"I don’t take orders from a lad wearing make-up" Zombie as Queer Metaphor in Dominic Mitchell’s In the Flesh
“I don’t take orders from a lad wearing make-up” Zombie as Queer Metaphor in Dominican Mitchell’s *In the Flesh*

Abstract

This article examines Dominic Mitchell’s drama *In the Flesh* as a metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay politics, which in recent years has followed a reformist agenda on the basis that lesbians and gay men are, what Andrew Sullivan (1996) has called “virtually normal” However, it has been suggested by some Queer theorists that being seen as ‘virtually normal’ is not unproblematic as it is predicated on a politics of toleration. Read as a metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay politics, *In the Flesh* presents a warning of the uncritical acceptance of discourses of sexual progress.

**Key Words:** *In the Flesh*, zombie, queer
Introduction

Over the last decade, the zombie has been a regular feature of popular culture appearing in a variety of media from movies (see, for example, *28 Days Later* (2002); *Dawn of the Dead* (2004); *Shaun of the Dead* (2004); *28 Weeks Later* (2007) and television programmes (perhaps the most critically acclaimed of which is AMC’s adaptation of Robert Kirkman’s graphic novel *Walking Dead*) through to video games (see, for example, *Resident Evil; Dead Rising; Dead Island*) and both fiction and non-fiction books (including Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), Max Brooks’ *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2004) and John Austin’s *So Now You’re a Zombie: A Handbook for the Newly Undead* (2010). It is even possible to experience the zombie apocalypse for oneself at one of the plethora of zombie experience events designed to test your survival skills. Against this apparent ‘zombification’ of popular culture, a home grown BBC zombie drama should come as no surprise. However, BAFTA award-winning *In the Flesh*, which first aired on BBC Three in March 2013, is no ordinary zombie narrative.

Written by Dominic Mitchell, the drama is set in the fictional Northern England village of Roarton, four years after ‘The Rising’ when, across the country, thousands of re-animated corpses rose from their graves to wreak deadly havoc on the living. Roarton was the site of the first risings and, in the absence of a government response, local residents formed a militia called the Human Volunteer Force to protect the village from the undead. So far, it seems to conform to the traditional conventions and lore of the zombie genre but where it differs is that the undead of *In the Flesh* can be medicated and rehabilitated. Instead of hordes of mindless, flesh eating zombies, we are presented with conscious, sentient individuals who, in their
treated state are known as Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers (PDSS) and, when successfully rehabilitated can return to their communities to exist side by side with the living. Indeed, once treated the PDSS appear almost indistinguishable from the living. They apply foundation make-up to give the illusion of healthy skin and wear contact lenses to mask their characteristically lifeless eyes. The central protagonist is Kieren Walker (Luke Newberry), a seventeen year old PDSS who committed suicide shortly before ‘The Rising’ following the death of his best friend and romantic interest, Rick Macy (David Walmsley) in Afghanistan. Despite having romantic relationships with two men, Dominic Mitchell says of Keiren’s sexuality "He's not gay but he’s not straight. He’s more in love with the person than the gender." (http://intheflesh.wikia.com/wiki/Kieren_Walker Accessed 12.10.2014)

Throughout the series we follow Kieren as he attempts to come to terms with what he had to do to survive in his untreated state and grows to accept who he is, both in terms of his PDSS and his sexuality.

Monsters have always played an essential role in culture because they provide “a space where society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time” (Levina and Bui, 2013: p.1). If we accept the argument that the zombie can, and should, be read as a metaphor for cultural consciousness (Bishop, 2006, 2009), the question that begs to be asked is what Dominic Mitchell’s domesticated zombie, the monster next door, tells us about the cultural anxieties of 21st century Britain? The figure of the zombie has been interpreted as a metaphor for a range of social issues, including critiques of mass consumerism, the inability of medical science to respond to global pandemics, the post 9/11 war on terror and the ‘Othering’ and marginalisation of already disaffected groups of people. This article will argue that is possible to read In the Flesh as a metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay
politics, which in recent years has been based on a reformist agenda to extend heteronormatively defined sexual rights to lesbians and gay men on the basis that they are, what Andrew Sullivan (1996) has called “virtually normal” However, it has been suggested by some Queer theorists that being seen as ‘virtually normal’ is not unproblematic as the aim of being normal is “to blend, to have no visible difference and no conflict” (Warner, 1999: p.60) For them, inclusion and acceptance is conditional on an adherence to heteronormative ideals, a politics of toleration that limits and regulates representations of sexuality in the public sphere. This article will explore how In the Flesh can be read as a critique of the narrow, reformist agenda of contemporary lesbian and gay politics.

Zombie Evolution: From the Zombi to the Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer

Although there has been a resurgence, or what Lauro and Embry (2008) playfully call a ‘resurrection’, of the zombie during the first decade of the 21st century, the zombie genre has remained largely unchanged for over fifty years. Most contemporary zombie narratives take as their inspiration George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (US, 1968) as it was this film that defined and, to a large extent, continues to define the cinematic conventions and tropes of the zombie genre. In particular, it created and established the zombie as the “shambling, cannibalistic undead [and] as horror cinema’s prime harbinger of apocalyptic social breakdown” (Hunt, Lockyer & Williamson, 2014: p.2). It is, of course, important to acknowledge that the zombie is not a creation of George Romero, specifically, or Hollywood cinema, more generally, but, rather, has a much longer history rooted in Haitian voodoo practices and brought to the attention of the American public through
anthropological studies such as William Seabrooks’ *Magic Island* (1929). According to Haitian folklore, the zombi is a corpse that has been resurrected by a priest, or Bocor, and turned into a slave or servant. In other words, this zombi is a victim rather than a monster and, for the indigenous people of Haiti, “the fear is not of being harmed by zombis; it is fear of becoming one” (Wade Davis cited in Bishop, 2010: p.51). This concept of the zombi as enslaved victim informed early Hollywood cinema, perhaps most notably *White Zombie* (US, 1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (US, 1943). Set in postcolonial Caribbean countries and portraying a largely negative and stereotypical view of indigenous populations, these films should be “considered as examples of racial exploitation and romanticization” (Bishop, 2010: p.66), evidence that, from the outset, the zombie should be read as a political and ideological figure.

