state of exception “has by now become the rule” (9).

THE DIGITAL ZOMBIE

Compared with the shambling zombie of *Shaun of the Dead*, the creatures of *28 Days Later* are accelerated. They do not shuffle; instead, the infected operate at the extreme limits of human capacity. These accelerated zombies are pathologized—they have a biological origin, with the infection being a product of a virus engineered by humans. The plot is set in motion when a group of animal rights activists release a monkey infected with what is called the “Rage virus.” The virus is transmittable to humans and produces an atavistic urge to kill. Because of the high speed of infection (it takes seconds as opposed to hours) and the bloodlust of the infected, the virus immediately spreads through the entire island nation. England’s status as an island is the only thing that prevents the infection from becoming a worldwide pandemic (something the sequel to the movie later amends). The film follows the protagonist Jim who, after an accident that has left him comatose for a month, wakes up Rip Van Winkle-style to the chilling sight of a completely vacated London. This moment in the film recalls H.F.’s description of a deserted London. When Jim encounters a church filled with zombies, the infected descend on him with a frightening swiftness.

These changes to the figure of the zombie can be seen as a response to technological, aesthetic, and cultural shifts. Just as *A Journal* is self-reflexive about the rise of print culture (information is now “spread instantly across the nation”), *28 Days Later*’s status as digital film similarly sets it apart from an older tradition of zombie films—one could call this rabid, viral, accelerated zombie a “digital” zombie. This figure reflects anxieties toward contemporary technocapitalism. Moreover, in the same way orality and typographic culture cannot be dissociated in Defoe, the digital zombie and its more traditional analog counterpart coexist with each other. Moveable type does not simply supersede chirography or orality just as the digital does not replace the analog, but there is a dialogic play among the various technologic, medial, and generic characteristics of the works we are examining whose stories are tied to the geographic space of London. *28 Days Later* is a hybrid movie, with several parts recorded in analog format, but shot mainly on digital video—a feature that makes it economically feasible to represent London abandoned and in ruins. At the same time, the movie is heavily stylized and characterized by editing that features rapid cuts and heavily compressed montage scenes. It assumes an audience sufficiently fluent in cinematic language in order to parse the number of in-between frames with an eye toward inferring a continuity of action. These formal elements of visual

acceleration and temporal compression aesthetically contribute to rebooting the figure of the zombie.

In Defoe's opening paragraph, anxieties regarding the dissemination of information are mixed with the spread of plague itself. *28 Days Later* opens with a similarly self-referential gesture: upon entering the laboratory, the activists discover chimpanzees being subjected to a *Clockwork Orange*-style barrage of violent news footage, the implication being that the violent imagery infects the animals with humanity's desire to destroy itself.³ Recalling Defoe's first page, this opening scene similarly conflates its own medium-specificity with the spread of the disease. Cooke writes that *28 Days Later* acts as a purveyor "of the very screen violence that they purport to critique, in moves which could be interpreted along differing lines as immanent criticism, cynical exploitation or plain disavowal of recent and commonplace media fears" (176). The undecidable status of the film's opening conceit in which screen violence is allegorized as infection is similar to H.F.'s ambivalence toward the rise of newsprint. Both film and novel explore the unstable, interdependent boundary between reality and fiction.

With one of the four horsemen in Revelations symbolizing Pestilence, apocalyptic and millennial angst has been deeply embedded in the discourse surrounding what was once the unstoppable, incomprehensible force of plague. In zombie films, more secular, economic anxieties surrounding the totality of capital literally bleed into an apocalypse. *28 Days Later* is a slight variation from traditional zombie films since the infected remain mortal. The zombie plague as represented in the majority of films following Romero, however, represents a postapocalyptic era in which only zombies will remain to walk the earth. What this fantasy of the zombie apocalypse offers is a kind of materialist inversion of Christian resurrection—instead of soul without body, the zombie is a body without soul. Once the last humans have died in a world overrun by zombies, the postapocalyptic end of history is complete. There is perfect stasis. The zombie fulfills the dream of an end to history. Gomel describes the apocalyptic plague body as a "suffering body, a text written in the script of stigmata, scars, wounds and sores" (406). The zombie embodies a similar figure of apocalyptic pestilence. This materialist inversion of eternal life can be read against Marx's narrative of economic progress, itself a materialist inversion of Christian eschatology. The zombies enact a kind of hysterical imagining of a proletarian revolution; they are a distorted fantasy of a postapocalyptic, classless society that articulates twentieth-century anxieties toward crowd and mob behavior. Such anxieties are expressed

in works such as *Psychology of the Crowd* (1896), in which Gustave Le Bon writes, “In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power, crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies. When the structure of a civilisation is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall” (19).

