Not Dead Enough to Be (an)Other.
Joyce Carol Oates's zombies between history and fiction.

Fiorenzo Iuliano[1]

τεθνάκην δ᾽ ἀδόλως θέλω·
ἄ με ψισδομένα κατελίμπανεν
πόλλα καὶ τόδ᾽ ἔειπέ [μοι
ὤιμ᾽ ὡς δεῖνα πεπ[όνθ]αμεν,[2]
(Sappho, Fragment 94)

When two policemen entered his apartment in Milwaukee, finally unmasking him as one of the most ferocious serial killers ever heard of, Jeffrey Dahmer "still being held to the ground, turned his head and muttered, 'For what I did I should be dead'" (Masters 1993, 4). This is, at least, what one of the instant books recounting Dahmer's life reports, probably merging real events and made up details so as to catch the morbid curiosity of readers. These few words, however, reveal a twofold narrative and rhetorical strategy. On the first level, the reconstruction of presumably true facts is filtered through the B movie-like story narrated in the book: an innocent victim escapes from his would-be murderer and

[1] Gratefully acknowledges the Sardinia Regional Government for the financial support (P.O.R. Sardegna F.S.E. Operational Programme of the Autonomous Region of Sardinia, European Social Fund 2007-2013 - Axis IV Human Resources, Objective l.3, Line of Activity l.3.1 "Avviso di chiamata per il finanziamento di Assegni di Ricerca").
[2] "Honestly I wish I were dead. / When she left me she wept / profusely and told me, / 'Oh how we've suffered in all this'" (Sappho 2009, 55).

goes to the police, thus allowing two policemen to arrive on the crime scene and immediately arrest the monster, who cannot even stand their presence and, for this reason, needs to avert his own eyes from the inspecting gaze of triumphant justice. On the second level, the words allegedly pronounced by Dahmer, "for what I did I should be dead", preserve a slight ambiguity, death being invoked as, potentially, both the moral and material consequence of his atrocious actions and the ideal precondition to commit them: I deserve to die for what I did, but also, death would have been the ideal status to perpetrate my crimes.

These two different perspectives will be the lenses through which I will explore a series of texts dealing with the story of the Milwaukee cannibal, the man who, between 1978 and 1991, killed seventeen young men, sexually abusing their corpses, sometimes eating their internal organs, and preserving their severed limbs in his house. After considering several books that have recounted Dahmer's life, I will concentrate on a novel by Joyce Carol Oates, *Zombie*, which is a loose rewriting of his story (Marcus 1995; Jarvis 2007, 328). The central element of my analysis is the use of the zombie both as a narrative and rhetorical trope, capable of blurring and radically questioning the divide between the familiar and the radically other, and as an interchangeable category whose symbolic and narrative function can alternatively serve the role of victims and serial killer. This functional ambiguity produces an interesting overlapping between the zombie and the serial killer as cultural icons, which turns out to be particularly fruitful in the reading of the Jeffrey Dahmer related texts. In these very texts, indeed, the unstable and continually shifting borders of 'zombiefication' deconstruct the opposition between victim and victimizer, the latter needing to increasingly identify with his own victims in order to affirm his own self.

This overlapping structure is well rendered by the rich semantic potentiality of the zombie. Zombies, in fact, are portrayed as living dead creatures, that, though still alive, can exert no control over their own bodies. They need to feed

on human flesh, so as to absorb the life they lack through cannibalism; they belong to a definite territory, though not much is known about their real origins (thus, unlike vampires, not embodying the alien or the foreign invader); they usually destroy a domestic and/or romantic or familiar setting; finally, they are immortal. These characteristics are symbolically ascribable to both zombies and serial killers. Consequently, the social monster, who wants to subtract life from his victims, reproduces the archetypal monster, who materially denies and overcomes his own death.[3]

Jeffrey Dahmer's macrotext

The story of Jeffrey Dahmer has been rendered as a heterogeneous macrotext, whose structure revolves around the conceptual cores of undeadness and unaliveness, and finally collapses because of the negative polarization of its own constitutive terms. Undeadness and unaliveness, in fact, seem to be the only terms capable of fully rendering the status of both Dahmer and his victims; they work as asymptotes that, though approaching actual referents, the living body and the corpse, never overlap with them. By collecting heterogeneous and apparently haphazard details about Dahmer's life, both biographic and fictional texts have produced the archaeological narrative of the serial killer as the zombie.

The zombiefication of Jeffrey Dahmer follows a pattern similar to the genesis of the monster theorized by Michel Foucault. In most of his works, indeed, Foucault analyzes the process through which marginal categories of individuals (for instance, the mad or the "sexual pervert") have been gradually turned into monsters and thus marked as visible but manageable menaces to the society. The monster, according to Foucault, is a creature that breaks the law, and, in doing so, always elicits extra-legal, violent responses (Foucault 2003, 56).

[3] See Cohen 1996, especially with regard to the second thesis, "The Monster Always Escapes", in which the connection between monstrosity and undeadness is pointed out.

Foucault, finally, investigates the slow transformation of monsters into "the abnormal" (Foucault 2003, 109-110): exceptional, and exceptionally punishable, cases, become the central elements of a taxonomy, identifying the risks of any transgression and trespassing. Dahmer's story has been narrated according to the same trajectory: initially depicted by the media as a monster, he is gradually turned into an abnormal subject, whose behavior can be attributed to a number of different (psychic, social, political, cultural) reasons. Monstrosity, nevertheless, comes back as a rhetoric and narrative strategy that unsettles the apparent stability and self-sufficiency of abnormality as a taxonomic system.