In order for us to recognise a text as a zombie narrative, the conventions and principal characteristics of the zombie genre must already be in existence (Tudor, 1995 [1973]) and the audience must possess sufficient knowledge of these characteristics to be able to identify the text as an example of the genre (Gelder, 2012). Further, if genre conventions exist *a priori* to a text, all genre narratives must be self-citational. Writing about vampire cinema, Gelder (2012: p.3) suggests that “all vampire films are self-citational [because] It is almost impossible for one vampire film not to cite or invoke another vampire film or vampire novel.” The same can be said about the zombie genre as almost all zombie narratives cite or invoke *Night of the Living Dead*. Indeed, such is the level of self-citation within the zombie genre that, as an audience, “We know enormous amounts about [zombies] …- their tastes, appearance, biology, reasons for their emergence, how to neutralise them, why we should despise and fear them” (Webb & Byrmand, 2008: p.83-4).
The zombie genre has a very prescriptive plot structure (Bishop, 2009). Almost all zombie narratives are set in a post-apocalyptic world where law and order has disintegrated and the very fabric of society has collapsed. It is this backdrop of social decay and the absence of social, cultural, economic and political structures that makes the zombie threat so frightening. With no government agencies to protect them and no social institutions available to offer sanctuary, human beings must develop their survival skills to protect themselves from the mass of flesh eating zombies, as well as the increasingly violent behaviour of other human survivors. In fact, Bishop (2013) suggests that the most recent zombie narratives, such as AMC’s adaptation of Robert Kirkman’s graphic novel *Walking Dead*, can be seen as inversion stories, where the boundary between monster and human becomes blurred. In their effort to survive it is the humans who become monstrous and humans are at as much, if not more, risk from other humans as they are from zombies.

Of course, it is, perhaps, the zombie itself that is the most obvious identifier in the zombie genre. The zombie is a reanimated corpse that has an insatiable and indiscriminate hunger for human flesh. It is lacking in sentience and cognisance, it has “malfunctioning motor skills, missing limbs (or in extreme cases, entire lower torsos) and severely damaged brains” (Hunt, Lockyer & Williamson, 2014: p.8). Given their limited functioning, an individual zombie represents little threat as their slow, shambling bodies can be evaded and they can be easily killed by severing their brain stem (Sconce, 2014). However, the zombie danger is one of “arithmetic and aggregation” (Sconce, 2014: p.99) because they only pose a threat when they achieve a critical mass and the cannibalistic instincts of the zombie horde are impossible to fight off. Unlike its monstrous counterpart, the vampire who has never
died, has immortality and looks like humans, the zombie has risen from the dead, its body bears the signs and scars of its death, it inhabits a human body yet looks monstrous. As Bishop (2009) notes the notion of the undead and immortal vampire evokes a sense of romanticism that is lacking in the dead zombie, leading some commentators to suggest that it is difficult, if not impossible, for an audience to empathise or even sympathise with the zombie. Indeed, Bishop (2009) suggests that whilst recent years have seen a domestication of the vampire and the portrayal of, what Zanger (1997) calls, the vampire door who experiences existentialist angst and evokes sympathy from the audience, “Such qualities for zombies are logical impossibilities” (Bishop, 2009: p.20). However, such qualities are present in Dominic Mitchell’s zombies.

*In the Flesh* is a self-citational text (Gelder, 2012) in so far as, and to some extent, it conforms to the zombie genre conventions and allows us to identify it as a zombie narrative. The first episode of series one opens in an empty supermarket and we see Lisa Webster (Riann Steele), a member of the Human Volunteer Force (HVF) doing a food run. From the radio conversation she is having with her fellow HVF volunteer, Jem (Harriet Cains), the post-apocalyptic scenario is established when Jem is heard saying, “It’s the end of the world, Lis, screw it. Get some biscuits as well.” As Lisa completes her mission she comes across two zombies, or ‘Rotters’ as they are called in the show, whose appearance conforms to all the established traits. They have dead, white eyes, decaying flesh and blood smeared around their mouth from their last feed. They are unable to speak, communicating in low grunts and they move characteristically slow. They are non-sentient, non-cognizant lumbering monsters in constant pursuit of their next meal. When Rotters, or indeed any zombies, survey their landscape, “they see a place whose only observable
characteristics are food" (Webb & Byrnand, 2008: p.84). The two zombies that Lisa confronts are Jem’s brother, Kieren Walker and his best friend Amy Dyer (Emily Bevan), or as Amy says, his BDFF, his Best Dead Friend Forever.

However, this is where their similarity with the zombie of Night of the Living Dead and its successors ends because in In the Flesh the reanimated dead can be treated. The next scene cuts to Kieren who is nearing completion of his rehabilitation at the Norfolk Treatment Centre, a place where rabid Rotters are sent before they can be returned to their communities (1: 1). Discussing his imminent release with Doctor Shepherd (Stewart Scudamore), Kieren expresses fears that his parents may not want to see him again because he is a zombie. He is immediately stopped by Doctor Shepherd, who says:

Dr Shepherd: No, Keiren. What are you? You are…
Kieren: I am a Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer
Dr Shepherd: And?
Kieren: And what I did in my untreated state was not my fault.
Dr Shepherd: Good.

The Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer does have more in common with the domesticated vampire than its zombie ancestors, Dominic Mitchell’s zombies have been domesticated. Once treated, PDSS pose no threat to society. Their medication, Neurotryptaline, suppresses their cannibalistic drives and, in what is, perhaps, the most significant departure from their zombie forebears, it repairs their cognitive circuitry. Indeed, the audience is made aware that the opening scene in the supermarket is one of Kieren’s flashbacks, evidence of his improving cognition. So, in their treated state, PDSS look like the living and because of their renewed
cognitive functioning they are able to experience the gamut of human emotions, from fear and anger through to joy and love. They do, however, retain the inability to experience autonomic physical sensations and responses, nor are they able to eat and process food. Although its continuity with the zombie plot structure allows us to identify as an example of the genre, it is the expansion of the zombie trope and, specifically, the form and character of the zombie’s domestication that makes Dominic Mitchell’s *In the Flesh* so interesting and opens up new possibilities for analysis and social commentary. With the assertion that monsters reflect the cultural consciousness, fears and anxieties of the socio-cultural context in which they emerge, then Dominic Mitchell’s zombie is a specifically 21\textsuperscript{st} century phenomenon. If read as a metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay politics, the zombie reflects current cultural anxieties regarding sexuality, sexual rights and sexual progress but, as Elliott-Smith (2014: 149) notes, the zombie has always been the “perfect metaphor for the homosexual within the moving image.”