For those individuals who survive to find themselves living within a postapocalyptic landscape, it is a common trope of the disaster narrative to show characters indulging in the fantasy of unfettered consumption—the last cold comfort that can be offered to the Last Man. In *The Alchemist* Jeremy has taken over his master’s home, while in *Journal of the Plague Year* H.F. tells the story of visiting his brother’s shop to find that it has been pillaged by the local women who break in and steal his hats. In *Shaun of the Dead*, Shaun and his friends sequester themselves in a pub where they take advantage of the bar, and in *28 Days Later* there is a playful moment during which the characters ransack a grocery store, running carefree among the aisles, stocking up on expensive scotch and as much food as they can carry. On the way out of the store, Frank mimics payment by placing his bank card on the counter with the colors of the MasterCard logo clearly visible in the corner. Frank leaves behind the now useless piece of plastic, as the MasterCard’s position as master is compromised. Like the zombies, the characters engage in unbridled consumption now that the mediating system of exchange has been forsaken. The scene mirrors the apocalyptic spending spree in *Dawn of the Dead*, with one significant difference: Romero’s characters flaunted wads of cash. This alteration constitutes another way in which the movie updates the analog (paper money) with the digital (credit cards). In fact, credit cards take money into the entirely virtual realm: by issuing credit, private, for-profit institutions, rather than a national treasury, create money from nothing.

The cultural resonance of historical London plagues is particularly evident in *28 Days Later*, which converts the supernatural horror of the zombie genre into the terror of a biothriller. The result is not only a structural similarity, but a few uncanny parallels that emerge through a comparison of these works, specifically with Defoe and *28 Days Later*. For example, the “28” of the title not only invokes the lunar cycles and the body (specifically the feminine body and reproductive futurity), but it also alludes to the twenty-eight-day quarantine law that Defoe cites in his journal (38). But what is perhaps the most intriguing connection between the rhetoric of bubonic plague and that of zombie infection is the notion that infection induces a dramatic personality change. Defoe repeatedly describes the plague as the

“raging of the Distemper”—and although Defoe himself is skeptical, he emphasizes the commonly held view (among doctors as well as lay people) that those who became infected were filled with the “desire to infect others”: “Everyone . . . is seized . . . with a kind of Rage, and a hatred against their own Kind, as if there was a malignity, not only in the Distemper to communicate it self, but in the very Nature of Man . . . as they say in the case of a mad Dog, who tho’ the gentlest creature . . . yet then will fly upon and bite any one that comes next him” (124). “Rage”—the French word for rabies—is invoked in both Defoe’s mad dog (an image he uses to describe plague victims multiple times) and the Rage virus of *28 Days Later*. A chilling aspect of both Defoe’s fictional journal and the zombie film is this aspect of being compelled to spread the infection. As Girard emphasizes, “plague is a transparent metaphor for a certain reciprocal violence that spreads, literally, like the plague” (836). The only difference is one of degree: in *28 Days Later* the virus spreads “instantly across the nation” on a level of instantaneity that far exceeds what Defoe imagined in 1722.

This act of losing control of one’s reason and turning against the social body to become an instrument of infection produces disastrous social changes in both works. Defoe shows not only how there was a “seeming propensity, or a wicked Inclination in those that were infected to infect others” (124), but also how this in turn produced a backlash. The charity and kindness that might have been offered to those attempting to flee London for the countryside were withheld out of fear, and Defoe recalls stories of the cruelty of people’s actions toward one another. Thus, the battle was not merely against the plague, since the plague turned citizens against each other. In *28 Days Later*, the virus is harnessed explicitly as a metaphor for the violent nature of humanity. As a soldier didactically observes in the film, “There is no virus, only people killing people.” A recurring trope of disaster narratives and specifically the zombie genre is that one frequently finds that the greatest enemy is not the disaster, in this case the zombies, but other people. Both *A Journal* and *28 Days Later* blur the boundaries between truth and fiction; they rely on a kind of gritty realism (both relative to their respective historical contexts) to convey a sobering cautionary tale. As such, both operate as guides on how to navigate infectious disaster.

MEDIA VIRALITY

There seems to be an underlying link that formally binds together the rhetoric of plague to the notion that rhetoric itself operates by a model of contagion.

