

Warm Bodies: Zom-Rom-Solidarity Econ

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The romantic comedy *Warm Bodies* turns the well-worn Zombie genre on its head. The film creates a world inhabited by three populations: humans who live in a walled-in, functioning city and venture out occasionally for needed medical supplies; "corpses" who look like and exhibit most of the traditional zombie behaviors, and "boneys" who appear as more extreme versions of corpses, faster, more intentional, and more vicious. The boneys have even eaten their own flesh, stripping themselves of any evidence of their former humanity. Over the course of the movie, the corpses, moved by love, begin to find their humanity and join with the humans to destroy the threat from the "boneys," who eventually wither away.



By creating a post-apocalyptic world in which zombies are capable of self-transformation, the political horizon moves from a goal of establishing a community that can eke out survival in a hostile environment, to the possibility that the world doesn't have to be hostile in the first place. We read *Warm Bodies* as inhabiting today's growing social imaginary and belief that even amidst growing inequalities, austerity and unfolding ecological challenges, another world is truly possible.

The movie begins with the protagonist, "R," ambling aimlessly through a deserted airport terminal, occasionally grunting at or bumping into other corpses. Much

like Nietzsche's last man, R is unable to dream. He is tired. Not of life, but of his banal living death. R is resigned to his lot, but at the same time he can't help but feel that something is missing and he wishes for a life that would bring him a bit of meaning, purpose and companionship. "I don't want to be this way, I'm lonely," a voice-over tells us.

Lacking the language to voice his inchoate and sublimated desires, R can only think about other ways of being in the world as fragments of an imagined past. In a foundational sequence, R wistfully tries to remember what the world must have been like when the corpses were human. "It must have been better when people could express themselves and enjoy each other's company," he tells us through a voice-over while the scene switches to a busy airport filled with humans on their cell phones, moving to and fro, texting, gaming, talking to distant others while avoiding the company of nearby others.

Here, *Warm Bodies* opens a familiar window. Zombie films have a long history of being enmeshed in political and cultural commentary, much of which focuses on the figure of the zombie as the quintessential mindless consumer. In Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, survivors hole up in an abandoned shopping mall, populated by zombies who stroll around, driven by an insatiable appetite to consume. The survivors clear the mall of zombies and, for a time, the mall functions as a utopian fortress, a gated community and a consumerist paradise until it is attacked by a marauding motorcycle gang that breaks down the barriers - letting the dead in again. At the film's conclusion, the surviving couple flees by helicopter while the dead once again roam the familiar shopping mall filled with an insatiable hunger, stumbling about while comic music plays and the credits roll.

The End of History, Consuming the Soul

We understand today's consumerism as part of a set of infectious beliefs about economy that, in becoming widespread, have encouraged us to act as if we are individuals resigned to compete against one another for jobs, stuff and status. As Margaret Thatcher aptly stated when describing her economic reforms that

emphasized privatization of industry and housing and personal responsibility, all while laying the groundwork for the ascension of London's financial class, "economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul." The construction of economy has more than material consequences. It imparts feelings, investments, desires and truths on the people who participate in it; economy works to shape our very natures.

In *Warm Bodies*, the corpses' hearts and souls have become hardened. Traumatized by loss, they are unable to feel much of anything beyond a gnawing discomfort and drive to consume humans. R is conflicted about this situation, but the drive is powerful. And in eating humans - and in particular human brains - he can find temporary respite and partial satisfaction. In fact, it is this very desire to know what it was like to be alive that opens R up to becoming more human, to want to have meaning and companionship.

For us, this is a kind of metaphor for anthropologist David Graeber's observation that we all seem to desire to live in community, even when participating in an economy that tells us there is no alternative but to take care of our own self-interest by competing against everyone else over scarce resources. Indeed, today desires for collective well-being are showing up across the political spectrum. They erupt in social movements like Occupy, which both projects and embodies desires for a **more collective, caring world**. They are exhibited in **transgressive behavior of mid-level managers** who break from economic and legal rules in order to pad the meager paychecks of their workers. From co-housing and intentional communities, to worker cooperatives, complementary currencies, and experiments in participatory budgeting, there seem to be countless examples of efforts from our desire to learn to live again as members of real communities.

And we can often find those same desires simmering in unexpected places. For example, archaeologist **Quentin Lewis** suggests that the social imaginaries found in recent initiatives aimed to construct conservative Utopias, like Glen Beck's "Independence USA," are complicated by desires for a more radical solidarity.