*Queering the Zombie*

Television, and cinema in particular, have a long tradition of portraying homosexuality as monstrous. Although representations of lesbians and gay men were few and far between in mainstream film and television until relatively recently, the few characters that were identified as gay tended to be cast as “pathological, predatory and dangerous, villains and fools, but never heroes.” (Russo, 1987: p.122). Not only were explicitly gay characters portrayed as monstrous, the movie monster was frequently coded as homosexual. Benshoff (1997) has suggested that there is a synergy between representations of the monster and the homosexual.
Both exist in the shadows, or in the closet, and both elicit fear and anxiety when they appear in public; “monster is to “normality” as homosexual is to heterosexual” (Benshoff, 1997: p.2). Both exist within a dichotomous model predicated on normality/abnormality, male/female, heterosexuality/homosexuality and within these binaries both are ‘Othered’.

To develop Benshoff’s argument about the synergy between the monster and the homosexual further, Foucault’s concept of the ‘abnormals’ proves illuminating. According to Foucault (2000), the categorisation of individuals as abnormal first emerged in the Middle Ages and was completed in the late nineteenth century alongside the development of the tactical polyvalence of discourses that sought to identify, classify and govern those subjects considered to be abnormal. The group of individuals collectively classified as the abnormals has three composite elements. The first element is the human monster, an individual whose physiology transgressed the laws of ‘nature’ and judicial laws and so, represented a double violation. Foucault (2000: p.51) gives examples of half-human, half-animal bodies and bodies with ambiguous genders as illustrations and asserts that the human monster “combines the impossible with the forbidden.” The second element, the abnormal individual, emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries alongside the regulatory institutions and disciplinary techniques that developed during this period. Those individuals who were unable, or unwilling, to submit to the disciplinary regimes of these institutions were considered to be in need of correction. Foucault has demonstrated how correction, in the form of confinement, was utilised on a range of subjects, including criminals, the mentally ill and the ‘perverse’ and was justified on the grounds that confinement was needed “to correct, to improve, to lead to repentance, to restore to “better feelings”” (Foucault, 2000: p.53). The final
constitutive element of the ‘abnormals’ is the onanist, based on concerns about the physical and psychological damage caused by masturbation and aimed, almost exclusively at children and young people. Although a diverse range of individuals make up the group of abnormals, Puar and Rai (2002) suggest that monsters and the abnormals have always been sexual deviants, whose correction has required the subjugation of their bodies and the suppression of their desires. Understood in the context of Foucault’s concept of the abnormals, Kieren’s exchange with Dr Shepherd outlined above takes on a greater significance. Dr Shepherd’s correction of Keiren’s use of the term zombie can be seen as a disciplinary technique in a wider strategy of correction and as a means of restoring him to “better feelings” in order to rehabilitate him.

If all monsters can be coded as homosexual, why focus on the zombie or, as Elliott-Smith (2014: p.151) asks “What’s so queer about the zombie?” He suggests that there are a number of ways in which the zombie can be queered. Unlike its undead counterpart, the vampire who, at least in its most recent incarnations, looks like us, the zombie is marked out as different, it is a “visibly ‘outed’ monster forced to inhabit its decaying flesh for eternity” (Elliott-Smith, 2014: p.148). Once identified as different, humans can choose whether to interact with or avoid the zombie and it can be regulated and contained, something that Elliott-Smith (2014: p.149) suggests is not that dissimilar from “The guardedness inherent in homosexual panic”. The zombie has ‘unnatural’ methods of reproducing itself, for example through a bite or a scratch, which opens up possibilities for queer reproduction and, in so doing challenges patriarchal heterosexuality (Elliott-Smith, 2014). The zombie is an ambiguous figure that troubles a number of taken for granted assumptions and disrupts binary categories of male/female, hetero/homo, subject/object, self/other,
dead/alive. It is a disruptive and denaturalising (Jones, 2013) creature and, therefore, can be interpreted as inherently queer.

As a disruptive figure that challenges these dichotomies and exposes them as “constructed illusions” (Jones, 2013: p.535) the zombie is rendered unintelligible. For Judith Butler, the laws that determine intelligibility are based on particular ontological and epistemological assumptions about the “knowability of the human” (Butler, 2006: p.183). As neither dead nor alive, the zombie defies these laws of knowability. The fact that they are frequently referred to in the impersonal pronoun of ‘it’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’ is evidence of their non-human status (Murray, 2013), a way of making them intelligible by characterising them as an object. In *In the Flesh*, rabid ‘Rotters’ are reanimated corpses, they are dead but they appear to be alive and, therefore, contravene all the ontological and epistemological assumptions of what it is to be human. In this sense, they conform to Foucault’s notion of the abnormals and, specifically, the human monster that transgresses both societal and so-called ‘natural’ laws. Their unintelligibility posits them as abnormal, monstrous and something to be feared. However, once treated the PDSS becomes intelligible because they perform ‘humanness’. The application of foundation make-up to give the appearance of healthy skin and their use of contact lenses to hide their dead eyes gives the appearance of being human and offers reassurance that fundamental belief systems about humanity are stable. In other words, the Post Deceased Syndrome Sufferer achieves a “performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1998: p.520).

There are several occasions throughout *In the Flesh* when this performance is recognised as illusory and, as a consequence, taken for granted belief systems.
about the knowability of the human are challenged. In one scene (1: 3) Amy Dyer is reminded that her residence in the village of Roarton is conditional on her successful performance of humanness. One morning, shortly after she has decided to stop wearing foundation and contact lenses and go “au naturale” she is visited at her home by Gary Kendal (Kevin Sutton), known to his friends as Gaz and a high ranking member of the HVF, who has come to mark her home in paint to notify others that she is a PDSS. She closes the door on him and returns to her bedroom. A short while later, Gaz appears at her bedroom door and leans against the frame.

