"A Zombie Novel with Brains": Bringing Genre to Life in the Classroom

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Abstract:
This essay explores the classroom application of genre theory to *Zone One*, Colson Whitehead's recent zombie novel. I argue that the lens of genre gives students a chance to reflect both on how novels make arguments and on how they can develop their own original arguments about a literary work. Working within a "low genre," *Zone One*, from its explicitly taxonomic title on, continually makes a problem of genre and ties the sorting of literary works to larger institutions of classification. The novel's generic self-awareness models an attentive form of reading that students can employ in thinking about both the text and their own writing situations. I conclude by presenting an adaptation assignment that provides the opportunity for further examination of the deep generic codes that structure modern life, including those that shape the English classroom.

Students in literature classrooms often struggle with two interrelated problems – understanding how a literary work makes an argument and developing their own original argument about that work. Much of this struggle on the former point can be attributed to the way that they de-privilege literary evidence in order to get right to the "deeper message." Encouraged by our culture's tendency to reduce knowledge to fact, many students view the literary aspects of a text as smokescreen or secret code, and they view their job as translating the message into a more digestible form. Employing the decoder ring lent them by the instructor, or increasingly often borrowed from Sparknotes or Wikipedia, students can come to see that *The Great Gatsby*, say, is *really* about the decline of the American dream. This particular conception of literary works might best be called the "deeper message in a bottle" approach, because it renders literature as a set of isolated containers into which a timeless moral is put, to be retrieved at some later date by the student who happens upon it (and who then presents it to the professor for credit). Yet once students have reduced a text's argument to a set of straightforward propositions, they struggle to find anything original to say, a situation that predictably reinforces the tendency to resort to "study aids." One effective way to have students move beyond this restrictive and deadening view is to have them interrogate a text's use of genre. For one thing, such an approach lets students see literary works as more than highly stylized message boxes. Once they move beyond thinking of genre as an ahistoric taxonomic scheme, students can see how it organizes and
enables a distinctively literary mode of knowledge in which form is both central and connected to larger social purposes. As they come to understand genre as a process in which they can participate, students can question the deeper message approach and can begin to understand what it means to take an original approach to the genres that we assign them.

On the pragmatic level, an investigation of genre works particularly well when the text traffics in codes which students have already mastered. While students can, of course, readily learn to recognize unfamiliar conventions, working within a known framework enables them to grasp how seemingly arbitrary formal features connect with larger social facts. Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* works exceptionally well for an undertaking of this sort for three main reasons. First, as a zombie narrative, it engages a genre whose conventions students can readily identify and enumerate. Second, *Zone One* ties literary genre to larger processes of sorting and classification. The novel thematizes genre as a social practice; as the title indicates, one of its main concerns is with the way that we construct, by way we act and by the way we think, boundaries and barriers: How do we sort people, how do we draw distinctions, how do we construct categories and what happens when these schemes fail, fade, or collapse? Finally, the novel models a form of genre criticism that is mindful of its consequences and constructs. Rather than making propositional claims about its theme, Whitehead's novel invites the reader to both participate in and reflect on the practices of genre-making.

I.

When *Zone One* was published in 2011, the zombie craze had reached new heights, becoming, as Jon Ogg reported, a nearly $6 billion dollar industry. The fad seemed to instance the very thing it was about. Zombie culture itself worked on the model of contagion, invading every conceivable literary genre from novels to Broadway musicals, and from video games to feature films. The omnipresence of zombie culture is such that most students are quite familiar with it, even if they aren't fans. Sampling selections in the class meeting before we start *Zone One* can bring generic expectations to the surface in a way

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1 In Ogg’s estimate, the bulk of the money earned came from movies and video games with only $100 million deriving directly from novels and other books. Several of the films were, of course, adaptations.
that primes students to pay closer attention to the salient formal features of Whitehead’s novel.

