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Laughing off a Zombie Apocalypse: The Value of Comedic and Satirical Narratives[1]

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In recent years, many international relations scholars have been discussing films, books, and television programs featuring zombies, largely because such narratives are thought to provide a compelling metaphor for thinking about a diverse array of contemporary threats. These range from relatively traditional threats posed by violent terrorists to nontraditional threats from epidemics or mass migration. However, because zombie narratives are generally apocalyptic, employing them can provide a misleading and dangerous understanding of international security. By contrast, satirical and comedic zombie stories provide interesting alternative narratives that coincide with the emancipatory objectives of critical security studies. Satirical narratives focusing on elites characteristically critique these powerful figures, often revealing them to be self-centered buffoons. Indeed, satire and black comedy can be quite subversive, reflecting critical and potentially transformative notions—about threats and other dimensions of security politics. Comedies typically center upon ordinary people, emphasize their regular lives, and end happily—aligning with the aspirations of the human security agenda.

Keywords: narrative, film, zombies, critical theory, human security

In recent years, international relations (IR) scholars have revealed a strong and growing interest in popular books, films, and television programs. Many are studying and writing seriously about a diverse oeuvre of words and images, though with a notable tilt toward pop culture works of fantasy and science fiction. Some of the most prominent publications have focused on the Harry Potter series (Nexon and Neumann 2006), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Ruane and James 2012), *Star Trek* (Weldes 1999), *Battlestar Galactica* (Buzan 2010), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Rowley and Weldes 2012). As Dyson (2015, 3) explains in his new book exploring IR in *Game of Thrones* and other television programs, popular fictional narratives are especially appropriate topics for IR scholars given that the field "as an intellectual enterprise" is "by necessity, as speculative and imaginative as a lot of sci-fi". IR is "built almost entirely on invented concepts and imagined notions" (Dyson 2015, 3). The constructivist axiom that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt 1992) essentially frees resourceful scholars in the discipline to contemplate and interrogate concepts like anarchy, power, and order in entirely fictional domains. Indeed, Dyson (2015, 5) notes that because the discipline is plagued by lack of data (the "small-n" problem), works from popular culture can provide ready-made, accessible, and vivid alternate invented worlds "to generate understanding about the big questions that drive international politics." Thinking about popular

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stories should inspire creative thinking, especially since fictional narratives often address controversial issues in a manner free from real-world political baggage attached to individuals, political parties, or particular states.

Arguably, the dominant work of the new IR of pop culture is Drezner's (2011a) *Theory of International Politics and Zombies*. Thousands of college students have studied the undead in their IR courses thanks largely to the success of this book.[2] Princeton University Press, the prestigious academic publisher of the monograph, has already produced a "revived" edition (Drezner 2015). In this decade, Drezner has written serious if sometimes tongue-in-cheek pieces about zombies and IR for various media outlets reaching wider audiences, including the *Wall Street Journal* (2013), *Foreign Policy* magazine (2010, 2011c), and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2011b). Drezner additionally delivered a TEDx talk on zombies, appeared on a zombie panel at a Comic-Con as well as an episode of C-SPAN2's *Book TV*, and is frequently quoted or referenced by journalists and bloggers in their stories and posts about zombies and popular culture. As the bibliography for this article reveals, a number of other academics have likewise promoted the study of zombies and global politics by publishing work on this topic. Moreover, as the revived edition demonstrates, American federal government agencies, including the US Center for Disease Control, the Department of Homeland Security, and even the US Strategic Command, have incorporated zombies into their public outreach promoting preparedness and training (Drezner 2015, 139–40). For Drezner (2014, 825), the current fascination with zombies reflects academic and policy-maker notice of "the hottest paranormal pop culture phenomenon of this century."

Of course, the field's interest in zombies does not merely reflect a popular trend. Fictional zombie tales are fascinating to students, teachers, researchers, and even policy practitioners in the field of IR because they provide powerful metaphors for thinking about diverse contemporary security threats, including "the spread of disease, mass migration, restricted access to clean drinking water, poverty, food insecurity, environmental degradation, social dislocation, and violence in all its manifestations" (Hannah and Wilkinson 2014, 4). Additionally, as frequently noted in the literature, it is surely more than a coincidence that zombie stories have proliferated in pop culture during the post-September 11, 2001 period when the threat posed by Islamic terrorists have figured prominently in world politics and political discourse (Hamako 2011; Saunders 2012, 81; Coker 2013, 94). Max Brooks, the author of *World War Z*, explicitly links the popularity of catastrophic stories about the undead with extraordinary contemporary levels of fear about global politics: "Zombies are an apocalyptic threat, we are living in times of apocalyptic anxiety (and) we need a vessel in which to coalesce those anxieties .... The zombie is a way for us to explore massive disasters in a safe way" (quoted in Sirota 2009).