Gaz: (Smiles) You’re not like other girls are you?
Amy: If you’ve finished defacing my property I would like you to leave now
Gaz: It just won’t do
Amy: What won’t?
Gaz: You. Going around like you are.
Amy: I was about to get dressed before you turned up.
Gaz: I mean that (points to his face), walking around bare. It’s a slap in the face to this community, to war heroes like me.

Here, Gaz’s disgust at Amy’s decision not to wear cover up make-up appears to be gendered. His comment that she is not like other girls might refer to her rejection of constructions of femininity that require women to perform and conform to standardised notions of beauty by applying make-up. The smile that accompanies the comment might also be read as a sexual advance to her reclining position on her bed. Amy responds by pulling her dressing gown together in order to cover more of her body and, in so doing, she physically declines Gaz’s advances. In response, Gaz becomes more threatening and violent. He enters her bedroom, lunges forward and grabs Amy by the hair. Forcing her to kneel on the floor at the foot of the bed he grabs items from the nearby dresser and pushes them in Amy’s face but the
audience is unaware of what these items are. He tells her “In this village you cover up your Rotter face. Got it?” and walking backwards to exit the bedroom he looks at Amy and says “That’s better’. When Gaz has gone Amy looks in the mirror to see foundation mousse and lipstick crudely smeared all over her face.

Similarly, in series two PDSS are required to enter into a ‘Give Back’ scheme as a form of restorative justice for the distress they caused the community when they were rabid ‘Rotters’, we see a role-play scenario where Dean Halton (Gerrard Thompson), a member of the Human Volunteer Force, is teaching PDSS how to assimilate with the living (2: 4).

Dean: Shake hands (He shakes hand with Connie Furness (Sara Kestelman), a PDSS) I’m alarmed. Your skin is cold to the touch.

Connie: Sorry about that

Dean: Like in the brochure.

Connie: I’m sorry I have caused you anxiety. I am a fully rehabilitated Partially Deceased Syndrome sufferer. I am wearing foundation mousse and contact lenses on account of

Dean: (interrupts) To minimise

Connie: To minimise distress caused to the living.

Dean: I have been administered Neurotriptyline in the last twenty four hours and will not enter a rabid state. You have to have it off [pat] otherwise what are you doing? (Looks around the room for a response) Scaring crap out of folk. (Turning to Connie) You need to work on your mousse application an’ all. Long even strokes. Yeah? Sit down. I’ll give you a six and that’s being generous.

Here, the illusionary nature of performing humanness is explicit. Dean even marks Connie’s performance on how convincing it is. If we return to Benshoff’s argument about the synergy between the monster and the homosexual, it appears that, like the monster, it is only when PDSS appear in public that they elicit fear and
anxiety. In Amy’s case, it is her refusal to wear make-up that causes anxiety and in
Connie’s case it is the fact that her skin is ‘cold to the touch’. In both scenes they are
unintelligible as humans and either ‘out’ themselves as monsters because of the lack
of make-up or are ‘outed’ so that they are intelligible to the living.

*Partially Diseased Syndrome Sufferers and the closet*

For much of the twentieth century, homosexuality in Britain was characterised
by invisibility and relegated to the private realm, with no or limited public recognition.
In part this is a legacy of constructions of sexuality that emerged in the sixteenth
century and consolidated in the nineteenth century, which positioned sex as a private
matter, something that took place behind closed doors between two consenting
adults. Homosexuality was tolerated as long as it remained hidden in the private
sphere and did not represent too much of a challenge to the heteronormatively
constituted public realm. This position was, perhaps, most clearly articulated in the
1967 Sexual Offences Act which partially decriminalised sexual activity occurring in
private between two men over the age of twenty-one not because homosexuality
was recognised as a legitimate lifestyle and identity but rather because it was
determined that, unless a crime was being committed, it was not the business of the
State to intervene in the private moral conduct of its citizens. The role of the State
was to maintain the public/private divide, control “common standards of decency”
(Weeks, 1986: p.102) and contain anything that represented a threat to those
standards.

However, over the last two decades, successive British governments have
introduced a raft of legislative reforms to the extent that lesbians and gay men now
have almost full equality under the law and enjoy public recognition in most areas of life. Despite these advances a number of commentators (Cooper, 1993, 1994; Phelan, 2000, 2001; Warner, 1999) have suggested that visibility and acceptance in the public sphere comes at the cost of increased regulation and surveillance and is predicated on adherence to heteronormative values. Leo Bersani (1995) refers to this as the gay absence, a paradox whereby successful campaigning for greater visibility and public recognition has rendered lesbians and gay men invisible as their difference and distinctiveness to their heterosexual counterparts becomes diluted. Sceptics of a linear and incremental reading of sexual progress warn us against accepting public recognition uncritically.

Throughout In the Flesh, the public / private divide, the limits to public recognition and the desire to keep the ‘monster’ hidden are recurrent themes. On his return to Roarton following his rehabilitation, Kieren is escorted into his parents’ house under the cover of his father’s coat so he is hidden from public view (1: 2). The following day Kieren is sitting in his lounge while his father, Steve, administers his daily dose of Neurotriptyline. The doorbell rings. Steve panics as he does not want the visitor to see that there is a PDSS in the house. He hastily ushers Kieren to the cupboard under the stairs. When Kieren protests that he does not like confined spaces, Steve reassures him that “It’ll only be for five minutes. I promise.” Kieren is literally forced into the closet. He experiences a flashback to his rising and his confinement in his coffin but this flashback can also be read as symbolic of his feelings of confinement regarding his sexuality and the disapproval that that his close relationship with Rick engendered amongst the community.

After this incident and unbeknown to his parents, Kieren leaves his house wearing a long hooded coat tightly pulled to his face so that he cannot be recognised
and walks to the graveyard. As he sits in front of his desecrated grave Amy Dyer
notices him and approaches. She suggests that they go on a day trip together and,
although he does not know where they are going, Kieren agrees. When he realises
that Amy has taken him to a local amusement park he expresses concern.