The contagion model of zombie culture occurs most explicitly in Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, a text that works very well as an introductory companion (in excerpt) to *Zone One*. Austen's novel is contaminated by the plague and remains recognizably itself (eighty-five percent of the words are Austen's) while turned to wholly new purposes. The opening paragraph briskly announces the switch of generic code:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains. Never was this truth more plain than during the recent attacks at Netherfield Park, in which a household of eighteen was slaughtered and consumed by a horde of the living dead. (13)

In trading Austen's subtle satire for postmodern parody, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* makes plain the way that genre conventions can be universally acknowledged while nonetheless passing below the level of conscious attention. Unpacking the first pages of the adaptation can bring out a number of unexpected similarities between seemingly disparate sets of conventions. That a few country (or suburban) families living in relative isolation provides "the very thing to work on" for both Regency comedies and zombie narratives can spur students to think about how the constraints of genre can be creatively enabling. Using Grahame-Smith's text as a lens, students can articulate the thematic concerns of conventional zombie fictions: the use of a small world microcosm, the struggle for autonomy and individuation, the anxiety over reproduction, and the threats to the idealized nuclear family. A lively classroom will produce an array of examples in which these concerns are taken up, and a few further clips from *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Walking Dead*, and the like can establish a secure base from which to work from as well as the sense that representations of zombies tend to be, as Mark McGurl put it, "monstrously generic." However diverse a collection of texts it seems to encounter, the zombie plague not only threatens humanity at the level of plot, it also seems to threaten stylistic virtuosity and depth of character at the level of form, as Grahame-Smith's mashup amply demonstrates. Once
we have mapped out the basic conventions of mainstream zombie fictions, we can begin using these narratives as a case study in the art of genre criticism.

II.

Genre criticism is something we have been doing for a very long time – from at least the moment when Aristotle proposed to "analyse the number and nature of the component parts of poetry" on (31) – and the very pedigree of this approach can make it difficult for students to use effectively. First-year students, or those coming from courses that privilege memorization and recall, need to think critically about genre so that they can avoid the error of treating the taxonomic categories as ends in themselves. One way to undermine the excessive reverence that might otherwise be given to pre-existing categories is give a "mini-quiz" like the following:

POP QUIZ: Please match each novel with its appropriate genre.

1) The Sun Also Rises      A) Roman der lebenden Toten
2) Adventures of Huckleberry Finn  B) Bildungsroman
3) The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym  C) Roman à clef
4) Zone One      D) Wetterroman

After completing the "quiz," we pressure the practice of classification that such an exercise embodies. The first step is to expose how seemingly factual classifications are historically constructed. The terms offered in the quiz are, after all, simply labels slapped on made-up things, analogous to entries in a exhaustive catalogue of mythical beasts: "A Hippogryph possesses the features of eagle in front and a horse with wings behind, but a Chimera has a lion's head, a goat's body, and a snake's tail." Ferdinand Brunetière pioneered the species model approach in his 1890 Evolution of Genres in Literary History and it has adapted well to a succession of critical ecologies. As Rick Altman observed,

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2 While Aristotle is often seen as having provided the basis for genre theories, most famously in the tripartite division of literature into epic, lyric, and drama, Gérard Genette has conclusively shown this to be a reductive misreading. His The Architext: An Introduction provides a much more nuanced account of the emergence of "Aristotelian" genres.
Reinvented by virtually every student of genre since Brunetière, scientific justification of genre study serves to convince theorists that genres actually exist, that they have distinct borders, that they can be firmly identified, that they operate systematically, that their internal functioning can be observed and scientifically described, and that they evolve according to a fixed and identifiable trajectory. It is indeed surprising how far this influence extends. (6)

With a little work, however, students can come to see that the naturalized classificatory schemes we habitually employ to describe biological and physical phenomena don't always map well onto literary phenomena. Weather might exist in nature, but wetterromans do not, or at least they didn't until someone wrote one. Even then, they didn't really exist until someone else invented the label. In the case of the wetterroman, they didn't exist until I made up the name with a little help from Google translate. It means, of course, "Weather Novel," and because I teach in L.A. it seems to my students an especially absurd genre category.