Notwithstanding the allure of zombie stories in IR, students, scholars, and policy-makers should keep in mind the significant limitations of the metaphor. Specifically, most narratives about the undead are apocalyptic, as virtually all zombie scholarship acknowledges. Indeed, Drezner (2014, 935) laments the "superficial homogeneity of every narrative about the living dead. In almost all zombie films and fiction, the plot is depressingly similar. Flesh-eating ghouls are introduced in minute one. By minute ten, the world is a postapocalyptic hellscape". Yet, despite what Max Brooks argues, focusing on these stories can provide a misleading and potentially dangerous understanding of international security politics. Drezner (2015, 142–45) worries that this framing distorts contemporary security debates and references evidence that threats posed by war, terrorism, and other security problems have often been greatly overstated, even though they are often framed in apocalyptic terms. Because not every IR problem should be framed in apocalyptic terms, Drezner (2015, 145) further argues that students, teachers, researchers, and

[2]Drezner (2011c) revealed that his Theories of International Politics and Zombies sold more than 10,000 copies in its first six months, likely because of its adoption in college courses.

practitioners should focus less attention on these apocalyptic tales that constitute the "zombie canon" and think more imaginatively about other possibilities. He suggests that the solution may be "more creative zombie narratives," which highlight "the adaptability, ingenuity, and creativity of human beings."

Employing Cox's (1981, 128–29) terminology about the purpose of theorizing, Drezner (2014, 844) quite clearly argues for better "problem-solving" zombie stories. After all, he notes, "humans have an enormous capacity to adapt to new threats and overcome them". However, Cox (1981, 129) contrasts problem-solving theory to critical theory, which calls into question the established frameworks, institutions, and social and power relations that are typically taken for granted by problem-solving theorists. Interestingly, a few scholars have recently started calling for overtly critical analysis of the zombie metaphor in IR. For example, despite Drezner's worries about the distortion of twenty-first century debates, Yadav (2011) argues that the apocalyptic thinking employed in the new zombie literature "has been a feature of IR theorizing for over a hundred years." Indeed, Yadav (2011) hypothesizes "that apocalyptic thinking functions to reassert the relevance of dominant modes of theorizing; apocalyptic thinking disciplines the discipline. Apocalyptic thinking is deeply conservative; it reasserts the relevance of theories which protect the status quo." Yadav (2011) calls for genuinely new "out-of-the-box thinking" about zombies that might include cultural dimensions of politics. Likewise, Morrissette (2014, 20) seeks critical examination of the zombie canon to challenge the "securitized discourse" currently in place that views "the undead as an existential threat to state security" and privileges "the necessity of military force." Hannah and Wilkinson (2014, 12) advocate for "an imaginative reconstruction of world order and global institutions that prioritize goals, such as peace, egalitarianism and social justice in the wake of a zombie apocalypse . . . . The way we use the zombie story in IR could and should be used to say something profound about the world we do and ought to live in."

To that end, this article embraces a critical rather than problem-solving theoretical approach when engaging the zombie metaphor in IR. The first section below looks briefly at the structure of apocalyptic zombie stories and reveals that they characteristically align with one of two basic and necessarily limited narrative forms, romance and tragedy. The romantic and tragic narrative forms, in turn, parallel two classic approaches to international politics, liberalism and realism. I explain why the apocalyptic zombie narratives, whether framed as romantic or tragic stories, limit creative and critical thinking about security studies and IR. The second section begins with a discussion of the importance of critical IR theory and explains how satirical and comedic narrative forms align well with the emancipatory objectives of critical security studies. Satirical narratives focusing on elite characters normally critique these figures by depicting them as self-centered buffoons. Indeed, satire and black comedy can provide especially subversive perspectives, reflecting critical and potentially transformative notions of threats and other dimensions of security politics. Comedies typically center upon ordinary people, emphasize their regular lives, and end happily—largely reflecting many key aspirations of the human security agenda (United Nations Development Programme 1994, 22–40). In the final section, the article examines the value of satirical and comedic zombie tales as reflected in popular films like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and especially *Zombieland* (2009). I argue that these alternative narrative forms offer valuable creative challenges to the traditional apocalyptic zombie story and outlook.

Traditional Zombie Narratives and Security

Zombie books, films, and television programs typically offer bleak and even apocalyptic visions of the world. Indeed, zombie stories seemingly provide a

near-perfect world to imagine an international threat environment that is often discussed by IR theorists—the Hobbesian state of nature, "where every man is enemy to every man." Hobbes claimed that

> In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (1962, 100).

