

**The undead are a poignant metaphor of our time: we have zombie consumers, zombie workers, zombie voters, and zombie kids in a drug-induced trance. We’ve seen the horror genre return to popularity in the past few years, resurrecting George Romero’s masterpieces of the 60s and 70s. But the myth, of course, did not start in Hollywood. Haiti’s folklore, its voodoo traditions of spiritual possession and ecstatic ritual, as well as its history of a dehumanised program of slave labour, all feed into the allegory of the zombie we know today. Haiti, the first slave nation to liberate itself from French colonial occupation at the end of the 19th century, today is one of the poorest countries on the planet. To understand this paradox is to unveil the changing undercurrents of power through time, and to unmask the vigorous censorship of that history operating on many levels. Ultimately, there is no transparency within the historical process. DUST met John Cussans to talk through the occlusions of history, as well as his recently published book *Undead Uprising, Haiti, Horror and the Zombie Complex*, which serve as a case study in how to approach our complex and opaque era.**

*John Cussans is a London based writer, artist and teacher, who has worked with the Ghetto Biennale of Port-au-Prince and often collaborates with the Haitian video collective Tele Geto, applies a ‘paranoid-critical theory’ to the subjects he approaches. Crisscrossing ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture, media studies and philosophy, he creates dense networks of connections in his research.*

AGNÈS VILLETTE *in conversation with* JOHN CUSSANS

***Agnès Villette: The idea of transparency, in our era of digitalisation, is an ambiguous notion, isn’t it?***

*John Cussans:* Baudrillard wrote this book called *The Transparency of Evil* in 1990 when the discourse on transparency was dominant. Back then, the idea applied as a strategy of power, as Fredric Jameson underlined with the concept the open-plan office, where everything is visible. It links to Foucault and the power of visibility with the perspective of the panopticon.

Panoptics make everything visible. So transparency and full disclosure are closely related. There is the anti-corruption side to the discourse of transparency – for example, financial disclosure as a way to counteract the rot in a corrupt system.

The other side of it is linked to the transparency of power, as Mark Fisher would have been sensitive to, as he was with horizontality. It then becomes a strategy of authority, hiding what power is really doing. It becomes a concealing device more than an exposure. The double meaning of transparency comes in: it is an invisible cloak. This is very Philip K Dick, obviously! You make what is significant disappear. The fundamental paradox of transparency is that it makes something see-through which is almost invisible. It’s so visible, it looks like it’s not there. Which makes it disappear.

**So does transparency represent a biased or reductive approach to the complexities of contemporaneity?** Transparency should actually be very close to objectivity, and within journalism, there has been that long history of an ideal impartiality.

Impartiality is a kind of moral objectivity, in which the observer is supposed to be what Donna Haraway calls “a modest witness”, in that great book, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium. FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. It’s a kind of ideological moral position, where an observer could perceive without bias, and Haraway says that it’s impossible, as this position of impartiality is already structured. I’m reminded of when Israel bombarded Gaza in 2009, and the Israeli government had a particular viewing area set up for journalists, from which the press could observe things. That is a great example of the falsity of the ‘moral witness’ idea, which is obviously biased according to extrinsic architectures of power. The idea of transparency, from that perspective, is a position from which things can be observed with a minimal amount of bias. It is a form of idealism. Most philosophical and cultural-theoretical approaches would see as it imaginary.

**Accessible interfaces of technology are making most of us long for a simplified approach and explanation of the world around us. Not that it makes life any more transparent...**

My immediate response is: time, duration and speed. I can link it to the ongoing debates online around Neoreactionaries and social justice. In observing the contestation of these relatively opposing camps, you find that some of the Neoreactionary bloggers, such as Mencius Moldbug, write incredibly long blog posts. They are like mini pamphlets, mini essays, and take a

long time to read. These bloggers approach online writing as an art form, an essay form, and they accept that it takes a long time to lay out an argument, to artfully make a strong point.

On the other hand, opposed and in reaction to that, you get the Twitter-feed, short reactionary sentences such as “This is horrendous”, “This is racism !!!”, which is another dynamic of Internet communication. I notice that the social justice dimension of Internet responses to contemporary events are often highly reactionary on an emotional level – i.e., if it makes you feel dreadful and upset, and it hurts you and you feel anger, this is a legitimate reason to say, “I am appalled by that horrendous image, and something must be done, as it is not okay”. Whereas a more reflective take on what is going on within the media sphere would require you to take time.

This is a classic point of general semantics: pausing for thought in regards to your reaction, and reflecting on why you had a reaction of that nature. And then having an internal dialogue about what those reaction points seem to be, in an age of ubiquitous immediate abuse of information, where technology allows for pulses of reactions on a massive scale. You pulse along with those waves by stating your outrage to certain events, and by certain statements. This is what has been happening in the last 5 years. So, to go back to the question:

**Any significant social issue requires deep and complex consideration that the dynamic of contemporary mass mediation does not allow for, because by the time you settled your thought and really reflected, everything has changed.**

There is such a rapidity now. Now no one is really reflecting deeply on Trump’s sexism and the comments he made about grabbing pussies. It is already done. And it all becomes an archive of the past. Everything is being archived incredibly rapidly, including the sense of long, considered meditations on typical social issues. So time, speed, duration is what is at stake.