Empirically-minded students will quickly discern that the chief difference between naming things like cirrus and cumulus clouds and naming things like bildungsroman and wetterroman is that the former can be retained or jettisoned insofar as they help us make relatively accurate predictions about what is going to happen, about what the weather might be like tomorrow. That's a useful thing, at least for those not living in L.A., where it is seventy-five and sunny every day. Genre criticism, however, can appear utterly useless because it can't help us see what is going to happen next. And this is point easily brought home with the resurgent zombie fictions since nobody saw them coming. Here's a critic writing in 1999, just before the craze exploded after lying dormant for decades: "the poor old zombie movie seems destined to stay dead for a little longer while the horror genre remains obsessed by Scream-type horror comedies" (Bryce 550). But worst of all, taxonomic schemes can seem designed to kill literary texts. Not just turn them into the living dead, but into the dead dead. There's a murderous element that smacks of going into the field and shooting something simply for the sake of putting it, once and for all, into a neatly labeled box.
Once given the freedom to question the taxonomic enterprise, students readily voice their suspicions that these labels merely lend a pseudo-scientific veneer to literary studies or that they are the invention of advertisers. In some sense, this represents the move from an Aristotelian or, more properly, Neoclassical understanding of genre to a Romantic or post-Romantic one in which genre is regarded as an arbitrary imposition on self-expression.\textsuperscript{3} This classification of classificatory schemes is itself but a pragmatic expedient and should not be really be thought of as representing evolutionary stages of development, considering that both mindsets may well co-exist in any given classroom, or, quite possibly, in an individual student. The point to be taken away is that they represent two common attitudes toward the way genre works, one that a more engaging approach needs to carefully navigate between.

Perhaps the most effective way to help students avoid these two dead-ends is to have them think of a text's relation to its genre not as one of belonging (or refusing to belong) but one of use. As Jacques Derrida put it in his "The Law of Genre," a text does not "belong" to "any genre" because "every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genre-less text, there is always genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (230). Furthermore, as John Frow points out, genres themselves are "necessarily unstable and unpredictable. And this is so above all because texts do not simply have uses which are mapped out in advance by the genre: they are themselves uses of genre, performances of or allusions to the norms and conventions which form them and which they may, in turn, transform" (25). \textit{Zone One} offers a particularly good way of exploring the uses to which genre (or rather genres) can be put because it quite knowingly both participates in and defies the common tropes of the zombie narrative, taking them seriously in both content (insofar as it works within settled conventions) and form (insofar as it approaches its materials as a work of "literary" fiction).

\textbf{III.}

\textsuperscript{3} Heather Dubrow's \textit{Genre} provides a brief, accessible overview of the history of genre theory from Aristotle to late twentieth-century critics, outlining the basic conflict between the Neoclassical defenders of generic tradition and their Romantic antagonists. David Duff's introduction to \textit{Modern Genre Theory} offers an equally brisk sketch of post-Romantic theoretical approaches (and his anthology provides an excellent classroom resource for more advanced investigations).
Heather Dubrow suggests that generic form can become "an invitation to reformulate and an invitation to reform." That is, "one motive for writing in a genre is the urge to question some of the underlying attitudes that shape that literary mode" (23). In the way that it openly blends disparate conventions, Zone One confronts the attitudes that underlie both zombie narratives and "literary" fiction by extending the invitation to rethink both categories to the reader. Initial reviews of the novel almost unanimously took up this offer, homing in on Whitehead's genre-bending. Entertainment Weekly's remark that "Zone One is not the work of a serious novelist slumming it with some genre novel cash-in, but rather a lovely piece of writing that happens to be about hordes of homicidal undead" nicely exposes the assumptions about both "literary" fiction and genre fiction (Brunner). The Washington Post review makes the point by way of a pun, dubbing Zone One "A zombie story with brains" (Charles). Insofar as they prompt reflection on the less obvious markers of allegedly non-generic "literary" fiction, these comments offer an opportunity for students to activate genre knowledge that they may not even have known they had. If students don't have much experience reading in this vein, it's doesn't take long to point out that Zone One owes as much to James Joyce's "The Dead" as it does to George Romero's Night of the Living Dead. The narrative present is confined to a single, and up until the end, rather mundane post-apocalyptic weekend, but it ranges widely as it follows the stream-of-consciousness musings of its protagonist, known only by his ironic nickname, Mark Spitz. The novel's (unattributed) opening epigraph comes from Walter Benjamin, and Mark Spitz, for most of the novel, operates as a flâneur of the post-apocalyptic era, a painter of postmodern (un)death. He is more of an observer than an actor, and obsesses over his own mediocrity.

From its achronological structure to its deeply fragmented protagonist, Zone One acts as a virtual primer on modernist conventions. Nonetheless, the intricate and highly aestheticized musings that punctuate the protagonist's movement through the urban wastelands of New York still unfold within a mainstream zombie narrative. The book is saturated with violence; its stream-of-consciousness style is balanced out by an oozing river of gore, through which wades the troupe of typified characters, banded together and rising above the differences that would have separated them in the "normal" past.