The Hobbesian view of the world is commonly reflected in zombie fiction, which "tends to associate the risen dead with the complete collapse of social order and a descent into chaos" (Morrissette 2014, 18; see also Youde 2012, 85). In the words of Hannah and Wilkinson (2014, 2), "Zombies engender mass panic, social dislocation and collapse, conflict, terror and catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions." Basically, a zombie calamity would be expected to shape and condition global political life in much the same way that anarchy is often said to shape and condition IR (Morrissette 2014, 8, 18–19). Drezner (2015) and other scholars (e.g., Blanton 2013) have already explicitly discussed the alignment between a Hobbesian state of nature and a zombie-infested world and outlined the way standard problem-solving IR theories like realism and liberalism would address the zombie threat.

The theoretical frameworks IR scholars employ when discussing zombies are largely shaped by the narrative arc of typical zombie stories. In recent years, a number of scholars making the "narrative turn" in IR (Knutsen 2002; Suganami 2008) have looked to literary theory (Frye 1957) in order to understand and explain how stories about global politics function. After all, as Ringmar (2006, 404) notes, "understanding stories . . . is the task of literary theory more than anything else." Audiences of different kinds of stories can anticipate that various kinds of tales will feature certain types of characters who will behave in a foreseeable manner through a particular narrative arc. Ringmar continues:

> As literary theorists have pointed out, from the ancient Greeks onward, all narratives are emplotted in predictable fashion; they are constructed according to a certain narrative type. This is why the story grabs and holds our attention, and why we as readers or as listeners are able to make sense of it. Although, in practice, there are mixed forms, there are nevertheless no more than four main narrative types: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire (2006, 404).

Each of these four narrative types features at least some distinctive situations, characters, and plotlines, even in a zombie story.

Among the four standard narrative types identified by literary theorists, IR scholars very commonly employ two of them—romantic adventure stories and tragedies. Generally, zombie stories also fit into one or the other of these two narrative types. In fact, Drezner (2011a, 9) implicitly acknowledges the two forms when he notes that "Zombie stories end in one of two ways—the elimination/subjugation of all zombies, or the eradication of humanity from the face of the earth." As explained in the following paragraphs, the first ending reflects a successful heroic conquest emblematic of romantic adventure stories, and the latter ending is a prototypical tragic failure. This apparent alignment among romantic and tragic narrative forms, mainstream IR theory, and standard zombie stories provides an additional rationale for the field of IR employing zombie metaphors with zeal.

Romantic narratives typically feature a main character pursuing some sort of valiant quest.[3] Normally, these adventure stories focus on the actions of a central hero who faces a dangerous journey on the pathway to a meaningful conquest—such as the elimination or subjugation of zombies. The protagonist successfully navigates through various challenges during a typical adventure story and then faces a major final confrontation with a dangerous villain. The hero achieves victory over this antagonist and is normally exalted in the end of the tale. Such plots are quite common in dragon-slaying and chivalric stories set in the Middle Ages, tales of the American Old West, and science fictional exploits in outer space. Over the decades of the twentieth century, actors John Wayne and Harrison Ford played the romantic hero in a large number of Hollywood films. Characteristically, the romantic hero employs both violence and cunning in order to complete a quest successfully.

Numerous zombie stories are structured as romantic adventure tales, including the filmed version of *World War Z* (2013). In that popular work, Brad Pitt's Gerry Lane heroically travels around the world in order to defeat the zombie hordes. He primarily uses his brainpower to attain this goal, but he also proves to be a daring man of action. The field of IR has a relatively strong tradition of scholars and practitioners telling romantic adventure stories. A significant portion of these stories are told as struggles between forces of good and evil, with a wicked foe typically defeated in the end (Kuusisto 2009, 609).[4] These relatively optimistic IR storytellers are viewed as liberals, who generally argue that democratic states can live together peacefully and that all states can potentially identify common interests that promote cooperative problem-solving rather than conflict. However, brutal or evil regimes and states block progress and must be defeated by heroic figures. For example, this trope is commonly used by IR scholars to explain American intervention into both world wars of the twentieth century (Mead 2002), the end of the cold war (Fukuyama 1992), and the global spread of democracy (Huntington 1993). As Ringmar (2006, 405) summarizes: "this is how Wilsonians, free-market enthusiasts, anti-Communist crusaders, Greenpeace activists, Esperanto-speakers and anti-globalization protesters usually talk about world affairs."

In contrast to romantic adventures, tragedies are heroic challenges that end in failure. Classically, a tragedy has been a deadly serious dramatic story focused on the downfall of a prominent—even aristocratic—protagonist. The hero's demise is typically caused by his or her own human fallibility, often developed in the story as an inherent character trait and flaw. In some tragedies, the hero's collapse could be attributed to a greater power, such as fate or a hopeless situation. As befitting a noble, the tragic tale is ordinarily set in the "Great Hall" or on the battlefield, and the tragic decline is initiated by some sort of critical test. The story turns on this conflict, which could be the source of tremendous torment for the protagonist. Throughout these dramatic narratives, tragic heroes are said to be passionate, even pompous egocentrics who answer only to themselves (Greene 2004, 142–43). The dramatic plot highlights the virtual inevitability of the hero's collapse, generally his (or her) death, given the circumstances. The main character's reaction to the conflict typically worsens the situation, though before death, the protagonist customarily discovers that attempts to control and resolve the conflict have actually compounded it.