As a result of the high number of texts on his life, behavior and personality, Jeffrey Dahmer has been turned into an icon, one of the most appalling but at the same time intriguing (and unwilling) protagonists of the cultural industry. As Brian Jarvis puts it:

> Over the next few years, Dahmer was the subject of numerous documentaries (including *An American Nightmare* (1993) and *The Monster Within* (1996)), films (*The Secret Life* (1993) and *Dahmer* (2002)), several biographies and Joyce Carol Oates's fictionalized *Zombie* (1996), a comic strip (by Derf, a cartoonist and coincidentally Dahmer's childhood acquaintance) and a concept album by a heavy metal band called Macabre. The extensive media coverage of Dahmer's exploits in 1991 coincided with the release of Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (which won the Best Picture Oscar and grossed US$ 272,700,000 in worldwide box-office) as well as the controversial and commercially successful Bret Easton Ellis novel, *American Psycho* (1991). Since the early 1990s, the translation of serial killer shock value into surplus value has become an increasingly profitable venture (Jarvis 2007, 328).

The image of Dahmer as a monster has been sanctioned by his biographies, which depict him as an introverted, solitary and bizarre individual.[4] His inhuman actions,

[4] "Dahmer sat on the edge of the experience, bewildered and untouched. … He was already, perhaps, beyond reach" (Masters 1993, 43); "At home, in solitude, he discovered the solace of masturbation, and indulged himself on a daily basis" (Masters 1993, 45); "Sitting on the sidelines throughout the wrenching event, feeling totally left out as his home life shattered, was Jeffrey, feeling forsaken as his parents battled over [his brother] David" (Davis 1991, 35); "Silent rage built to white heat within him. It appeared to Jeffrey that, once again, nobody wanted him" (Davis

thus, have been explained as the unexpected outcome, in turn, of his monotonous existence in the American provinces, of his marginal condition (as an alcoholic and a homosexual), and even of an astrologically problematic personality. The monster, thus, is gradually put into the social misfit category, and every part of his behavior can be deciphered as the symptom of a fundamental abnormality. [5]

Arguing that "middle America sees itself as domestic. … the serial killer represents 'the savage force roaming in the dark, as the nuclear family huddles terrified inside the home'" (Thitecott 1997, 53), Richard Thitecott classifies Dahmer as an offspring of the sordid and violent American periphery. However, it is the best seller *The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, by Don Davis, that strongly insists on the provincial and peripheral dimension of Milwaukee, repeatedly (and inappropriately) comparing its monotonous rhythms with the events that, between the 1980s and the 1990s, were changing the world. The whole chapter 11, for instance, curiously goes on by juxtaposing episodes from Dahmer's criminal life with the Iraqi war in 1991, which is recounted through emphatic, though often imprecise, details.[6] As for the astrological question, it is again Davis that seriously dwells on the topic, arguing that, being a Gemini, Dahmer "was born under the sign of the twins, the two different personalities in one person. … The moon in

1991, 36); "Dahmer told investigators he felt guilty for having been born … By the time he was sixteen, Dahmer was having homosexual fantasies in which he envisioned having total control over other. … in high school he turned to alcohol to numb himself." (Mann 2007, 4-5); "I sometimes wonder: Had young Dahmer planned to dispose of his first victim's body on the day of the solstice, or was it a mere coincidence?" (Mann 2007, 17).

[5] In this closely resembling to what Foucault argues about madness and its symptomatology (Foucault 2003, 157).

[6] "At the opposite end of the thermometer from the blistering desert sun of Saudi Arabia was Milwaukee, Wisconsin" (Davis 1991, 12). The theme of provincial life as a reality that produces monsters recurs also with reference to Oates's *Zombie*: reviewing the novel, Steven Marcus writes: "the narrator lives on fast food, washed down with seas of intoxicants, incessantly watches television and trips out on whatever drugs happen to be handy – just like enough of the rest of America to permit one to entertain the inference that there is something representative about his deranged behavior. This dreadful creature is presented to us as not simply living in mainstream America and as not merely being affected by the culture but as in some sense an embodiment of it, as containing and conveying its truth if not its very essence" (Marcus 1995); while David Gates ironically affirms that "Joyce Carol Oates's novels and stories seem to appear with the regularity of long-distance buses, often bound for depressed areas of western New York State" (Gates 1996).

Aries would mean he possessed a flaring anger and longed for power" (Davis 1991, 279-80).

Homosexuality, too, is included among the causes of Dahmer's marginality and his subsequent monstrification. In his detailed etiology of the monster, Thitecott devotes the whole fourth chapter to the theme. "Jeffrey Dahmer. Gay, White Cannibal" is the title that opens what the author describes as the analysis of "the correspondence between Dahmer's putative sexuality, his color, and his supposed cannibalism and mainstream culture, a culture which in many ways continues to present itself as being essentially heterosexual as well as white" (Thitecott 1997, 67).[7] Dahmer's sexual orientation, as I will show, is also taken up in Oates's novel, which describe the protagonist's schoolmates making fun of him because of his homosexuality, and is thematized, in its contradictory aspects, by Brian Masters, who first lingers on the young Dahmer's solitary sexual fantasies (Masters 1993, 64), then stresses his lack of interest in gay life while he lived in Miami, and finally depicts him as totally at ease on the Milwaukee gay scene.