The tension between the novel's style and its story provides a ready point for discussion. As one student framed it on the course's online message board: "What is the meaning
behind the excessively descriptive style and confusing non-linear plot and do you believe that this is the most effective way of telling this kind of a story?" The student's question nicely demonstrates both the continued life of vaguely neoclassical strictures and the way that such expectations can frame the way we respond to a novel text or circumstance. Comments of this sort, which the obvious generic tensions within the novel call forth, can provide the chance to move beyond genre as a merely academic occupation to a broader exploration of the impulse to definitively "sort things out" in the first place, an impulse that is, it turns out, one of the primary preoccupations of the novel itself. The questions that Zone One raises in its play with literary modes and its exploration of classification invite the sophisticated approaches of modern genre theory.

IV.

Contemporary genre theorists contend that the seemingly mandarin categories of analysis like the bildungsroman, or for that matter, the wetterroman, actually have a strong connection with ordinary social existence. Thomas Beebe argues that the analytical objects of this school are neither "collections of texts" nor "lists of essential features" but rather "processes of interpretation." In his view, "genre is only secondarily an academic enterprise and a matter for literary scholarship. Primarily, genre is the precondition for the creation and reading of texts" (250). Literary genre intervenes in a particular set of historical forces: what we do with books, the ways that we sort and group them, reflects and affects much broader intellectual operations. Picking up on this line of argument, John Frow argues that genre "exists as a part of the relationship between texts and readers, and it has a systematic existence. It is a shared convention with social force." For Frow, this social force is "grounded in the institutions in which genre has its social being: the institutions of classification in the broadest sense" (102-3).

Because Zone One unfolds during a routine weekend well into the post-apocalyptic era, when the tentative efforts of the human "reconstruction" project seem to be making progress against the zombie horde, the novel presents the institutions of classification at the very moment of their (re)emergence. Mark Spitz is not a front line soldier, but part of a "sweeper" crew tasked with clearing any zombies that the first wave of Marines might have missed from Lower Manhattan, the "Zone One" of the title. Poised as he is at the boundary
between total chaos and a re-emerging "normalcy" and burdened with only modest duties amidst the grand monuments of the past, he has ample time and opportunity to meditate on the social practices of sorting. Standing at the advancing threshold of a cultural system in the process of (re)-organizing itself, Zone One, from its explicitly taxonomic title on, obsessively focuses on the way genre variously constrains and enables life, often in the most urgent possible way.

Once students begin to look for institutions of classification, they will find them everywhere. In one minor example, humans are threatened not only by zombies but also by psychological trauma. Nearly everyone still capable of conscious thought suffers from "Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder," a diagnosis coined by a former self-help guru. To Mark Spitz, PASD is "A meticulous inventory with a wide embrace. Not so much criteria for diagnosis but an abstract for existence" (68). What seems like a throwaway gag takes on additional weight as additional evidence piles up. The novel appears to link the restoration of civilization with the return of finer and finer distinctions, yet these distinctions complicate rather than clarify the dividing line between the living and the dead.

At first blush, the classification code deployed by Zone One is the obvious and apparently natural one we expect from a zombie narrative, tidily encapsulated in the phrase "There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them" (288). The "wasteland protocols" of dividing along that primary axis are nearly automatic and consist in "running demeanor, gear, posture, and facial expressions through the database." In those moments of doubt when the ragged survivors most closely resemble the monsters who threaten them, the primary test is linguistic: "Did they speak […] Did they still have language" (137). These protocols are all, of course, indirect tests of conscious thought – the starkly simple measure of humanity in a fallen world – yet the very fact that they operate so unconsciously poses provocative questions.

Indeed, once attuned to the novel's preoccupation with classification, students can pressure the apparently natural distinction between zombie and survivor, seeing how the categories mutually condition one another. On the one hand, the category of the "reviled Them," while it initially seems like straightforward negation, actually marks a carefully calibrated opposition. The narrative's most apparent complication along these lines is to sift
the zombies themselves into two classes: skels and stragglers. Skels are the readily recognizable denizens of modern zombie culture; they could stumble out of the pages of Whitehead's novel and into any mainstream zombie narrative without any real dissonance. They readily participate in what Mark McGurl dubbed the "zombie renaissance," bodying forth our anxieties about consciousness and autonomy by representing "a plague of suspended agency, a sense that the human world is no longer (if it ever was) commanded by individuals making rational decisions." The threat of zombies is the threat of genericness itself, the total loss of particularity. As McGurl goes on to note, zombies "wander aimlessly and apolitically in search of food. Their origins are not interesting. They no longer even have names. They are the lowest common denominator of horror." Yet, for McGurl, their blankness bolsters their appeal: "Zombies are anti-characters, but they do make for good allegories, their very flatness propelling us into speculation about what they might mean 'on another level.'" *Zone One* internalizes this act of allegorization, letting us see how an anti-character reveals character. The novel stages this most clearly in what is crucially one of its most "action packed" scenes, though, just as crucially, it is narrated retrospectively.