**Can you to describe the way in which you write, think and teach? It often seems to spring from associations and critical ways of thinking that aren’t afraid to make leaps of meaning, criss-crossing through high and low cultures.** I describe my own research method as paranoid critical theory, which is a mixture of Philip K. Dick’s paranoid science-fiction, critical theory and Dali’s notion of the paranoid-critical method. Basically, it combines critical theory, the Frankfurt School’s ideology critique – which is mainly Marxist. And, because it sees the culture industry as an expression of capitalist false consciousness, it continuously tries to unmask the machination of capitalism under the veneer of the commodity fetish – call that Critical Theory 101 – with Salvador Dali’s paranoid-critical method of seeing into things.

Dali accepted the weird coincidences of associated thoughts and associated forms as being meaningful and significant, and not just purely delusional. This is coming out of psychoanalysis and

Surrealism obviously. Between those two schools of thought, there is a supernatural conspiracy theory, whereby you accept your weird associations as perhaps signifying something other than the pure manifestation of capitalism (which of course is not an explanation for everything).

Why is capitalism working so efficiently? How is it able to seduce and control such a massive sway of the human population by its particular method? How does it work? The Marxist materialist analysis does not really explain ultimately why capitalism works on so many people. So paranoid critical theory was the idea of a method, and one aligned with the texts of Philip K. Dick. All his characters are semi-delusional proto-schizophrenics who are unable to distinguish between their perceptions and external reality. It may be the consequences of drugs or a cognitive mental illness or deficiency, schizophrenia or autism, or it might actually be the machination of an external, sinister conspiratorial agency.

Marxists seem to me to be weirdly Lutheran, evangelical kinds of characters who see capitalism as an evil demiurge, which is pretty much how Philip K. Dick saw it as well. His hypothesis was that there might actually be alien or theological entities behind the edifice of capitalist mass culture. Paranoid critical theory introduces those supernatural occult and esoteric elements in the analysis of late capitalism.

**I take the book *Undead Uprising: Haiti, Horror and the Zombie Complex* published this year by The MIT Press, as a great illustration of how to unpack historical events, especially in its reconsideration of what is unanimously understood as ‘the Haitian tragedy’.** The ultimate tragedy of the Haitian Revolution is that it was understood as a tragedy rather than a triumph. In Haitian studies, there is a strong current associated with Sybille Fischer and Michel Rolf-Trouillot that the significance of the Haitian Revolution for modern world history was completely devalued, almost instantly, by the reactionary forces of Europe, North America and the international superpowers of global capitalism. Of course, that is true historically: there is no doubt that the denigration – and this term is interesting as it has the concepts of “blackness” and “blackening” in it – was done in explicitly racist terms.

**The Haitian Revolution is a culmination of not only the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment expressed by the French Revolution and the freedom of slaves, but also the high point in the emergence of our understanding of race and racism when the world gets divided between black people and white people.**

Such a significant moment! Our contemporary debate about race, which is moving increasingly, in some quarters, towards a black and white divide – as a consequence, in part, of Black Lives Matter and the increasing popularity of whiteness studies programs in universities – can be related directly back to Haiti. We might well be able to look back at Haiti and see why it was

necessary for Dessalines to eliminate the white population of the island. It was the first act of racial cleansing on the part of a Black revolutionary republic, which recognised that colour was one of the major factors in the perpetuation of the colonial plantation system.

The Haitian Revolution was the most forward-thinking progressive movement of social emancipation on the planet at the time. The tragedy was the reaction of white colonial powers, which assumed that black slaves were incapable of running an enlightenment-styled social democracy. The tragedy was the slavery, not the revolution. The great reactionary lie cloaks this truth. Since the Haitian Revolution, reactionary forces keep saying, ‘It will never work, it would be a failure’. There have been economical and ideological efforts to prevent Haiti from being a great example for the rest of the Caribbean and other American nations. The Haitian Revolution was shut down as colonial powers feared seeing the revolution spread to the rest of the colonies.

**When it comes to Haiti’s history, it seems to demand a different type of reading and deciphering. There is a necessity to apply an investigative approach, such as one would in the role of international aid.** All those things are complexly interdependent. Such as the militarisation of aid after the Haitian earthquake: on what grounds do you need to militarise an aid operation? That was clearly an act of covert occupation by the Americans. They have done this each time they think Haiti is politically unstable. There is a political relationship between the disaster – such as the earthquake or the recent hurricanes Harvey and Irma – and the disaster response; and there are clear continuities between the dynamics of aid and the occupation.