Quite often, the figure of Dahmer as fully incapable of mastering his own actions according to a rational human logic has been equated to diabolic possession. Brian Masters insists on Dahmer's fascination with Satanism and his interest in the *Satanic Bible* by Anton LaVey (Masters 1993, 85), then to argue that Dahmer was not "in possession of himself, but rather … 'possessed' by demonic force" (Masters 1993, 185). This theme is also taken up by Davis, who chooses to title a whole chapter "The Exorcist", with reference to the homonymous movie Dahmer was watching while killing one of his victims, and with a clear allusion to Dahmer's metamorphosis into a diabolic monster.

[7] Finally recognizing the difficulty of any taxonomic procedure, the author nevertheless reasserts the polarized terms he uses to create Dahmer as a medical-juridical specimen: "Our fascination with Dahmer is perhaps related to this inability to settle on how we are to depict him, to our inability to unproblematically conflate the opposition heterosexuality/homosexuality and civilization/savagery" (Thitecott 1997, 88).

As for the complex question of what the real object of Dahmer's desire was, his biographers tend to discard the fact that he was a necrophile, insisting that not corpses in the proper sense, but undead (or no longer alive) bodies were what he craved for.[8] In *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer*, Masters couples this controversial question with the problems, respectively, of frenzy and control. While underscoring Dahmer's morbid desire for inanimate bodies on which to exert full control, at the same time Masters describes Dahmer himself as totally unaware of what he was actually doing, the unaliveness of his victims being thus juxtaposed and compared to his own merely accidental undeadness. Not the corpse itself, but a completely tamed and unalive object, was all he yearned for.[9]

One of the most intriguing pieces of Dahmer's macrotext is the graphic novel *My Friend Dahmer*, created by Derf (pseudonym for John Backderf, one of Dahmer's classmates in high school) in 2002, and republished in an enlarged edition in 2012. Nothing gory is ever displayed in the book, which, on the contrary, portrays Dahmer as an obtuse, retarded and dull young man, continually laughed at by his friends, and ridiculed for his strange habits. Drawings reinforce a tacit assumption about Dahmer's character as uncertainly dwelling in a grey zone halfway between life and death. Social life and social death, oblique and implicit keywords detectable in the other texts, are here ingrained in the narrative and graphic devices that Backderf uses to illustrate what Dahmer was and what he

[8] This detail is crucial not only to the centrality of the zombie as a recurring and pivotal trope in Dahmer's macrotext, but also to a perception of the social and symbolic role of the corpse as it has been described in relation to Dahmer's crimes. The anthropologist Elizabeth J. Emerick maintains that the corpse, as a symbolic repository of the Americans' death related projections and fears, works as an icon that, while embodying death and rendering it visible, at the same time exorcises its unbearable overwhelming power. Emerick seems to attach to the dead body the typical characteristics of zombies (loneliness, mechanicalness and dehumanization; (2000, 47), thus equating the corpse as a prominent symbol in the American popular imagination with one of the most abhorred and feared monsters that American popular culture has ever conceived. On the other hand, the subtle but crucial slippage from the corpse's to the zombie's symbolic economy is rendered by William Bogard, who reads it as a symbol of the transition between different economic systems (2008, 188).

[9] With regard to this, Masters recalls an episode in Dahmer's life (1993, 90-91) when he stole a mannequin from a shop to sexually engage with it.

looked like to his friends and peers. The 2002 book cover displays a caricature of Dahmer wearing glasses with a skull depicted on each lens; as the book goes on, the author insists on Dahmer's dullness as his most prominent and visible feature, supposedly derived from his attempt to imitate his mother's interior decorator, who had cerebral palsy (Backderf 2002, 2), or, as revealed in the 2012 edition, from the attempt to mimic his mother, who suffered from depression, when she had her seizures (Backderf 2012, 64). Describing his actions as completely mechanical and proper to a person whose capability to exert control over his body was reduced to nothing, Backderf particularly stresses two of Dahmer's weirdest attitudes: his kick for animals' dead bodies and his addiction to alcohol. These would often result in bizarre and disturbing performances that occurred among unaware people, who were thus turned into involuntary spectators of Dahmer's stammering and screaming. At the end of both texts, Dahmer's zombiness, exhibited by his friend as an instance of freakery, is rendered increasingly visible, not so much as the distinctive trait rendering his disturbed personality, but as a rhetorical device depicting his lack of participation in social life. In both versions of his text, Backderf repeatedly resorts to typical gloomy and horror movie-like scenes, with dark woods and a pale moonlight on the backdrop, against which Dahmer is spotted as a spectral presence, almost unnoticed by anyone.