**Kieren:** I thought we were going somewhere secluded, not
Grand Central Station

**Amy:** You call this Grand Central Station?

**Kieren:** I call this being out in public

**Amy:** So! We’ve got our contacts in, our cover up on. You wear too
much of that stuff by the way.

**Kieren:** You don’t wear enough

If we return to Benshoff’s (1997) analogy that monster is to normality as
homosexual is to heterosexual, this scene can be read as a commentary on the
limits of lesbian and gay men’s acceptance in public. Kieren’s comment about being
out in public does reflect his fear about being recognised as a PDSS. However,
‘being out’ can also be understood in terms of its contemporary usage of ‘coming
out’, ‘being out’ and ‘being outed’ to refer to disclosures of sexuality, particularly as
this scene comes shortly after Kieren’s father forced him into the cupboard/closet.
The panic attack that ensued can be read as his fear about having to return to the
closet now that he is back in the small community of Roarton, while his anxiety at the
amusement park seems to be concerned with being outed, a situation in which he
lacks control over disclosures about his status and sexuality. As it happens, Kieren is
right to be concerned about being outed when he is spotted by someone who
attended his funeral and shouts “He’s a Rotter”. A small crowd gather, turn on Kieren
and chase him out of the park. Despite advances in lesbian and gay rights, being out
or outed in public can still be dangerous, with the threat of hate crime a real possibility. A 2013 British crime survey reported that one in six lesbian, gay and bisexual people, approximately 630,000, had experienced a homophobic hate crime or incident in the previous three years, with “Insults, intimidation and harassment [...] the most common, affecting more than one in four (27 per cent) lesbian, gay and bisexual people” (Guasp, Gammon & Ellison, 2013: p.6)

Amy and Kieren’s exchange about the amount of cover up they use can be interpreted as evidence of the different degrees of conformity and normalisation and as a metaphor for their different political and ideological positions regarding their undead status, with Kieren’s overuse of foundation reflecting a reformist, assimilationist approach and Amy’s minimal coverage denoting a more transgressive and disruptive strategy. This is analogous with what some sexuality theorists have referred to as the good gay / bad queer dichotomy.

*Domesticating Zombies / Domesticating Queers*

If the acceptance and public recognition of lesbians and gay men is predicated on adherence to heteronormatively defined norms and values, the logical conclusion is that “The more you are willing to articulate political issues in a way that plays to a normal [heterosexual] audience the more success you are likely to have” (Warner, 1999: p.44) However, Warner (1999: p.60) suggests that this “embrace of normal” is based on blending in, being invisible and denying differences on the grounds of sexuality. When Kieren’s parents collect him from the Norfolk treatment centre, the “embrace of normal” (Warner, 1999: p.60, the importance attached to blending in and having no visible difference from the living becomes obvious (1: 1).
Steve: You look .......... well

Kieren: It's the cover up mousse. It makes me look .......... better.

What is not said in this exchange is the word 'normal' but the inference is clear. Kieren's cover up mousse helps him blend in, pass as living, and look normal. Here, normalisation equals conformity and results in domestication. In a later scene in this episode, at the first Walker family dinner, Steve tells Kieren that his mum has made his favourite meal. When Kieren reminds them that he cannot eat anymore, his mum, Sue (Marie Critchley), replies “Just pretend” With an empty plate in front of him and a knife and fork in each hand Kieren pretends to eat imaginary food just so he can engage in the family mealtime food practices. Sue’s request that Kieren just pretends to eat food illustrates that it is more accurate to talk about ‘doing normal’ rather than ‘being normal’, it is an acknowledgement that ‘doing normal’ is a performative act.

For Warner, the embrace of normal is profoundly antipolitical. When gay men and lesbians blend into heteronormative society they become what Bersani (1995: p.32) refers to as “Invisibly visible, unlocatably everywhere.” Not only do they become invisibly visible to heterosexuals they also become less visible to each other, limiting the opportunities for collective action and consciousness raising. We are reminded of this when Kieren meets Simon Monroe (Emmett J Scanlan) for the first time (2: 1). Simon is a member of the Undead Liberation Army and is committed to educating other PDSS that the requirement that they were make-up and contact lenses is a cage preventing them from being free. Kieren’s first encounter with Simon, who does not cover up his PDS status by wearing make-up, takes place in the village graveyard where he finds him sitting on his gravestone. Kieren shouts out
that he is sitting on his grave, to which Simon replies “Is this you? I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you were one of us. All that ….. on your face”

Diane Richardson (2005: p.516) has noted that assimilation into mainstream heteronormative society relies on a neoliberal model of governance whereby lesbians and gay men are expected to be “self-governing subjects to become normal/responsible citizens who voluntarily comply with the interests and needs of the state.” For Warner (1999:p.68), the ‘normal’ and responsible lesbian/gay subject becomes de-sexualised because of a “false antinomy between dignity and sex.” Perhaps the most recent legislative example of the de-sexualised lesbian/gay subject in England and Wales is the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. This piece of legislation extends marriage and most of the rights and entitlements it confers to same-sex couples but there is a complete absence of references to consummation or adultery, both of which are central to the way in which heterosexual marriage is defined under the law. So, on the one hand, gay men and lesbians have the right to have public recognition of their relationships but, on the other, the law is notably silent on the subject of sex. It is with regards to discussions and representations of lesbian/gay sex that the limits to their public recognition are evident.

Elliott-Smith (2014: p.15) has suggested that zombie attacks are frequently coded in sexualised ways which focus on how the zombie “tears open victims and consumes flesh … [and emphasise] …. the zombie’s own body as essentially penetrable and penetrating, objectifying the corporeal in all its messy goriness.” The sexualisation of the zombie attack and the desexualisation of the lesbian/gay subject becomes apparent in a scene depicting a family meal. Kieren has brought Simon, who is now his boyfriend, to his parents’ house for Sunday lunch (2: 4). Jem is late.
for lunch so they start without her. The meal gets off to an awkward start, exacerbated by the fact that Kieren and Simon are expected to pretend to eat food. To break the silence Simon asks Steve where he met Kieren’s mum.

**Steve:** Work

**Sue:** Work. What about you two?

**Kieren:** The same. Work.

**Simon:** I liked the way he gave back.

As PDSS Kieren and Simon were both required to take part on the restorative ‘Give Back’ scheme, which is clearly what Simon is referring to here. However, it could also be read as a sexually coded comment about reciprocity in a sexual act. The ambiguity in meaning is not lost on Kieren’s parents as they both look at each other with embarrassment on their face. Fortunately, this embarrassment is short lived as Jem arrives with Gaz, who is now her boyfriend. They are both wearing their HVF uniform. When Steve asks Jem if she would like to change before lunch as he recognises that this may be offensive to Kieren and Simon she replies “Not really, I’m starving.” Over lunch, Gaz regales the guests about a situation that he and Jem had experienced during the Rising and provides explicit details of how she saved his life by killing three ‘Rotters’. Although Steve tries to change the subject of the conversation he does not stop Gaz from telling his story and both Kieren and Simon become visibly uncomfortable. Kieren becomes angry and begins to tell the story of his rising. Although Steve and Sue appeal to him to stop Kieren continues to explain how he felt when he rose.