The NGO Christianised response to Haiti’s disaster is a continuation of the suppression of the Haitian Revolution. It goes back to the Haitian rice industry, which was destroyed by the US monopolising rice production in a supposed act of charity. Haiti’s potential for food sovereignty was ended then. So aid and charity have been used to continue the disaster, as is shown in Raoul Peck’s film *Fatal Assistance*.

**You use the term “zombie complex” to approach Haitian history. Can you explain this term?** In its simplified form, there are two distinctive behavioural modalities of the contemporary zombie figure: it’s either an apocalyptic insurrectionary cannibal or a total sub-servant mind-controlled slave. Those are the two poles of the zombie complex. My argument is that they go back at least as far as the Haitian Revolution. The concept of the zombie was consolidated precisely in reaction to the Haitian Revolution.

In my interpretation, linking back to the paranoid-critical theory we discussed at the beginning of the interview, the key philosophical ideas within critical theory, as practised in Western philosophy since the 18th and into the 20th century, are of central importance. Especially Hegel, and in particular the section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* known as the master-slave dialectic. I will just tease two points out for now. First, within

the discourse of critical theory of Marxist philosophy, the idea of revolutionary historical consciousness goes back to Hegel. The idea that one can be conscious of one’s historical mission is the fundamental dynamic of the philosophical idea within *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This is the idea that was taken on by Marxism: to change history, one has to be historically conscious. This question of historical consciousness has interested me for a long time.

How do you know when you have become historically conscious? At what point do you become aware of your historical destiny to overcome your despotic bourgeois masters? At what point does historical revolutionary consciousness turn into action? It caught my thinking on the zombie complex. As zombies are never conscious historically. They are unconscious on both poles. They are the antithesis of historical consciousness and yet they are absolutely situated in the discourse of revolutionary historical consciousness as it has been acted out on the world stage since the Enlightenment.

The second obvious point about Hegel is that he was aware of the Haitian Revolution when he wrote *The Phenomenology of Spirit* – as Susan Buck-Morsse points out in her book *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* – but he chose not to mention it. Although he was writing a philosophy in which the struggle between master and slave was central to self-recognition in the process of detaining universal historical consciousness, he chose to ignore the concrete instance of that happening on the planet at the time of his writing. This is where transparency comes in: although Hegel is the key figure for this revolutionary tradition of the enlightenment of universal consciousness, he deliberately chose to ignore the case of Haiti in the historical unfolding. It has something to do with racism, not in an overt sense as we recognise it today, but in a more evolutionary philosophical sense that has to do with the way racism was formulated in the 18th and 19th centuries.

**It seems that we are in zombie-times and -territories at the moment. Would you agree?** A renewed attention to the zombie figure might open up a new way of talking and thinking about these issues. If it works, people may be encouraged to think about consciousness, agency and self-determination. It can bring us to reflect on how we are controlled and conditioned by extrinsic forces which have nothing to do with the individual. It can trigger how the individual and the collective can challenge and question those forces that seem to make people act against their interests.

**An understanding of the zombie complex might enable us to renew a kind of critical revolutionary project that once and for all exceeds the entrapments of racist reasoning.**

Zombies have to do with the hypnosis of mass media, with the figure of the sleepwalker. It is a theme that runs through critical

theory as well, through Adorno, and his essay on the industry in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*. The idea is in Marx too, as it links to the notion of fetishism and how you are seduced to believe in something that is not true, just because its image is so powerful.

There is a densely knit link between zombiedom and hypnosis. Marshall McLuhan also used the figure of the zombie in connection with television; he wrote about the zombie trance, which is the perfectly obvious way to describe it. This links to Guy Debord, the society of spectacle and the seduction of images, what Baudrillard calls the “evil demon of images” – there is still a sense that mass media are hypnotic and addicting, only intensified by their intensely personal character now. We never used to be able to speak to friends through our televisions sets. Today’s computer interfaces are basically television sets through which you can reach out to your friends and to strangers, and read personal tweets from the president of the United States. The advancements of ubiquitous telecommunication is a powerful hypnotic phenomena as McLuhan pointed out in the 60s. I think we are still in a media trance, and it is hard to break – this is why people turn off their computers and try to get away. It links to what I mentioned earlier about the longer, Neoreactionary blog posts, which take time to read, versus our instant reactionary responses.

The current direction of social politics is related to what is called clicktivism or slacktivism: you click a “like” and virtually signal what you are into. This is a massive part of spectacular global capitalism. What is weird is that social justice activists use the term woke to describe people who are woken up to see the horrors of tyrannical white male European domination (or whatever version of the ideological constructions of the repressive state apparatus).

Woke means you are now totally awake, whereas you were previously asleep. But that wokeness has been mediated through systems operating on platforms that are entirely part of the global capitalised system such as Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, Google, etc. You name it – they are all part of this stitch-up. The paradox is that the people online who respond to the “atrocious” statements made by various public figures feel themselves to be very conscious historically, very aware and awake about the political situation. A Philip K. Dick perspective on this would discern that the media are affecting a false awakening in people, making them feel that they have a very important task at stake. Their revolutionary awakening is feeding their continued domination.