The narrative strategies employed by all these texts always follow the pattern of cheap horror movies, in which harmless victims are massacred by a monster whose cruelty seems to substantially derive from the total blankness of his mind and actions. Probably aware of this subtextual track, indeed, Davis writes: "Nobody would make up something that weird. Sounded like a script by Stephen King" (Davis 1991, 154). While never labeling Dahmer as a zombie, thus, every single element of all these books create a subtle parallel between his status as a mentally retarded guy and social misfit and his condition of dead man walking (and killing), whose lack of control over his body and actions is

strengthened as the narratives go on. In the chapter devoted to Dahmer in his *Serial Killers*, appropriately titled "Lifelikeness", Mark Seltzer insists on dissociation as a distinctive trait that marked Dahmer's behavior: "this very distance is the psycho-dispassionate dissociation of the serial killer: the serial killer as the 'devoid'" (Seltzer 1998, 182). Monstrosity, temporarily curbed under abnormality, finally emerges in the inevitable impossibility to judge Dahmer because of his completed transformation into a zombie: a dead man cannot be held responsible of anything.

A Zombie of One's Own: the gaze and its surplus

Joyce Carol Oates publishes *Zombie* in 1995, four years after the truths about Dahmer were discovered, and less than one year after he was killed in the Columbia Correctional Institution in Portage, Wisconsin. Generally read as both one of Oates's sketches of dark America and a book that "depict[s] the darker impulses of human nature" (Schilling 2005, 21), *Zombie* does not evoke gloomy atmospheres, nor does it ever morbidly linger on unspeakable atrocities. Everything, on the contrary, is impiously cast under the grey and fading light of suburban life. The murders perpetrated by the protagonist, Quentin P., start surfacing in the narrative as the latter is slowly unraveled by the killer himself, in a sort of unfathomable, but apparently neutral and colorless, recounting of his own actions, which closely reminds the readers of Dahmer's actions and unemotional personality, as they have been displayed in books and TV documentaries.

While identifying Quentin's object of desire with a zombie, Oates portrays him as a creature deprived of any will and consciousness, who gradually identifies himself, while narrating his own story, with the object of his own desire and Frankensteinish aspirations. The idea of making a zombie for himself occurs to Quentin for the first time while listening to a lecture given by his father, a well

known scientist, about the unexplored immensity of the universe. With a rapid glance addressed to the other students, he realizes that the perfect zombie needs to comply with few essential requirements, related to its social extraction and ethnic origins:

> A safer specimen for a ZOMBIE would be somebody from out of town. A hitch-hiker or a drifter or a junkie (if in good condition not skinny & strung out or sick with AIDS). Or from the black projects downtown. Somebody nobody gives a shit for. Somebody should never have been born (Oates 1995, 28).

Once expressed his desiderata in detail, Quentin goes on to explain what he expects from his zombie: "A true ZOMBIE would be mine forever. He would obey every command & whim. Saying 'Yes, Master' & 'No, Master.' He would kneel before me lifting his eyes to me saying, 'I love you, Master. There is no one but you, Master'" (Oates 1995, 49). This same paragraph is repeated verbatim more than a hundred pages later, thus heightening the circular, spiral structure of the novel, a perfect rendering of Quentin's schizoid and obsessive psychic dynamics. In order not to be menaced or scared by any trace of living consciousness, Quentin is aware he will need to suck away any minute trace of life from the living bodies he desires and wants to turn into zombies: "Nor would be *terror* in my ZOMBIE's eyes. Nor *memory*. For without *memory* there is no *terror*" (Oates 1995, 169). While, on the one hand, what Quentin tries to construct can generically be confined to the realm of the undead, on the other it is Quentin himself that longs for unaliveness as the aptest condition to identify with his victims and to conceal his conscious responsibility for the atrocities committed.[10]

[10] Unawareness or unconsciousness as means to elude any direct responsibility is a theme taken up by Richard Thitecott in his *Of Men and Monsters*, when, discussing Dahmer's case, he states: "The idea of sudden, inexplicable violence can be a way to exonerating the serial killer. … Figuring the self as the site of a struggle between competing personalities or forces is a move we dismiss as an attempt to have the serial killer's actions excused" (Thitecott 1997, 51). But, as the author remarks later on, it is this very discursive scheme to sketch Dahmer's personality as forcibly uprooted from the human society, and recast in a liminal status, in a kind of social death that is configured as the only suitable frame for the monster: "But whereas we condemn the serial

What Quentin expects from his victims is a status of perennial undeadness, which, though potentially subsuming the actual condition of the corpse, does not perfectly overlap with it. This produces a semantic slippage which results, on the narrative plan, in a continuous deferral of the final action, that is, of a gesture capable of completely fulfilling Quentin's expectations, quenching his excruciating desire for a perfect, and as such practically unattainable, object of jouissance. Quentin needs a living corpse to satisfy his interest in and desire for an apparently aseptic object to both scrutinize and adore, in this reproducing and enacting one of Dahmer's essential characteristics, as had been described by Masters, who insisted that "he has never said that he enjoyed the act of killing, and the image with which he has left us is that of a lover choking his unconscious mate before wrapping him in his arms" (Masters 1993, 200). It is not death, nor is it a form of sadistic perversion that dictates Quentin's behavior too, but the desire to attain a full control over the body he faces, which amounts to its reduction to a status of docile but vigilant consciousness. Quentin's repeated attempts to construct a perfect zombie parallel his own absorption into the prototype of the zombie, which, embodying the condition of unaliveness he needs, reflects and replicates the undead objects he craves and creates.