Trapped in the subway, Mark Spitz and his band are forced into battle with a mob of skels. As the survivors gun their way through they "drap[e] their disparate masks over the faces of the damned so they could be certain of who and what they were killing. They each saw something different as they dropped the creatures" (265-6). To Gary, the band's working class misfit, "they were the proper citizens who had stymied and condemned him," "the homeroom teachers and assistant principals, the neighbors across the street who called the cops" (266). For Kaitlyn, the group's high achiever, they were "the rabble who nibbled at the edge of her dream: the weak-willed smokers, deadbeat dads and welfare cheats, single moms incessantly breeding, the flouters of speed laws, and those who only had themselves to blame for their ridiculous credit-card debt" (266). To Mark Spitz, through whom the episode is filtered, "the dead were his neighbors, the people he saw every day [….] They were all him" (266-7).

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4 It's worth pausing over the fact that Whitehead carefully avoids employing the term "zombies" at all – it's a word much discouraged within the human world of the novel, precisely because it would move the represented reality too close to the generic world of zombie fictions.
In exploring what zombies mean "on a deeper level" to each of the characters, the novel reveals the human characters as "types" in their own right. The carefully distributed traits that seemingly distinguish them arise not from stable character differences but from a system of characterization that extends out of the novel into the "real world." Whitehead sharpens this point by assigning each character a "grade": Kaitlyn is the A student, Mark Spitz the B, and Gary the C. Together they comprise the "Omega Unit" of sweepers. The post-apocalyptic setting renders both the artificiality and the necessity of these classifying gestures in high relief and provides an occasion for a provocative discussion about how the narratives we read, often in a classroom, condition operations of "characterization." The extinction of character embodied in a zombie thus provides occasion to reflect on characterization more broadly, calling into question the very notion of stable individual identity – perhaps the most visible boundary between modernist literary fiction and genre fiction. Ultimately, however, a greater existential threat, and an occasion for more intense reflection on acts of genre making, comes not from these violently "othered" zombies but from their seemingly harmless cousins, the "stragglers."

While skels lurch across the pages of the novel in the accustomed way, these other zombies remain persistently opaque, "a succession of imponderable tableaux" (60). Frozen into "a discrete and eternal moment," yet possessing the near immortality the already dead, stragglers endlessly repeat a single gesture: "Slipping a disc into the game machine. Crotch-down on the yoga mat. Spooning bran from a bowl. Surfing the dead web. Yawning. Stretching. Flossing. Wound down and alone in their habitat" (62). Despite their apparent benignity – and, as a crucial event in the novel shows, the benignity is only relative – Mark Spitz spends much more time thinking about this subspecies of zombie:

The monster-movie speculations of his childhood had forced him, during many a dreary midnight, to wonder what sort of skel he'd make if the plague transformed his blood into poison. The standard-issue skel possessed no room for improvisation of course. He'd hit his repugnant marks. But what kind of straggler would he make? What did he love, what place had been important to him? Job or home, bull's-eye of cathected energy?
As this passage makes evident, the stragglers, in their very hyper-individualization, become an interpretive problem, one that tellingly folds back on the interpreter. The very resistance of "stragglers" to the primary protocol of classification – they appear not so much to have lost the ability to think as they appear to be lost in thought – allows the narrative to model and refine its own version of genre criticism.

V.