Consistent with this narrative, many IR realists acknowledge having a "genuinely tragic" (and typically Hobbesian) vision of international political life (Spirtas

[3]Despite the "romantic" label, the terminology does not ordinarily refer to the kind of tale commonly called a "love story," though a romantic adventure could involve an expedition to reunite a hero with a true love partner after they have been physically separated from one another.

[4]The war on terror was framed in this way. Kuusisto (2009) prefers the term epic, but her survey of romantic stories includes tales about the Persian Gulf War of 1991 and the 1999 NATO air strikes against Serbia to save Kosovo.

1996; Mearsheimer 2001, 3). They generally dismiss the romantic idea that international politics involves struggles between good and evil forces. Rather, every state is viewed as a self-interested actor capable of doing whatever might be necessary to achieve its goals. Realists pessimistically see a world comprised of like-minded risk-averse states that are fearful of potential physical threats posed by real or imagined rivals (Mearsheimer 2001, 32, 42–46; Tang 2008). States are essentially doomed to suffer the consequences of preparing for, and engaging in, recurring acts of competition and violence. These outcomes are almost uncontrollably perpetuated by the security dilemma. Indeed, neoliberal scholars have long argued that IR realists are especially prone to emphasizing worst-case security threats in building their pessimistic theory (Keohane and Martin 1995, 43).

Realist scholars tell compelling and dramatic stories centered upon states stuck in unfortunate situations that ultimately require them to confront the limits of their power. In his book, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, Lebow (2003, 309) claims that the "core insight of tragedy," which he found to be central to classic texts penned by Thucydides, Carl von Clausewitz, and Hans Morgenthau, was "the need to know one's own limits." Stories about actors who fail to recognize their limits often end with calamity—the rise and fall of great powers is a familiar plot in IR (Kennedy 1988). Frequently, realists explain that great powers fall because the reach of their ambition tragically exceeds their grasp, as understood in the notion of "imperial overstretch." On a smaller scale, tragic realist stories might simply explain the failure of a central power to exert its will over a weaker entity, such as the British Empire in India, France and the United States in Vietnam, or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. As Drezner (2011a, 9) notes, many zombie stories end tragically in human calamity. In others, such as the classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the main heroic figure tragically fails to defeat the zombies and dies. Indeed, the pathway to zombie apocalypse and heroic failure is typically littered with human mistakes or flaws—scientific, military, or political (Bishop 2011).

IR narratives, especially those employing zombie metaphors, tend to focus on the conquests or failures of heroic figures, typically acting under conditions of Hobbesian anarchy. Because zombie narratives are commonly set in apocalyptic circumstances, they implicitly champion a traditional and relatively narrow kind of IR thinking centered on the difficulty of surviving in a very dangerous world—or the need to defeat an evil or monstrous villain. These kinds of tales rarely address other interesting actors and circumstances in global politics. For example, these IR narratives normally do not examine the stories of ordinary people. Echoing Yadav's concerns about the need for out-of-the-box thinking, Hannah and Wilkinson (2014, 2) worry that the zombie metaphor has almost exclusively served the disciplinary status quo, "used merely as a means of teaching students about existing theories of IR rather than as a vehicle for developing critical and normative thinking."[5] In the following sections, I advocate a critical theoretical approach relying upon alternative narrative forms—namely satire and comedy—that challenge both apocalyptic thinking about threats and the demand for heroic responses.

Comedy, Satire, and Critical Theory

This section does not offer a postmodern plea for scholars to embellish security debates with diverse and perhaps contradictory alternative narrative perspectives. Instead, my call for greater attention to satirical and comedic narratives

[5]Blanton (2013, 7–9) suggests some ways that constructivist and feminist concerns can be tied to the study of zombies in the IR classroom, but he does not offer a means by which to use zombies to offer a wider and reflective critique of the field.

emphasizes the value of critical theory as developed in the Frankfurt School.[6] All too often, liberal and realist IR scholars (Schweller 1999, 150) see this form of critical theory as "fantasy theory" employed to dream pointlessly about a utopian "fantasy world." However, the conceit embraced here echoes Dyson's view about the creative and inspirational possibilities of fictional narratives. Put simply, IR scholars should sometimes fantasize about utopian ideals—especially in the context of a zombie apocalypse.