**Kieren:** That feeling is like what being born must be like except you’ve got context because, honestly, everything up until then was fear.
Everything, even when I was alive, just different levels of fear and then it's gone and you're like 'Yeah, come on, give it to me, fill me up' and do you know what, Gary? This hunger, this appetite, could not wait to get started.

_Steve:_ (Bangs his hand on the table) That’s enough. Do you hear me? I will not have it.

_Kieren:_ What? Did I cross the line, Dad?

_Sue:_ Kieren, please

_Kieren:_ No, they sit around high fiving each other about killing us like it’s a big joke. Oh, no. That’s fine with everyone. I say one thing and that is indecent. I’m sorry but that is bullshit.

Sexuality is frequently described as a drive or an instinct, in both everyday discourse and in some academic theories of sexuality, in particular the essentialist perspectives. Here, Kieren’s reference to his ‘hunger’ and ‘appetite’ might allude to an essentialist understanding of sexuality and, the fact that he directs this statement to Gaz can be read as an inference that Kieren’s hunger/sexuality is different to Gaz. It might also be read as a demand for the recognition that Kieren’s hunger/sexuality is as valid and worthy of discussion as Gaz’s ‘hunger’. It is noteworthy that it is at the point that Kieren mentions his ‘Rotter’/sexual drives that his dad feels compelled to intervene. If the ‘Rotters/Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers of _In the Flesh_ are taken as metaphors for homosexuality and we accept Elliott-Smith’s argument about the sexually coded portrayal of the zombie attack then Kieren’s family’s refusal to hear about his pre-treated experiences of feeding on the living can be seen as illustrative of the desexualisation of the ‘normal’ and responsible lesbian/gay subject.

_Conclusion_

This article has argued that, read as a persuasive metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay politics and sexual rights, _In the Flesh_ acts as a warning about the
limitations of the sexual freedoms and progress that have been granted to gay men and lesbians in recent years. Perhaps Andrew Sullivan was right to claim that lesbians and gay men are virtually normal. Dictionary definitions of ‘virtual’ indicate that, as an adjective, it can be used to mean ‘almost’ or ‘nearly’ as described but not completely so. In others words, to be seen as virtually normal, where normal is taken to mean heterosexual, heteronormative and, increasingly, homonormative, is to be seen as almost or nearly normal. It continues to reinforce a dichotomous model of sexuality where heterosexuality is privileged and serves as the benchmark against which all other sexualities are judged. As has been suggested the extent to which homosexuality has been accepted and publically recognised has been shaped by the extent to which it is seen to pose a threat to the heteronormative order. In In the Flesh, Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers can be returned to the treatment centre if they become non-compliant or a threat to themselves or the community, evidence of the conditionality of their acceptance by the living. As with Foucault’s normals they are confined and required to undergo a process of correction. Standing in front of the parish council, accused of breaking and entering and releasing rabid ‘Rotters’, Kieren is presented with precisely this threat by Councillor Pearl Pinder (Gillian Waugh)

Kieren: I’m not a threat to the community

Pearl: Are you the community?

Kieren: Yeah, I am. (Looks confused) I don’t understand the question.

Pearl: It’s simple. I’m asking are you the community?

Kieren: No.

Pearl: That’s right. You’re not. We are the community and we have deemed you a threat to it.
References

Austin, J. (2010) *So now you’re a zombie: A handbook for the newly undead* Brookline, Zephyr Press


https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/mcst


In the Flesh (2013) BBC Three, BBC Drama Productions


Mitchell, D. (writer, 2013) In the Flesh BBC Three


https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/mcst


Tudor, Andrew (1973) “Genre” in Grant, B.K. (ed) (1995) *Film Genre Reader II*, University of Texas Press, pp. 3-10


**Filmography**

*I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Torneur, 1943)

*Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968)

*Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004)

*28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002)

*28 Weeks Later* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007)

*White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932)
"I don't take orders from a lad wearing make-up" Zombie as Queer Metaphor in Dominic Mitchell’s *In the Flesh*

Abstract

This article examines Dominic Mitchell’s drama *In the Flesh* as a metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay politics, which in recent years has followed a reformist agenda on the basis that lesbians and gay men are, what Andrew Sullivan (1996) has called “virtually normal” However, it has been suggested by some Queer theorists that being seen as ‘virtually normal’ is not unproblematic as it is predicated on a politics of toleration. Read as a metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay politics, *In the Flesh* presents a warning of the uncritical acceptance of discourses of sexual progress.

**Key Words:** *In the Flesh*, zombie, queer
Introduction

Over the last decade, the zombie has been a regular feature of popular culture appearing in a variety of media from movies (see, for example, *28 Days Later* (2002); *Dawn of the Dead* (2004); *Shaun of the Dead* (2004); *28 Weeks Later* (2007)) and television programmes (perhaps the most critically acclaimed of which is AMC’s adaptation of Robert Kirkman’s graphic novel *Walking Dead*) through to video games (see, for example, *Resident Evil; Dead Rising; Dead Island*) and both fiction and non-fiction books (including Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), Max Brooks’ *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2004) and John Austin’s *So Now You’re a Zombie: A Handbook for the Newly Undead* (2010). It is even possible to experience the zombie apocalypse for oneself at one of the plethora of zombie experience events designed to test your survival skills. Against this apparent ‘zombification’ of popular culture, a home grown BBC zombie drama should come as no surprise. However, BAFTA award-winning *In the Flesh*, which first aired on BBC Three in March 2013, is no ordinary zombie narrative.