Before delving into the analysis of *Zombie*, it seems to me crucial to consider Oates's cultural sources, so as to understand her choice of the zombie as the most suitable icon and metaphor for Quentin and his victims. It is quite unlikely that the zombies Quentin seems to be so fond of have anything to do with the walking dead of the Haitian tradition. They can be interpreted, on the contrary, as a clear legacy of popular culture.[11] Foreign presences at their first appearance

killer for this apparent attempt to avoid culpability, for this neat divide between his self and other, *we* strenuously attempt to maintain such an opposition … to place him in turn within and separate from, normal society."

[11] Tracking back the zombie as a mass-culture icon to its colonial origin, Jennifer Fay reads the 1932 Victor Halperin's movie *White Zombie* as the pioneering work in which the living dead had first been envisaged as the tangible form of an unconscious process of rejection and subjection of

in American movies, zombies have finally been configured as domestic, albeit frightening and mysterious, figures, all the more dangerous because of their proximity to scenes of domestic life. In one of his essays on zombies, Kyle Bishop brings to the fore the crucial opposition between familiarity and unfamiliarity (one of the lenses through which also Oates's story can be read), along with its deep relationship with territory and the sense of domesticity that ensues from it, arguing that, while "[i]nitially, zombie movies shocked audiences with their unfamiliar images; today, they are all the more shocking because of their familiarity" (Bishop 2009, 24). The transition between foreignness and familiarity is effectively summarized in the shift from the 'zombi' of Haitian tradition to the zombie as a metaphor, as Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry imply in their provocative "Zombie Manifesto":

> The *zombie* can also be a metaphoric state claimed for oneself or imposed on someone else. This zombie has been made to stand for capitalist drone (*Dawn of the Dead*) and Communist sympathizer (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), and, increasingly, viral contamination (*28 Days Later*) (Lauro 2008, 87-88).

Zombies are mythological figures whose strength lies not so much in what they traditionally used to embody (the exploitation of working classes or colonial peoples), as in their subversive symbolic role as deforming mirrors that threaten mortality. The mortal threat represented by zombies is balanced and neutralized by the immortal status that is gained after being bitten by one of them, and consequently transformed into a zombie in every respect. The paradox instanced by zombies, as frightening monsters that haunt the common imagination, lies in their power to annihilate life by destroying death; their craving for human flesh could be seen, in this sense, as a monstrous promise of eternal life. The serial

---

strongly racialized enemies: "The zombie does, of course, have history in the U.S. cultural unconscious that connects it to colonial rule, unpaid slave labor, and the democratic injustices of American empire. The first feature-length zombie film, Victor Halperin's *White Zombie*, premiered in 1932 when the U.S. occupation of Haiti was in its seventeenth year" (Fay 2008, 82).

killer, too, as a monster who wants to feed on human lives, belongs to a mythical dimension that death has no power to terminate, perceived as he is as the transient embodiment of an eternal threat. In Oates's novel, the lack of any real ending (as will be shown later), together with the merging of both the zombie and the serial killer into the sole figure of Quentin, fully expresses the sense of infinite menace and anxiety posed by a trans-human creature.

As regards the direct textual sources from which Oates derives her choice of the zombie as a metaphor, a cursory reference to two specific seminal texts, which have informed the figure of the zombie as a cultural icon, will prove precious. I am referring to George Romero's by now classic *Night of the Living Dead* and to John Landis's renowned *Thriller* video, starring Michael Jackson. Kyle Bishop's thesis, according to which zombies are essentially visual objects, seems to me appropriate to frame Oates's novel among the literary and cultural outputs of a TV-based popular imagination (Bishop 2006, 197); suggesting an interesting equation between the zombies' lack of human and psychological depth and their being rendered flatly, as mere visually displayed objects, Bishop writes: "the zombie is a relatively modern invention. Their lack of emotional depth, their inability to express or act on human desires, and their primarily visual nature make zombies ill suited for the written word; zombies thrive best on screen" (Bishop 2006, 200). Zombies' visual nature – which, for Bishop, defines them as cultural icons – repeatedly surfaces in *Zombie*, both in rhetorical and in diegetic terms. On the one hand, Quentin's constant use of the word zombie amounts to its reduction to a frustrating trope, namely, a mere signifier that almost always fails to match the actual results of his experiments; on the other, as I will argue later on, Quentin is obsessed with visuality and with an imperious need to avoid any direct eye contact, thus attaching the greatest importance to the gaze and to its power to give way or to paralyze any desiring projection.

The heritage of popular culture in Oates's novel is all the more manifest in her sanctioning the zombie as the mythic destroyer of romance and domesticity, thus rendering all the more explicit the connections between *Zombie* and the visual texts mentioned above. In both Romero's movie and Jackson's video, indeed, zombies are perverse incarnations of the 'genius loci', disquieting creatures that, revealing a close tie with the territory they had inhabited, suddenly appear to unsettle a domestic scene (Romero's movie starts on the scene of two siblings paying their respects to their parents' grave) or the ordinary life of two fiancées (as for *Thriller*). The dull quietude of provincial life, aptly chosen by both Romero and Landis for their works, is replicated by Oates by insisting on Quentin's daily routine in the periphery of an anonymous small city in Michigan. In the novel both victims and slaughterer belong to the same place, each chapter obsessively stressing their strict connection with a small, almost suffocating local dimension. From the novel's very beginning, Quentin is presented as a quasi normative 'quiet American', an obscure young man that repeatedly declares how proud he is to be a white American guy, to the point of endowing the rear window of his "no longer new" (Oates 1995, 4) Ford van with an American flag sticker. His provincialism is also revealed by his fears of racial contamination: he complains, for instance, about the troubles caused to his small town when "*[c]oloreds* began to move in & *whites* to move out in a steady irreversible stream to such suburbs as Dale Springs" (Oates 1995, 102). Needless to say, the racial implication of his murderous quest is actually verifiable in Jeffrey Dahmer's story, all his victims being of African-American, native American, Hispanic or Asian descent.