Influential members of the Frankfurt School have long envisioned a critical theory that is simultaneously explanatory, normative, and practical. Like realists, critical IR theorists generally tell stories explaining the importance of materially powerful actors pursuing their selfish interests and thereby often determining global political outcomes. However, unlike realists, critical theorists also make overtly normative points critiquing both the outcomes of international power struggles and the political processes that make those outcomes possible. Critical IR theorists reject the legitimacy of outcomes built exclusively on the strength of material power or coercion. Indeed, these scholars overtly seek emancipatory change. Fundamentally, critical theory is oriented around the goal of liberating individuals from the dominant and often arbitrary forces that shape their lives. The aim is progressive political transformation that will upend entrenched centers of power, with desired change described in terms of human freedom and security. To that end, critical theorists seek in practice to identify and explain the fissures, inconsistencies, and hypocrisies embedded in any given political system and encourage the development of social pressures that could then change public consciousness and make alternative normative and structural outcomes possible. Ideally, they seek to identify viable pathways by which political communities can consensually develop and abide by legitimate policies and social norms—and reject illegitimate policies and practices built on selfish interests and/or crass use of material power.[7] Thus, critical theorists embrace the recursive and reflexive notions from mainstream social constructivist theorizing but with strong normative and practical dimensions.

Satirical and comedic narratives align quite well with the critical theory project.[8] Indeed, various forms of comedy allow for direct or indirect critique of an established idea, order, or practice. Most notably, satire is viewed as a particularly sharp means by which to offer pointed criticism, often with the implied or explicit purpose of improving the practices and norms of powerful actors and institutions. Both satirical and comedic narratives offer the possibility of deepening the normative aspirations of IR theory by mocking heroic characters ordinarily at the center of IR stories and even challenging the goals and situations taken for granted in romantic and tragic tales. For example, a good satire might challenge the idea of various kinds of apocalyptic threats. Scott (2005, 109) points out that satire is "the most directly political of comic forms." He continues:

> Satire aims to denounce folly and vice and urge ethical and political reform through the subjection of ideas to humorous analysis. In the best instances, it takes its subject matter from the heart of political life or cultural anxiety, re-framing issues at an ironic distance that enables us to revisit fundamental questions that have been obscured by rhetoric, personal interests, or realpolitik (2005, 109).

[6]As employed here, critical theory is directly inspired by the Frankfurt School's commitment to emancipatory social change, reflexivity, and human agency in the form of practical reasoning. No attempt is made to integrate poststructuralist perspectives influenced by French social theorist Michel Foucault and others. Postmodernists find power and knowledge to be virtually inseparable; thus, any prescriptive application of ideas, regardless of how widely shared, effectively endorses a particular and likely problematic regime of truth.

[7]German social theorist Jürgen Habermas and many other critical theorists embrace discourse ethics or deliberative democracy as means by which to develop consensual norms (Payne and Samhat 2004).

[8]Boland (2012, 440) argues "that the consequences of critical comedy do not necessarily emancipate, but do indicate critical sensibility."

Day (2011, 5) emphasizes the subversive or emancipatory purpose that contemporary social critics seek when they employ satire "to draw attention to hypocrisies and ironies in the supposedly serious world of political discourse and to advocate for alternative formulations of the issues of the day."

To achieve its purposes, the satirical narrative form involves "the employment in speaking or writing, of sarcasm, irony, ridicule, etc., in denouncing, exposing, or deriding vice, folly, abuses or evils of any kind" (Hodgart 1969, 7). Again, powerful or wealthy actors are especially common targets in satirical narratives and they are typically revealed to be pompous and/or ridiculous. Specifically, in IR, these characters might be ridiculed for pointing to dubious security threats to justify their selfish actions or perhaps for promoting the expansion of democratic ideals ("freedom") with coercive force. Effectively, satirists work much like critical theorists, scrutinizing weaknesses, errors, and shortcomings of their subjects. Satirists might also feign approval of their targets even while mocking them, making "extensive use of irony, of saying the opposite of what the author and the audience know is (or ought to be) the case, in order to draw attention to an inconsistency or contradiction" (Hall 2012, 6; see also Bloom 2010, xv). Though a political actor's intent can be difficult to gauge, an ironic situation or environment features "a contrast between a given expectation and the 'reality' of the situation in which this expectation is realized" (Katz 2009, 401). By highlighting characters' motives and actions, as well as the unfortunate consequences, satirical narratives serve the same function as critical IR theory, which likewise confronts the inconsistent and hypocritical justifications for any given status quo and encourages the development of social pressures for emancipatory change. As Odysseos (2001, 731) argues, "the comic is a perspective which is valid for human understanding, for the practice of critique and reconstitution of the possibilities of the everyday."