Written by Dominic Mitchell, the drama is set in the fictional Northern England village of Roarton, four years after ‘The Rising’ when, across the country, thousands of re-animated corpses rose from their graves to wreak deadly havoc on the living. Roarton was the site of the first risings and, in the absence of a government response, local residents formed a militia called the Human Volunteer Force to protect the village from the undead. So far, it seems to conform to the traditional conventions and lore of the zombie genre but where it differs is that the undead of *In the Flesh* can be medicated and rehabilitated. Instead of hordes of mindless, flesh eating zombies, we are presented with conscious, sentient individuals who, in their
treated state are known as Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers (PDSS) and, when successfully rehabilitated can return to their communities to exist side by side with the living. Indeed, once treated the PDSS appear almost indistinguishable from the living. They apply foundation make-up to give the illusion of healthy skin and wear contact lenses to mask their characteristically lifeless eyes. The central protagonist is Kieren Walker (Luke Newberry), a seventeen year old PDSS who committed suicide shortly before 'The Rising’ following the death of his best friend and romantic interest, Rick Macy (David Walmsley) in Afghanistan. Despite having romantic relationships with two men, Dominic Mitchell says of Keiren’s sexuality “He’s not gay but he’s not straight. He’s more in love with the person than the gender.” (http://intheflesh.wikia.com/wiki/Kieren_Walker Accessed 12.10.2014)

Throughout the series we follow Kieren as he attempts to come to terms with what he had to do to survive in his untreated state and grows to accept who he is, both in terms of his PDSS and his sexuality.

Monsters have always played an essential role in culture because they provide “a space where society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time” (Levina and Bui, 2013: p.1). If we accept the argument that the zombie can, and should, be read as a metaphor for cultural consciousness (Bishop, 2006, 2009), the question that begs to be asked is what Dominic Mitchell’s domesticated zombie, the monster next door, tells us about the cultural anxieties of 21st century Britain? The figure of the zombie has been interpreted as a metaphor for a range of social issues, including critiques of mass consumerism, the inability of medical science to respond to global pandemics, the post 9/11 war on terror and the ‘Othering’ and marginalisation of already disaffected groups of people. This article will argue that is possible to read *In the Flesh* as a metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay
politics, which in recent years has been based on a reformist agenda to extend heteronormatively defined sexual rights to lesbians and gay men on the basis that they are, what Andrew Sullivan (1996) has called “virtually normal” However, it has been suggested by some Queer theorists that being seen as ‘virtually normal’ is not unproblematic as the aim of being normal is “to blend, to have no visible difference and no conflict” (Warner, 1999: p.60) For them, inclusion and acceptance is conditional on an adherence to heteronormative ideals, a politics of toleration that limits and regulates representations of sexuality in the public sphere. This article will explore how In the Flesh can be read as a critique of the narrow, reformist agenda of contemporary lesbian and gay politics.

Zombie Evolution: From the Zombi to the Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer

Although there has been a resurgence, or what Lauro and Embry (2008) playfully call a ‘resurrection’, of the zombie during the first decade of the 21st century, the zombie genre has remained largely unchanged for over fifty years. Most contemporary zombie narratives take as their inspiration George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (US, 1968) as it was this film that defined and, to a large extent, continues to define the cinematic conventions and tropes of the zombie genre. In particular, it created and established the zombie as the “shambling, cannibalistic undead [and] as horror cinema’s prime harbinger of apocalyptic social breakdown” (Hunt, Lockyer & Williamson, 2014: p.2). It is, of course, important to acknowledge that the zombie is not a creation of George Romero, specifically, or Hollywood cinema, more generally, but, rather, has a much longer history rooted in Haitian voodoo practices and brought to the attention of the American public through
anthropological studies such as William Seabrooks’ *Magic Island* (1929). According to Haitian folklore, the zombi is a corpse that has been resurrected by a priest, or *Bocor*, and turned into a slave or servant. In other words, this zombi is a victim rather than a monster and, for the indigenous people of Haiti, “the fear is not of being harmed by zombis; it is fear of becoming one” (Wade Davis cited in Bishop, 2010: p.51). This concept of the zombi as enslaved victim informed early Hollywood cinema, perhaps most notably *White Zombie* (US, 1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (US, 1943). Set in postcolonial Caribbean countries and portraying a largely negative and stereotypical view of indigenous populations, these films should be “considered as examples of racial exploitation and romanticization” (Bishop, 2010: p.66), evidence that, from the outset, the zombie should be read as a political and ideological figure. Whilst there are some differences in the way that these films portray their subjects, with *I Walked with a Zombie* framed “almost in the manner of an ethnographic study” (Bishop, 2010: p.65) in so far as it represents voodoo and its practitioners in a non-stereotypical way, both films illustrate that the zombie is a monster of the Americas. In the words of Bishop (2010: p.38), the zombie is “born from imperialism, slavery, and – most importantly – voodoo magic and religion.”

In order for us to recognise a text as a zombie narrative, the conventions and principal characteristics of the zombie genre must already be in existence (Tudor, 1995 [1973]) and the audience must possess sufficient knowledge of these characteristics to be able to identify the text as an example of the genre (Gelder, 2012). Further, if genre conventions exist *a priori* to a text, all genre narratives must be self-citational. Writing about vampire cinema, Gelder (2012: p.3) suggests that “all vampire films are self-citational [because] It is almost impossible for one vampire film not to cite or invoke another vampire film or vampire novel.” The same can be said

---

Comment [AM1]: Added to reflect the nuanced differences between the two films.
about the zombie genre as almost all zombie narratives cite or invoke *Night of the Living Dead*. Indeed, such is the level of self-citation within the zombie genre that, as an audience, “We know enormous amounts about [zombies] ... their tastes, appearance, biology, reasons for their emergence, how to neutralise them, why we should despise and fear them” (Webb & Byrnan, 2008: p.83-4).

The zombie genre has a very prescriptive plot structure (Bishop, 2009). Almost all zombie narratives, post Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (US, 1968) are set in a post-apocalyptic world where law and order has disintegrated and the very fabric of society has collapsed. It is this backdrop of social decay and the absence of social, cultural, economic and political structures that makes the zombie threat so frightening. With no government agencies to protect them and no social institutions available to offer sanctuary, human beings must develop their survival skills to protect themselves from the mass of flesh eating zombies, as well as the increasingly violent behaviour of other human survivors. In fact, Bishop (2013) suggests that the most recent zombie narratives, such as AMC’s adaptation of Robert Kirkman’s graphic novel *Walking Dead*, can be seen as inversion stories, where the boundary between monster and human becomes blurred. In their effort to survive it is the humans who become monstrous and humans are at as much, if not more, risk from other humans as they are from zombies.