Oates's zombie, thus, comes to be represented as, at the same time, an archetypal monster and a social monster. As a serial killer, Quentin turns out to be the monster that, far from being an outcast, an external menace to any established social order, is its most authentic and genuine product. Furthermore, in what

seems a cruel parody of the genealogy of medical science recounted by Michel Foucault in *Naissance de la clinique,* Oates traces the archeology of the zombie back to the necessity to murder and dissect human bodies in order to know what the "human" is. Quentin thinks of himself essentially as a scientist and acts accordingly, drawing inspiration from anatomy and science books he happens to find in libraries, and likening his attitude towards potential victims to a doctor's or scientist's stance upon the observed specimens ("I will observe him detached as a scientist calculating what kind of ZOMBIE he might make"; Oates 1995, 77).[12] Quentin's father is a scientist, whose research aims at discovering the mysteries of cosmos, and, in a specular and parallel move, Quentin decides to devote his existence to exploring the most intimate and unsounded mysteries of the human body, apparently driven by a true desire for discovering the mechanisms of life rather than by an obsessive and ferocious frenzy.[13] For this reason, in the first part of the novel he declares his resolute intention to simply carry out a lobotomy, not differently from what numerous scientists had done in the past.[14]

Departing from close adherence to real facts, Oates narrates an episode in which the archaeology of the monster diverges from the genealogy of the zombie. It is here that visuality and the power of gaze come into the picture, playing a crucial role in this shifting paradigm. Quentin narrates how, after having been assaulted and robbed, he looks at his own face in the mirror, and his first

[12] Further complicating the semiotic economy of the novel, Oates inserts whole excerpts from a surgery book in her narrative (1995, 40-42).

[13] In this respect, Oates's novel truly replicates the real story of Jeffrey Dahmer, whose fascination with dead bodies dated back to his adolescence, when he used to kill and dissect animals. Dahmer's biographies insist on his interest in discovering the hidden mechanisms of the body, which caused him to dissect animal corpses. This point is repeatedly addressed in Masters's book, especially when he points out: "Dahmer was not aroused by the infliction of pain upon a *living* creature, but entirely by the cold, mechanical dissection of a dead one. … was not excited by the soul or the senses, but by the mechanics--he wanted to see how an animal works. … This obsession with the machine of life in preference to life itself is typical of the necrophile" (Masters 1993, 46-47).

[14] Steven Marcus (1995) argues: "In other words, Ms. Oates's aberrant protagonist seems to be, on one side, little more than an individualized and monomaniacally focused version of what American society itself is capable of on its legitimate scientific and medical side."

impression is that his face is not his own. It comes to him like a surprise or a revelation: he is not stunned to find out that his face looks different from what it used to, but that he, too, has *a* face like anyone else, a face that can be shown to the world, changed according to feelings and emotions, and, also, mistaken for someone else's face:

> there was this FACE! this fantastic FACE! … I could habit a FACE NOT KNOWN. Not known ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD. I could move in the world LIKE ANOTHER PERSON. I could arouse PITY, TRUST, SYMPATHY, WONDERMENT & AWE with such a face. I could EAT YOUR HEART & asshole you'd never know it." (Oates 1995, 60)

This revelation, so crucial to the process of apprehending, through an operation of phenomenological apperception, the existence and the tangibility of his own body, occurs after violence. It follows that, until then, Quentin was not fully aware of his own corporeality, which is discovered as something never thought of before. Never fully realizing that his limbs really belong to himself, it is only through the external gaze that Quentin is made aware of his own corporeality, whose burden seems to him so hard to bear. When, while having a dental visit, Quentin realizes he is being looked at, he suddenly repudiates his own body, referring to it as someone else's body he is able to observe and scrutinize, not differently from the doctor who is visiting him at the moment, and starts to talk about himself in the third person: "It might be that Q__ P__ is being photographed and/or videotaped here, might Q__ P__'s actual brain is being X-rayed & the negatives sent to the county offices" (Oates 1995, 69). This episode is a watershed in Quentin's attempts to construct a zombie. From now on Oates starts a narrative process through which it is Quentin himself who, while continually attempting to construct the perfect zombie, turns into one, as if he were able to face the trouble with the others' corporeality only after experiencing a trouble with his own corporeality and with its unexpected and unmanageable display.