In terms of explanatory potential, it seems difficult to believe that classic comedic narratives have much to offer IR. After all, characters in comedic narratives are embedded in broader social contexts than are tragic or romantic protagonists and are usually ordinary people rather than heroic figures (Odysseos 2001, 720–23). The problems of the regular people in comedies are typically rather ordinary and the audience approvingly views the ascendance of the central characters' fortunes. The satisfaction for the audience comes in observing success for deserving people. Comedic narratives typically feature what Kuusisto (2009, 613) calls "a cheerful atmosphere" and usually end happily, often in a wedding. The comedic narrative is valuable in IR, however, precisely because it has a practical "vision of life"—it "mocks heroism and gets us to laugh at hypocrisy, stupidity, vices, and other shortcomings" (Morreall 2014, 125–26). Moreover, Morreall (2014, 126) argues that comedy is "about people struggling in a world of conflict and confusion . . . it deals with the disparity between the way things are and the way we think they should be." Indeed, Morreall explicitly contrasts a comic vision to a tragic vision and finds the antiheroic protagonists featured in comedic narratives uniquely reliant upon their clever, playful, and social nature to solve problems with imagination. To demonstrate his point, Morreall (2014, 134) references an array of characters ranging from Shakespeare's Falstaff, to Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, to the "clever boy in the movie *Home Alone*." Kuusisto (2009, 616) agrees that comedic characters overcome obstacles to happiness in inventive, resourceful, clever, or crafty manner: "The comic plot amounts to a willingness to see conflicts and adversaries in a non-deterministic way, to a certain flexibility in terms of appropriate means, and to a readiness—at least in principle—to engage in self-criticism." Although this comedic purpose sounds like a problem-solving[9] rather

[9]According to Kuusisto's (2009) analysis, comedic narratives are already commonly applied in IR under specific circumstances. However, she tends to identify problem-solving functions of comedy. For instance, Kuusisto (2009,

than a critical approach, Burke (1984, 171) explained the transformative power of comic reflexivity in a classic text: "the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness. One would 'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles."

Additionally, ordinary comic characters—not the elites lampooned in satire—both implicitly and explicitly embrace a wide array of critical theoretical ideals. They poke fun at authority and tradition at almost every opportunity and normally embrace progressive ideas such as greater societal equality, including more favorable treatment of women and the poor. The ordinary "little guy" comic protagonists, as opposed to tragic heroes, typically reject militaristic and violent responses to problems, Morreall (2014, 133) argues, mainly because they "are not willing to die for much of anything." Perhaps, most importantly, the characters in comedy value the strength of their community over the success of the individual.

> [T]here are catastrophes, wars, and other problems. But because the characters are in it together, hardships that might be devastating to them as individuals are much easier to take . . . . More generally, in the comic vision, life is a series of adventures enjoyed by groups, rather than a series of battles in which individuals show their nobility and greatness (Morreall 2014, 134, 138).

Both satire and the comic "vision of life" align well with critical theory's transformational emancipatory purpose and commitment to human security and community. Ordinary people are involved in global politics in numerous ways, but their stories are rarely told or even examined by most IR theorists. Often, of course, the masses suffer dearly as a consequence of the actions of powerful figures. Ordinary people are often the primary victims of human rights violations and genocide, they fight as soldiers in the wars managed by elites, and they work the tedious manufacturing or service jobs at the base of the global economy. As the comical films *Life is Beautiful* (1997) and *The Great Dictator* (1940) illustrate, comedy—especially when paired with satirical narratives—can simultaneously explain and critique dreadful elite decisions, broadly illustrate the suffering of ordinary people, and nonetheless allow for the possibility of regular people finding a happy ending in their families and wider communities. In the next section, I demonstrate that satirical and comedic zombie narratives provide the same opportunity as those earlier works about World War II and the Holocaust, invoking both pointed critique and purposeful laughter amid apparent apocalyptic horror.

Comedic and Satirical Zombie Narratives

Contemporary popular satirical and comedic zombie narratives highlight subversive ideas about security politics and threats and ultimately emphasize important human security concerns of ordinary people. The primary focus here is on *Shaun of the Dead* and *Zombieland*, two recent popular films, which feature a great deal of satire, dark comedy, slapstick, and other forms of humor amid seeming apocalyptic conditions. Some attention is also directed at the lesser-known *Warm Bodies* (2013) and *Fido* (2006). As explained below, these stories include significant and humorous love-story plotlines that help define them as comedies in a classic sense (Bishop 2011). The final moments of these stories provide strong hints that the main characters have fallen in love, strengthened their families, and returned to a new—and improved—normal life. Brad Pitt's character Gerry Lane occasionally

614) claims that a comedic framework is the "standard solution of the Western leaders to ordinary disagreements among friends, [or] problems with 'small foes' . . . there is usually room for negotiation and some compromise. A desire for mutual understanding is publicly pronounced and a wide range of options are officially considered."

worries about his family in *World War Z*, but that is the background condition for the adventure plot, not the main story.