"Beck argued that housing in Independence USA would be wealth-mixed, putting rich families and poor families adjacent to each other "to break the class barriers." Beck drew on metaphors of suburban community life in advocating for this rather striking spatiality, arguing that it would foster greater community interaction among residents, and keep families from isolating themselves in their backyards ... Thus, despite his commitment to anti-state libertarian economic principles, and the metaphors of freedom and individualism that frequently align with them, the housing neighborhoods of Beck's independence would not be out of place in the most left-leaning and radical urban plans of the 20th century."

To be (Humane) or not to be

Warm Bodies is the second "zom-com" in recent memory, following in the tradition of *Zombieland* (2009), but its significance might better be understood in relation to the small-screen adaptation of the *Walking Dead* comic book. As with earlier productions in the genre, it only partially settles the question of whether or not solidarity bonds among humans allow for survival in a harsh world or if it makes more sense to be unrelentingly self-sufficient and self-reliant in such cases. As the protagonists make difficult choices to remain part of the group, the show arguably comes down on the side of human social bonds. But, as we learn in the conclusion of the second season, all humans are already infected with the virus, and all will become zombies upon death. It is as if the show is saying to us that no matter how much we are able to hold onto our moral compass, the best we can do is merely survive. Here we are reminded once again of Margaret Thatcher's famous TINA (there is no alternative injunction), one which tells us this world we are living in now is as good as it gets and that we had best look to our own survival.

Warm Bodies takes us beyond this delimited humanism. The film takes for granted that solidarity is necessary for survival, but, even more, it tells us that love can be transformative. The primary narrative device in the film is the romantic love between "R" and a human female Julie - a not so subtle reference to Romeo and Juliette - but the aim here is to reveal more than an idealized romantic love. As the corpses begin to see themselves as linked with each other,

but also with the humans, love is emergent from and becomes emblematic of the solidarity bond itself; love becomes the very basis for re-humanizing the corpses.

We find this very same dynamic, this same conscious search for and expression of communal love in today's span of efforts to find alternatives to a capitalist economy amid extreme inequality and **imposed austerity**. **Solidarity economy, new economy**, the interest in localism of all sorts: These are all attempts at rehumanizing the economy. In place of necessity and competition - and consumption as our sole/soul compensation - we instead have the intention that production, exchange, and care be organized as a set of works that are, in fact, not just good for the soul but constitutive of it: cooperative rather than individual behavior, ethical care instead of competition, collective as opposed to individual self-interest. As people interested in this other world, part of our responsibility is to keep count and make sense of these disparate efforts. The **Community Economies Collective** is one such project we are involved with that aims to do just that.

Exhuming Humanity

In the film, the corpses become human again as they embrace and enact love for each other through their actions of and in solidarity. First, witnessing R and Julie's love incites one of the corpses to save the couple from an attack by the ferocious boneyes. This selfless, ethical decision further transforms the corpses, and, as they begin to consider the possibility of love, their dormant human hearts, quite literally in the movie, begin to slowly beat again. However, this decision also has consequences; the boneyes banish this transgressive group of corpses from their airport terminal home.

Here we can find another interesting, unexpected twist. Rather than the humans representing the besieged middle class who are fighting a populist fight against a terrifying, unknowable enemy, it is the corpses, the zombies themselves that represent humanity in our vulnerable contemporary condition - alienated, aimless, a Walking Dead driven to consume, and punished or excluded if we refuse to or are unable to participate. The film tells us, however, that not all is

hopeless. It's possible to transform ourselves through a radical love that we can find and cultivate through practice. For us, this means building the ideas, institutions, projects and campaigns that will encourage us to be in common with one another; to construct a society and an economy that can be a "method" to "change the heart and soul."

Of course, this still leaves the question of contending with the boneys who punish the corpses for their misbehavior. But what exactly are the boneys? Are they the Koch brothers? The Waltons? Bank of America? Yes, in part. But even more, they might best be explained as the embodied idea of brutal, predatory capitalism - representatives of an imaginary that won't simply disappear if one of them is killed off (they can always be replaced). Indeed, in the film, humans and corpses must organize and form an alliance in order to prevent the boneys from consuming them all, but it is only when the corpses begin to be part of a new community, a new humanity that the boneys finally, with no one to prey on and no more people to take their place, wither away and die.

The take-away here is that our humanity is to be found in those solidary actions that allow us to be more than we currently are (more than bare life, life stripped to the bone). This must involve both resisting and defending ourselves from the soulless acts of corporate actors and state aggression, and at the same time imagining, truly believing in and constructing another world that can encourage and cultivate our humanity.