The importance of visuality is all the more evident in Quentin's need to define and delimit his own scopic field, by avoiding other people's gaze, which would annihilate him (Oates 1995, 4). When he meets one of the tenants living in the building where he works as a caretaker, he is literally overwhelmed by the impact of the man's eyes, and painfully tries to cast his own gaze on any other part of his body: "Take care NOT TO MAKE EYE CONTACT but in our mutual awkwardness I did glance at him, & he was looking at me … Oh Jesus, my eyes slid down him, the slippery length of him. Melting at his crotch" (Oates 1995, 65-66). Yet he also points out how the others' gazes hardly touch him, merely skimming on the surface of his body ("their eyes sliding onto me"; Oates 1995, 38) and how his own eyes cannot restrain from unceasingly moving ("my eyes I couldn't keep still darting & swimming among them like minnows"; Oates 1995, 38). Though scrupulously avoiding any direct eye-contact with other people, the only gaze Quentin wants to return is his zombie's. This gaze has to be a void one, a gaze beyond which neither a human intellect nor any trace of sensibility can be detected: "His eyes would be open & clear but there would be nothing inside them *seeing*. & nothing behind them *thinking*. Nothing *passing judgment*" (Oates 1995, 49). Quentin's trouble with his victims, in fact, comes from them closing their eyes, something he struggles to avoid: "I had to lift the eyelid of his remaining eye … & secure it with tape, it never kept open by itself" (Oates 1995, 56); and later on, referring to the handsome "BIG GUY", a half-black and half- Huron guy he has just killed, he recalls addressing the corpse with "*Hey? Hey c'mon? You're O.K. c'mon open your eyes?* But the left eye I'd gone into with the ice pick was shot & the right eye wasn't much better, rolled back in his head like it wasn't even an eye but something else" (Oates 1995, 57).

Throughout the novel, Quentin and his victims exchange their roles, finally conflating the distinct functions of the victims and the victimizer into the comprehensive but, as such, ambiguous trope of the zombie. Quentin's split

personality is the artifice through which his own romances reach their climactic moment only through the murder and the dismemberment of his occasional lovers' bodies, thus assigning to the sole Quentin a narrative and symbolic function that in zombies popular narratives was equally balanced between the harmless victims, which in Oates's novel are explicitly defined as zombies, and the aggressive monsters, the zombie Quentin turns into before committing his crimes. "Zombie", thus, is a term that can alternatively designate both Quentin himself and the young men he kills. Yet, Quentin's frustration arises when he realizes that, instead of a zombie, the only object he can actually create is a lifeless carcass. The pure materiality of the dead body, counterbalancing the fantasies about the perennial undeadness of his victims (with which he, albeit unawarely, wants to identify), represents for Quentin that radical otherness he is not even able to deal with, probably because it reminds him of his own actual body, which he was so surprised (and afraid) to possess. This is made clear in the second part of *Zombie*s, which focuses on SQUIRREL, a young man Quentin accidentally spots and decides to turn into a zombie.

SQUIRREL reminds Quentin of Barry, one of his seventh grade classmates, whose accidental death apparently struck Quentin; for that reason, SQUIRREL is Barry brought to life again, in what seems an appropriate precondition to be a perfect potential zombie:

> & NOW BARRY WAS RETURNED TO ME! But golden-shining in the sun & in fact better-looking. … Q__ P__ struck like somebody'd hit me over the head with a hammer. & my cock alert, in wonderment. For there was my true ZOMBIE. No questions asked (Oates 1995, 100).

SQUIRREL is a white young man (this is the first decisive divergence from Jeffrey Dahmer's true story and his mania for colored guys), and works as a waiter in a fast food, which excites Quentin's fantasies about having him as his

personal servant.[15] Quentin's claim on SQUIRREL fuels his devouring jealousy to the point that, when SQUIRREL flirts with some girls in his presence, he openly gives vent to his annoyance and anger. This strong entitlement to SQUIRREL as something he legitimately owns suddenly turns into an untamable drive for consumption, foreshadowing a much stronger desire to kill and incorporate SQUIRREL, whose body, however, after Quentin's futile attempt to make a zombie out of it, is reduced to a void and sterile, unalive carcass.[16]

The process of identity crossing between Quentin and his victim is minutely accomplished in a passage of the novel, where Quentin ultimately identifies himself with SQUIRREL. "How many times Q_ P_ awaits SQUIRREL his prey in his van calm & methodical. & how many times Q_ P_ *is* SQUIRREL pedaling his bicycle" (Oates 1995, 134). The zombie he wants to create mirrors the zombie he has turned out to embody, in a process of simultaneous identification and rejection. His victim is, indeed, the undead object of his obsessive desire and the frustrating leftover of his consumption, an annoying material surplus that, after the massacre, he has to get rid of. The three-line chapter 47, which follows SQUIRREL's death, laconically runs: "Do bones float? & if so, but no flesh is attached, & the bones themselves scattered & lost to one another, what *identity* is there. I never think of it" (Oates 1995, 153). Hardly recalled elsewhere in the novel, the trouble with identity appears here for the first time, when Quentin faces the need to dispose of what remains of his would-be zombie. Quentin's drives, in

[15] Though apparently sidestepped and totally unaddressed, the question of ethnicity is touched again when Quentin declares his new strategy in an (as usual) aseptic way: "This was Dale Springs & not the inner city, nor any lonely stretch of interstate. This was a Caucasian upper-middle-class kid, a child (as his parents probably consider him) & not a black or a mixed breed & lots of people cared for, & would miss at once, & would notify the police in a panic" (Oates 1995, 109).