It is initially important to explain that these zombie stories fundamentally disrupt the genre by creating characters, situations, and narratives that are not altogether centered on the apocalyptic nature of the situation. Typically, as discussed above, zombie stories take place in anarchical conditions as domestic order has been severely disrupted if not destroyed. People use violence selfishly and somewhat indiscriminately, seeking to save themselves in an environment they view as highly threatening. The level of trust is low and the level of fear is high (Bishop 2009). In fact, a zombie-infested world arguably offers a near-perfect parallel to the international politics described by realist scholars, though it also offers plenty of opportunity for heroic (liberal) adventurers to save the day. These are the ideas primarily featured by Drezner and many other IR scholars who study zombies.

Yet, these satirical and comedic zombie films do not tell stories focused exclusively on basic survival. Rather, the threats emanating from zombies are often played for laughs and are otherwise undermined by the way they are viewed outside of traditional security frames. At times, these films seem to treat violence in the same comic-book style that Quentin Tarantino employs in his movies (Kelly 2013, 85–86). *Zombieland* was criticized for its failings as a horror film and includes slapstick-style footage of a "Zombie Kill of the Week," complete with the main character's humorous punch line. The zombies in these films seem relatively easy to slay and do not consistently pose an existential threat to the main characters. Obviously, the zombie outbreaks reflect at least some failure of established order, but even in *Zombieland*, which features the more complete societal breakdown, the characters construct their own rules and understandings in order to cope with their situations somewhat peacefully and cooperatively—despite plot points that emphasize the characters' lack of trust. Throughout *Zombieland*, in fact, the main character Columbus narrates a list of personal rules of conduct and the validity of these rules is occasionally illustrated with comical zombie attacks shown in flashbacks. Although Drezner (2015, 55–56) sees these rules as liberal ideals, many of them seem much more appropriate to the kind of security community favored by critical theorists. They certainly stand in contrast to a realist self-help world, wherein the most powerful actors call the shots and write the rules. Columbus's rules focus on the need for partners, buddies, and the advantages of avoiding or escaping violent confrontations with zombies. One rule is "don't be a hero," though Columbus at least temporarily reverses that to "be a hero" in the film's final scene. A running gag finds the women double-crossing the men on multiple occasions, but everyone eventually learns that they are all better off when they trust one another and build family-like ties. Similarly, in *Warm Bodies*, the former human and zombie enemies are transformed into friends and even lovers living in a common security community, uniting against the so-called Boneys, monstrous creatures that have altogether lost their flesh and human identities. In *Shaun of the Dead*, the nature of the threat is implicitly minimized by the fact that a fairly strong order is constructed in only six months. In the language of critical theory, these films demonstrate that even a zombie apocalypse is not an immutable condition, but instead is subject to emancipatory change built upon human agency.

Zombieland additionally satirizes the position of powerful elites in a chaotic zombie-infested world, thanks largely to the appearance of star actor Bill Murray playing himself. The four central characters find Murray after traveling to Los Angeles and looking specifically for his home as a tourist attraction. In contrast to the four new friends, Murray essentially lives alone in his well-stocked Hollywood mansion and disguises himself as a zombie so that he can have an autonomous and full daily life outside his dwelling. By disguising himself as a zombie, Murray is even able to play golf, a country club sport. It would appear that Murray's privileged position has been maintained even through a zombie apocalypse. Indeed,

Murray seems uniquely advantaged given his access to various material resources and his realistic ability to appear to be a zombie. Yet, Murray's lifestyle quickly proves unsustainable, as he pays dearly for his behavior. Specifically, Murray pretends to be a threatening zombie inside his own home and is shot and killed by Columbus who does not realize that Murray is simply playing a prank. In a zombie-infested world, the material advantages of wealth and fame are not necessarily enduring, the scene seems to suggest, and may well be quite unimportant compared to the social power of friendship and camaraderie shared by the four members of the new surrogate family. Together, they are able to fulfill their dreams in a way that Murray is not. Pointedly, Murray's death does not lead to a clichéd power-struggle over leadership and position among the survivors. Rather, many of the characters' most intimate bonding moments occur soon after Murray's death.