As we saw with both *The Alchemist* and *A Journal*, the medium itself was regarded as a carrier of information as well as (potentially) plague itself. In oral discourse, a rumor or noxious speech could produce a plague of immorality, but in addition, it was affiliated with the spread of the disease itself via theories popular at the time that proposed that plague was communicated via miasma in the air transmitted through breath. Writing was subject to similar anxieties since the figurative dimensions of a proliferating text could be regarded as a literal source of plague.

While Ong frames his discussion of media as living dead mostly in relation to writing technologies, the notion of writing as a kind of reanimated corpse with an uncanny relation to life and death can be extended to other media. André Bazin perhaps expresses the relationship of film to death most succinctly in his short essay "Ontology of the Photographic Image," in which he describes both the development of plastic arts and film being fueled by what he calls a "mummy complex" (9). What is particularly unique to film, according to Bazin, is its indexical status. Film is time's fingerprint, a physical trace of the light having left its trace on photosensitive film. This quality differentiates analog film from both the plastic as well as, more recently, the digital arts. Bazin argues that the result of this mechanical process is that film "embalms time" (14).

The virality of media and their relationship to a kind of discourse of the living dead appears to dominate our aesthetic and epistemological frameworks. One could argue, however, that in the digital age, although print culture is still our preeminent epistemological model, the quality of "deadness" in a text may no longer be part of the ontology of digital culture. Film theorists note that the transition from analog to digital has resulted in the loss of indexicality. As Mary Ann Doane describes the ontological conditions of digital media, "the relation of digital representations to their material conditions of existence (which does exist) is so abstract as to be almost unattainable. For the digital exudes a fantasy of immateriality, in contrast to the fantasy of referentiality of the index" (143). It is appropriate that as cinema fully embraces digital technology, there is a concomitant shift in the representation of zombies. For purists, digital video is no longer film. An argument could likewise be made for the new kind of digital zombie in *28 Days Later*.⁴ The indexicality of film, what Doane describes as the "existential bond" (134) between a photographic image and its original referent, works to produce this uncanny form of living deadness. This indexicality is necessarily absent from the ontology of digital cinema. One might also argue that the

ontological status of writing is completely redefined in digital contexts as the fixity and stability of a text are no longer a given in networked and programmable media. Following this loss, the new digital zombies of *28 Days Later* have shed their status as undead and are instead the monstrous product of biological engineering. While the virus is still one of the greatest terrors to have infected the cultural imaginary of the twenty-first century, it is a product of a world that has become increasingly governed by the logic of the network present in the rhetoric of globalization, social networking, and viral media. Beginning with the millennial angst of Y2K, the notion of a technological apocalypse is indelibly fused to models of biological infection.

This study has gathered four texts as case studies—*The Alchemist*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *28 Days Later*, and *Shaun of the Dead*—two comedies and two cautionary tales that have their plots set in motion by an infectious outbreak. Together, they demonstrate the way the discourse of plague and infection functions in different historical as well as generic contexts. Despite their differences, there remains a common narrative trajectory that binds the body of plague writings we are examining. From the social tensions resulting from emergent industrial capitalism to the anxieties expressed toward globalization in a digital age, the concepts of plague and, more recently, the zombie, serve as a kind of master signifier that binds these economic, technological, and aesthetic discourses to each other.

NOTES

1. On this subject, see Shaviri's discussion of Romero's work (83–106); Lauro and Embry; Russell 91–96; and Harper.

2. Cinematic zombies existed before Romero reimagined them in 1968, making their first significant screen appearance in *White Zombie* (1932). *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) demonstrated that the figure could facilitate a meditative, artistically ambitious film. These zombies, originating from the Haitian tradition, were nonviral and under the control of a master. Relatively few films from this era featured zombies as the primary threat. *Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957) first introduced the autonomous, infectiously reproductive zombie, and science fiction films of the 1950s offered self-proliferating automatons for the atomic age (e.g., *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). Yet the financial success of Romero's low-budget *Night of the Living Dead*—which eliminated the witch doctor, introduced cannibalism, and relocated the threat to North American soil—inspired an explosion in zombie film production in the 1970s and 1980s domestically and internationally. As Fay has argued, the postmodern zombie of "remakes and sequels" is a product of historical erasure (83). Following Shaviri's description of the zombie as being without "origin or referent" (81), Fay attempts to relocate this figure not in cinematic history, but historical brutality—specifically

the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915–34), which led to the spread of the zombie into American popular culture.

3. The use of the chimpanzee evolving to a heightened form of violence also recalls 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, another Stanley Kubrick film.

4. See Pegg's article in *The Guardian* in which he polemically insists, "ZOMBIES DON'T RUN."

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