[16] Quentin's metamorphosis into the very zombie he is attracted to is also suggested by his obsession with food and eating. SQUIRREL works as a waiter, and the first connection established between the two of them hinges on the act of eating; all the more, Quentin's ravenous appetite is more than once recalled as an ungovernable symptom of his compulsion: "Eating the second burrito I'm not even hungry for but I'm ravenous, my mouth is alive by itself & devouring what's in my hand" (Oates 1995, 137).

the end, only produce burdensome residues and useless leftovers, for which he has no interest nor desire. Quentin's compulsion is a cyclic one that, like the novel, has no clear ending,[17] as is made clear by the brief, insignificant chapter that closes *Zombie*: "Mom called & left a message & the answering tape screwed up & erased most of it. Asking would I come for Christmas dinner probably" (Oates 1995, 181). Quentin remains a docile, invisible man, whose dangerous presence is completely neglected until he unexpectedly bursts out in a rage, caught by demonic and untamable frenzy. His infernal machine, yet, seems to be unceasingly operating, his zombie factory doomed to fabricate and destroy many other specimens.

Zombies as semiotic monsters

By concentrating in one person a whole taxonomy of marginal subjects (the alcoholic, the homosexual, the social misfit, the provincial guy whose family broke up when he was just a child, and so on), the narrative renderings of Jeffrey Dahmer's life fail to accommodate his as a merely private and domestic story (as has usually been the case with serial killers; see Freccero 1999, 27). On the contrary, they insist on the social origins of violence, resorting to Dahmer to effectively express the way in which repressed and marginalized subjects, literally, come back to life to threaten the very structures of social normativity that have produced them.

Moreover, the use of the zombie as a trope provides these texts with the narrative and rhetorical open-endedness that a simple report of Dahmer's actions

[17] In this respect, too, *Zombie* counters the journalistic accounts of Jeffrey Dahmer's life, which predictably end with Dahmer's trial and death, as in a orderly arranged parable, whose structure Oates's novel decidedly does not conform with: Masters's final chapters are "The Trial" and "The Shrine", while more emphatically Davis decides to title the chapter 24 simply "Death".

would probably lack. Oates's *Zombie*, in particular, annihilates the linearity of the narrative about Dahmer, thus indirectly reintroducing, on the plane of signification, a monstrosity that had been banned and turned into abnormality in the detailed reconstructions of Dahmer's life provided by the texts. The zombie is called for in order to question any dynamic of cause-and-effect, which it disrupts by merging into its very figure antithetic elements: undeadness and unaliveness, the victim and the killer, the one who is deprived of life and the one who violently destroys others' lives. Needing to be previously dead in order to kill living beings, zombies short-circuit the linear progression of narrative imagination. As a zombie, Quentin turns out to be a sort of "semiotic monster": not only does he kill innocent victims, but, all the more, he unbalances the equilibrium between life and death, beginning and ending, in both symbolic and structural terms. Whereas moral monsters infringe the law, and real monsters threaten the life of people, semiotic monsters disrupt the sequentiality and consequentiality of narrations. Jeffrey Dahmer, and Quentin along with him, fully succeed in destroying our perception of biologic order, narrative linearity, and, finally, of moral responsibility.

Bibliography

Backderf, Derf. 2002. *My Friend Dahmer*. Derfcity Comics.

---. 2012. *My Friend Dahmer*. New York: Abrams ComicArts.

Bishop, Kyle. "Raising the Dead." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 33 (4). pp 196-205.

---. 2009. "Dead Man *Still* Walking: Explaining the Zombie Renaissance." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37 (1). pp 16-25.

Bogard, William. 2008. "Empire of the Living Dead." *Mortality* 13 (2): 187-200.

Davis, Don. 1991. *The Jeffrey Dahmer Story. An American Nightmare*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1996. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." In *Monster Theory. Reading Culture*. Ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press. pp 3-25.

Emerick, Elizabeth J. 2000. "Death and the Corpse: An Analysis of the Treatment of Death and Dead Bodies in Contemporary American Society." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 11 (1-2). pp 34-48.

Fay, Jennifer. 2008. "Dead Subjectivity. *White Zombie*, Black Baghdad." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8 (1). pp 81-101.

Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Abnormal. Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975*. Translated by Graham Burchell. London and New York: Verso.

Freccero, Carla. 1999. *Popular Culture. An Introduction*. New York and London: New York UP.

Gates, David. 1996. "American Gothic." *New York Times Book Review*, September 15. www.nytimes.com

Jarvis, Brian. 2007. "Monsters Inc.: Serial killers and consumer culture." *Crime Media Culture* 3 (3). pp 326-344.

Lauro, Sarah Juliet and Karen Embry. 2008. "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitaiism." *boundary 2* 35 (1). pp 85-108.

Malin, Irving. 1996. "A Letter to Joyce Carol Oates." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 35 (3). pp 570-573.

Mann, Robert W. and Miryan Ehrlich Williamson. 2007. *Forensic Detective. How I Cracked the World's Toughest Cases*. New York: Random House.

Marcus, Steven. 1995. "American Psycho." *New York Times Book Review*. October 8. www.nytimes.com

Masters, Brian. 1993. *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Oates, Joyce Carol. 1995. *Zombie*. New York: Harper Collins.

Sappho. 2009. *The Complete Poems of Sappho*. Trans. by Willis Barnstone. Boston: Shambhala.

Seltzer, Mark. 1998. *Serial Killers. Death and Life in American Wound Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Schilling, Timothy P. 2005. "The Shape of Our Despair. The Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates." *Commonweal* 132.13. pp 21-3.

Thitecott, Richard. 1997. *Of Men and Monsters. Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.