In a brilliant move, Zone One goes beyond simply meditating on the differences between the living and the living dead and installs the distinction between them at the level of form. The initial distrust that students often feel toward Whitehead's apparently disordered use of interior monologue in "this kind of a story" begins to give way once they realize that the device instances this central distinction. We think; they don't. What better way to dramatize the point than by employing a highly stylized Jamesian center of consciousness to represent exactly what is under threat? Whitehead, however, uses the supposed division between conscious thought and zombie automatism not to exalt individuality and the quest for distinction, but to show how such aspirations operate as part of the generic system of both the novel and a culture which has used the novel as a mode of representing and propelling individuation. The device of interior monologue turns Mark Spitz himself into a reader of genre, thus making the interpretive problems of the novel ones of both content and form. As Mark Spitz struggles to decipher the problem of the stragglers, he becomes more and more aware of the patterns of his own thoughts and the cultural practices that shape those patterns. In so doing, he understands himself as genre bound, as, that is, a straggler. In perhaps the most explicit nod to Joyce's "The Dead," where we cannot be sure if the title refers to those actually deceased or to those suffering from the moral paralysis of modern life, Mark Spitz grows uncertain of whether the still-living are any more alive than the living dead.

Because Whitehead continually though subtly employs the trope of contemporary (pre-apocalyptic) life as a deeply recursive form of living death, students can enjoy unraveling complex chains of association in his diagnosis of how, for instance, the morning commute resembles a march of the living dead or how we are "infected by reruns" (73). Indeed, one of the joys of the novel is the way it renders the generic rituals of modern life with both
nostalgic tenderness and critical clarity. Perhaps the most frightening thing about *Zone One* is not the dawn of the dead – we don't really fear the coming of the zombie apocalypse – but rather the dawning recognition that we are already the zombies, and that like them we continue to walk around because we're "too stupid to know to know [we're] dead" (270). Brains are threatened not by physical violence or by a runaway virus, but by inattention.

Yet, if the novel stopped at merely participating in this familiar critique of the consumer-capitalist culture industry, it would seem to instance the "deeper message in a bottle" trope. As a skeptical undergraduate might observe, the message might be more subtle, but it's still a message and a familiar one at that: laugh-tracked sitcoms, "neighborhood" franchise restaurants, "friendly" chain cafés, and formulaic horror films devour brains as quickly and completely as any zombie and leave a mindless horde in their wake. Without denying the critique it's possible show how the novel goes beyond merely communicating a message by offering a particular experience. It functions rather, in Joshua Landy's terms, as a "formative" fiction. For Landy, formative fictions are those select texts that offer a special kind of practice:

Rather than providing knowledge per se – whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation – what they give us is *know-how*; rather than transmitting beliefs, what they equip us with are *skills*; rather than teaching, what they do is *train*. They are not informative, that is, but formative. They present themselves as [...] spaces for prolonged and active encounters that serve, over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are. (10)

Crucially, formative fictions do not operate automatically. The benefits only occur when we pay close attention to, as it were, the genre of our reading habits. After all, if the usual prescribed antidote to the vacuous products of pop culture is, "Go read a book!," what could be more emblematic of the "straggler" than the fully enraptured novel reader: inert in a
chair, face cracked into a vague smile, and endlessly repeating the minor gesture of turning pages.⁵

In place of a message, or even a plot, *Zone One* offers a training ground for a reflexive form of genre criticism. In staging thought as a continually revised negotiation with its own schemas, the novel offers its readers interpretive cues by creating and then observing an internal audience in the form of a model reader who continually reads himself (mis)reading. The cues that the text provides by way of Mark Spitz's "readings" are, however, inherently unstable because they are uses of genre rather than directives. Frow highlights precisely this instability when he remarks that, through genre a text seeks "to control the uncertainty of communication [...] by building in figures of itself, models of how it should be read. The complexity of genre means, however, that these models can never be taken as straightforward guidelines" (4). Ultimately, the training a work like *Zone One* offers isn't confined to instruction in the art of close reading; even as it trains its readers it asks after the value of such instructions.

One of the conventions of zombie narratives, and of horror fictions more generally, is that the ability to adapt quickly to the conventions of a new reality stands as an essential survival trait. In a tidy allegory, those who end up (un)dead are those who remain lost in the old order of things, unable to assimilate the generic codes of a new world. Those who make it through are the ones who can most quickly adjust, the ones who, to paraphrase one of the novel's most alarming scenes, can most efficiently switch from "she's my mom; she loves me" to "she's a zombie, she is going to eat me." Arguably, however, within horror fiction, this shift is often represented less as an adaptation and more as a form of revelation. The altered circumstances brought on by whatever dark event animates the plot bring out character traits that the decadent and corrupt pre-apocalyptic world suppressed. Disaster leads to reclassification, but while the old virtues and vices of the ordinary world are often