These comedic zombie narratives very clearly focus on the daily distresses of regular people—and offer them a communal feeling and happy ending amid the changes wrought by the horror of zombie attacks. The pairing of overt humor with these endings generally sets these movies apart from filmed stories like *World War Z* and *Night of the Living Dead* featuring, respectively, romantic and tragic heroic quests. In any case, in these comedic and satirical films, the ordinary people who have the leading roles spend a fair amount of screen time thinking about and then acting upon ways to improve their love lives, family situations, or communities. In *Zombieland*, until the ending, the four central characters are somewhat anonymously identified only by their cities of origin (Columbus, Little Rock, Tallahassee, and Wichita). Tallahassee insists upon this anonymity so that they do not form attachments; yet, the new acquaintances do in fact form fairly strong ties through their day-to-day adventures. Although the "new normal" of *Zombieland* has turned their old lives upside down, the appropriate characters find in one another many of the familial or communal ties they have lost or never really felt—including loving parents, children, and romantic partners. Prior to meeting the others, former college student Columbus admits that he never really had any friends or much of a family. Early in the film, he declares, "My whole life, all I'd ever wanted was to find a girl and fall in love." Tallahassee is revealed to have lost his young son. The two main female characters, sisters, aspire to visit Pacific Playland, an amusement park ordinarily frequented by families with children, and that is the setting for the movie's final scene. In the film's last moments, the older of the two females reveals her name (Krista) to Columbus and kisses him, signaling the establishment of an even more intimate bond. By the end, the main characters have not learned how to survive in a disastrous world, as they were all surviving prior to connecting with one another. Instead, they have learned how to thrive in new (surrogate) family relationships they have constructed. Columbus reports about the three others, "those smart girls in that big black truck [Wichita and Little Rock] and that big guy in that snakeskin jacket [Tallahassee] . . . they were the closest to something I had always wanted but never really had. A family. I trusted them and they trusted me."

Similarly, *Shaun of the Dead* features most of the tropes of comedy, including the classic emphasis on home and family situations. The main (title) character is a flawed and nonheroic man who is struggling at work and in his love life but has a loyal best friend (Ed) who lives on Shaun's couch. Although the story is set amid a zombie infestation, many of the plot developments are played for laughs using the characters' preestablished identities and relationships. Remarkably, Shaun's slacker lifestyle makes him at first unable to notice the urgent threat posed by the zombie infestation despite several unusual confrontations with infected people. Later, thanks to the zombie epidemic, Shaun is forced to reconcile with his estranged stepfather and must poignantly kill his own mother after she becomes infected. Most significantly, Shaun strengthens his relationship with his girlfriend, Liz, though prior to the infestation he had failed even to plan an appropriate

anniversary event. The film does not end as a heroic adventure story might during the immediate aftermath of the confrontation at the pub between the main characters and the zombies. In fact, that scene only concludes when the small group is rescued by the British army. The film instead ends in a home and family setting where uninfected people have returned to their lives and communities. Zombies who were formerly human friends are now apparently kept around for entertainment or labor—much like family pets or work animals.[10]

Other zombie comedies feature a similar emphasis on family, love, and personal relationships. Although some critics viewed *Warm Bodies* as a familiar story based loosely on William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the story is not by any measure a tragedy. The young main characters in *Warm Bodies* form an affectionate relationship between human and zombie. Indeed, their budding love demonstrates that humans should understand zombies differently than they have up to that point in the story, creating the potential for a transformation in their relationship—as well as a physical transformation in the "warming" zombies. During eight years of zombie apocalypse, humans walled off a city and guarded it against threat of external attack by enemy zombies. After the main characters in *Warm Bodies* express amorous feelings for one another, the threats are reevaluated and the wall is destroyed, signaling the possibility of a new coexistence and assimilation. This new changed understanding and relationship can be compared and contrasted to many parallel in-group/out-group situations from world politics, involving, for example, people of disparate ethnicities, nationalities, or religious faiths.

Conclusion

Zombie narratives provide powerful metaphors for thinking about various contemporary security threats. To be sure, the apocalyptic situations survivors face in zombie infestations provide ample opportunity to explore heroic success stories as well as catastrophic doomsday scenarios. In turn, liberal and realist IR theorists have no difficulty finding appropriate zombie narratives to illustrate their concerns. So far, the debate about zombies in IR has been dominated by these problem-solving understandings. However, the traditional apocalyptic zombie metaphor is much less useful for criticizing the idea of apocalyptic threats or for thinking about alternative policy concerns, such as the human security agenda. This article focuses primarily on popular satirical and comedic film narratives to engage with the priorities of critical IR theorists. Satirical and comedic stories like *Shaun of the Dead*, *Zombieland*, and *Warm Bodies* provide interesting and unconventional narrative perspectives on the traditional zombie tale. Though set amid the societal destruction after zombie plagues, these satirical and comedic stories primarily center upon rather ordinary struggles pertaining to domestic human relations. All end fairly happily, with the development of new familial and communal relations. Because these popular works infuse comedy into the horror genre, they work effectively as subversive satire, reflecting a critical rather than an entrenched understanding of fear and threats. Ultimately, including these zombie films in IR debates offers a viable critical perspective for thinking about global security politics.

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[10]The zombies in *Fido* are similarly employed as workers or pets (as the title implies), controlled by electronic collars. The ending of *Fido* is also relatively happy and new family ties are formed between humans and zombies. Much of the satire in the film is aimed at military contractors, who effectively administer a police state in the zombie setting.

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