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⁵ In a course on the American Novel, it might be helpful to remind students at this point of the ways that novels themselves were cast as a plague by early readers. In Thomas Jefferson’s words "A great obstacle to good education is the inordinate passion prevalent for novels, and the time lost in that reading which should be instructively employed. When this poison infects the mind, it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading. Reading and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected" (247). The Reverend Enos Hitchcock makes the same point: "The free access which many young people have to romances, novels, and plays has poisoned the mind and corrupted the morals of many a promising youth; and prevented others from improving their minds in useful knowledge" (qtd in Davidson, 112).
transposed, character remains immutable. Whatever the changed circumstances bring out in a person were there all along, requiring only a proper litmus test to make them legible. What's useful about Zone One, however, is that it tests the test by reflexively putting the procedures of literary genre to use. In the end, even as the novel instances the code shift of zombie fiction, it questions the value of compliance, embracing the change in codes as an opportunity to reflect on the process of genre-making itself. This deep ambivalence invites reflection on the larger purposes classification serves and it seeks to explore the consequences of such sorting. These consequences extend, of course, to the classroom in which the novel is read and it's essential to provide a space for the students to question how "academic" reading nourishes genrification. Ultimately the goal is to have students actively participate in that process, rather than simply accommodating themselves to it.

VI.

Thus far, I've been discussing genre from the viewpoint of a literary scholar, giving emphasis to the role of the reader, and even suggesting that Mark Spitz models a useful, albeit unstable, form of genre criticism. Yet, it is also worthwhile to consider genre from the point of view of the writer, thus linking literary scholarship to composition scholarship. In its sophistication and complexity, Zone One embodies the sort of exceptional text that the methods of literary scholarship are well equipped to handle, but students can take what they learn from the novel, particularly its reflexive attention to genre, and apply it to their own writing situations. Regardless of the writing task we might assign, Whitehead's zombie fiction can usefully instigate a discussion around what it means to construct an "original argument," a point that returns us to the student difficulties I opened with. The problem with the "deeper message in a bottle" approach is that it not only makes original work nearly impossible, but it also makes it virtually nonsensical. If the argument of a text can be reduced to a message, it's asking a tremendous amount of any undergraduate to come up with one that professional literary scholars have overlooked, even in the case of a recent

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6 See Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff's Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy for a sweeping overview that situates "literary" theories in relation to those emerging from composition studies and rhetorical genre theory. Amy Devitt's "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre" also thinks through possible bridges that connect literary genre theories with rhetorical ones.
work. Worse still, it seems intellectually perverse to ask them not to use tools like Sparknotes: if someone out there knows the answer, it's at the fingertips of anyone with a smartphone. As James Lang has recently suggested, the need to both maintain academic honesty and promote effective learning environments requires that we answer questions like: "Why should [students] bother to memorize or learn […] or do their own work when technology can often provide them with the information they need (more) quickly and efficiently?" (204-5). A reflexive generic awareness of the writing situation as it connects to broader social and intellectual purposes can make it more likely that students will both do their own work and get more out of that work. As they come to better understand what originality in a given discipline means from the standpoint of genre, where innovations always refer to standard patterns even as they deviate from them, they can also better understand how to compose original scholarship. Cured of the idea that work is creative only when it emerges ex nihilo, they are less likely to be paralyzed by the blank page. While this doesn't necessarily make the intellectual task any easier, it does provide a rationale for the inevitable struggle that is at the heart of literary interpretation.

Although a fairly conventional essay exercise can tap into the power of genre, I prefer to pair Zone One with an adaptation task. This "interpretation through adaptation" exercise (see appendix for the handout) consists of three parts, an adaptation "pitch," a creative "preview," and a follow-up analytical paper. The first two can be done in groups, but the final step generally works best as an individual assignment. In brief, the students adapt Whitehead's novel to a new genre – a movie, videogame, Broadway play, etc. – based on their interpretation of the novel's argument. In the pitch, students work in an explicitly persuasive genre, attempting to earn the "greenlight" for their creative work by presenting it to the whole class. Because their rationale for the adaptation needs to depend on the novel's argument – rather than on economic incentives – it asks them to think about how literature connects to the "real world." They need to explain why we need yet another zombie movie – especially one as potentially "dull" as Zone One – and they need to use the text itself as a support. A good adaptation, I suggest, is not one that remains slavishly faithful to the story, but one that mobilizes the resources and constraints of the new genre to
the best effect while letting us see the source text in a new way. Once the project has been "greenlighted" by the rest of the class, the group moves onto the creative stage, employing the constructive feedback they received to craft a short video or presentation that samples the work, perhaps a movie trailer or an advertising poster. This step lets them look at genre from the lens of the producer, encouraging them to bring whatever tacit knowledge they have about these other modes to the surface. A preview or a poster has its own generic qualities that both draw from and feed into the source work. Genre's broader intersections with culture emerge as they consider questions of marketing and audience, and they can focus on genre "use" rather taxonomic "belonging." As Amy Devitt has argued, "To understand the one genre well requires understanding all the other genres surrounding it, both the genres explicitly used and the genres implicitly referred to or shaping what the genre is and is not" (712). Finally, in the follow-up paper, students analyze the formal choices that they made – set design, casting, score, and so on – alongside the formal choices Whitehead employs. Their "creative" reading of the text is put into dialogue with their more academic one to the benefit of both. Such a comparison can provide them with the chance to develop an essential meta-generic understanding of the work we ask them to do, along with a space for them to question the larger purposes of such assignments.

In the end, one of my main goals is to have students become aware of how genres operate within their own lives, not least their life in school. Charles Bazerman put the importance of such an understanding in emphatic terms:

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. (19)

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7 Robert Stam has argued convincingly for the inadequacy of the "fidelity trope," and, conveniently for my purposes, proposes that it is better to think of adaptations as "readings" of the source text. For Stam, the fidelity ideal is both limiting and excessively judgmental, and he proposes that the relationship ought to be recast: "The trope of adaptation as a 'reading' of the source novel, one which is inevitably partial, personal, conjunctural, for example, suggests that just as any literary text can generate an infinity of readings, so any novel can generate any number of adaptations. An adaptation is thus less a resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialogical process" (4).
Yet, the very reach of genre makes it frightening. Zone One reveals the ways in which those forms of life and frames of action can lead to a sort of automatism. Critics of genre-based approaches to composition have long argued that such approaches produce what we might call "zombie" writing. To teach genre well then, requires not only teaching students to conform to different patterns but also teaching them to transform these patterns. If, as Bazerman argues, genres are "forms of life," the ultimate benefit of an approach that makes genre both an object of analysis and a process of interpretation is that it permits classroom genres to become living ones rather than ones that students mindlessly complete, as if they were merely part of the zombie horde.
Appendix 1

Interpretation through Adaptation

Zombies are everywhere, spreading through multiple genres of art and entertainment like the plague. There have taken over blockbuster films, novels, graphic novels, literary classics, video games, amusement park attractions, and even Broadway musicals (Zombie Broadway, from the comic of the same name). Imagine that your group has been asked to pitch an adaption of Zone One for one of the genres just mentioned (or any other you can think of). The exercise will consist of three parts.

PITCH: A rationale (supported by argumentative analysis) explaining why you have refashioned Zone One in the way that you have. This will introduce your creative presentation and will explain the need for yet another zombie tale in our current moment.

PREVIEW: A creative sample of your work that shows your vision. This might take the form of a YouTube trailer, a story board, a few sample pages from a graphic novel, etc.

PAPER: The individual interpretive portion should be an expansion of your (revised) rationale that features close comparative analysis of both the original and your adaptation. Support your vision by way of a close reading of the source text and explain the stakes of your adaptation.

The ultimate point is to adapt the experience – rather than the explicit content – to a new medium. An adaptation that merely remains faithful only to the plot of original is likely to seem, at best, an inferior substitute. Work instead to translate the central formal elements (chronological arrangement, characterization, point of view, dialogue, setting) from the literary work into your chosen form, keeping in mind your new medium's specific constraints and possibilities. Doing so will involve practical decisions about language, set design, soundtrack, character casting, etc. In the end, a good adaptation changes the way we look at the original work by letting us read/see it in a new way that is nonetheless true to the source text.
Consider your decisions in light of the intended audience and briefly think out consequences, keeping in mind what you have learned about genre. Remember, you are not simply catering to consumer demand but providing your audience with a literary experience that you think valuable and urgent. Consider the conventions of your chosen medium, but justify all decisions by reference the source text and keep in mind that a good adaptation need not only conform to a genre; it can transform that genre too. Ultimately, performance is interpretive argumentation and your goal is to argue the source text's argument.
Works Cited


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