Of course, it is, perhaps, the zombie itself that is the most obvious identifier in the zombie genre. The zombie is a reanimated corpse that has an insatiable and indiscriminate hunger for human flesh. It is lacking in sentience and cognisance, it has “malfunctioing motor skills, missing limbs (or in extreme cases, entire lower torsos) and severely damaged brains” (Hunt, Lockyer & Williamson, 2014: p.8). Given their limited functioning, an individual zombie represents little threat as their
slow, shambling bodies can be evaded and they can be easily killed by severing their brain stem (Sconce, 2014). However, the zombie danger is one of “arithmetic and aggregation” (Sconce, 2014: p.99) because they only pose a threat when they achieve a critical mass and the cannibalistic instincts of the zombie horde are impossible to fight off. Unlike its monstrous counterpart, the vampire who has never died, has immortality and looks like humans, the zombie has risen from the dead, its body bears the signs and scars of its death, it inhabits a human body yet looks monstrous. As Bishop (2009) notes the notion of the undead and immortal vampire evokes a sense of romanticism that is lacking in the dead zombie, leading some commentators to suggest that it is difficult, if not impossible, for an audience to empathise or even sympathise with the zombie. Indeed, Bishop (2009) suggests that whilst recent years have seen a domestication of the vampire and the portrayal of, what Zanger (1997) calls, the vampire door who experiences existentialist angst and evokes sympathy from the audience, “Such qualities for zombies are logical impossibilities” (Bishop, 2009: p.20). However, such qualities are present in Dominic Mitchell’s zombies.

In the Flesh is a self-citational text (Gelder, 2012) in so far as, and to some extent, it conforms to the zombie genre conventions and allows us to identify it as a zombie narrative. The first episode of series one opens in an empty supermarket and we see Lisa Webster (Riann Steele), a member of the Human Volunteer Force (HVF) doing a food run. From the radio conversation she is having with her fellow HVF volunteer, Jem (Harriet Cains), the post-apocalyptic scenario is established when Jem is heard saying, “It’s the end of the world, Lis, screw it. Get some biscuits as well.” As Lisa completes her mission she comes across two zombies, or ‘Rotters’ as they are called in the show, whose appearance conforms to all the established
traits. They have dead, white eyes, decaying flesh and blood smeared around their mouth from their last feed. They are unable to speak, communicating in low grunts and they move characteristically slow. They are non-sentient, non-cognizant lumbering monsters in constant pursuit of their next meal. When Rotters, or indeed any zombies, survey their landscape, “they see a place whose only observable characteristics are food” (Webb & Byrnand, 2008: p.84). The two zombies that Lisa confronts are Jem’s brother, Kieren Walker and his best friend Amy Dyer (Emily Bevan), or as Amy says, his BDFF, his Best Dead Friend Forever.

However, this is where their similarity with the zombie of Night of the Living Dead and its successors ends because in In the Flesh the reanimated dead can be treated. The next scene cuts to Kieren who is nearing completion of his rehabilitation at the Norfolk Treatment Centre, a place where rabid Rotters are sent before they can be returned to their communities (1: 1). Discussing his imminent release with Doctor Shepherd (Stewart Scudamore), Kieren expresses fears that his parents may not want to see him again because he is a zombie. He is immediately stopped by Doctor Shepherd, who says:

*Dr Shepherd:* No, Keiren. What are you? You are…
*Kieren:* I am a Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer
*Dr Shepherd:* And?
*Kieren:* And what I did in my untreated state was not my fault.
*Dr Shepherd:* Good.

The Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer does have more in common with the domesticated vampire than its zombie ancestors, Dominic Mitchell’s zombies have been domesticated. Once treated, PDSS pose no threat to society. Their
medication, Neurotryptaline, suppresses their cannibalistic drives and, in what is, perhaps, the most significant departure from their zombie forebears, it repairs their cognitive circuitry. Indeed, the audience is made aware that the opening scene in the supermarket is one of Kieren’s flashbacks, evidence of his improving cognition. So, in their treated state, PDSS look like the living and because of their renewed cognitive functioning they are able to experience the gamut of human emotions, from fear and anger through to joy and love. They do, however, retain the inability to experience autonomic physical sensations and responses, nor are they able to eat and process food. Although its continuity with the zombie plot structure allows us to identify as an example of the genre, it is the expansion of the zombie trope and, specifically, the form and character of the zombie’s domestication that makes Dominic Mitchell’s *In the Flesh* so interesting and opens up new possibilities for analysis and social commentary. With the assertion that monsters reflect the cultural consciousness, fears and anxieties of the socio-cultural context in which they emerge, then Dominic Mitchell’s zombie is a specifically 21st century phenomenon. If read as a metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay politics, the zombie reflects current cultural anxieties regarding sexuality, sexual rights and sexual progress but, as Elliott-Smith (2014: 149) notes, the zombie has always been the “perfect metaphor for the homosexual within the moving image.”

*Queering the Zombie*

Television, and cinema in particular, have a long tradition of portraying homosexuality as monstrous. Although representations of lesbians and gay men were few and far between in mainstream film and television until relatively recently,
the few characters that were identified as gay tended to be cast as “pathological, predatory and dangerous, villains and fools, but never heroes.” (Russo, 1987: p.122). Not only were explicitly gay characters portrayed as monstrous, the movie monster was frequently coded as homosexual. Benshoff (1997) has suggested that there is a synergy between representations of the monster and the homosexual. Both exist in the shadows, or in the closet, and both elicit fear and anxiety when they appear in public; “monster is to “normality” as homosexual is to heterosexual” (Benshoff, 1997: p.2). Both exist within a dichotomous model predicated on normality/abnormality, male/female, heterosexuality/homosexuality and within these binaries both are ‘Othered’.

To develop Benshoff’s argument about the synergy between the monster and the homosexual further, Foucault’s concept of the ‘abnormals’ proves illuminating. According to Foucault (2000), the categorisation of individuals as abnormal first emerged in the Middle Ages and was completed in the late nineteenth century alongside the development of the tactical polyvalence of discourses that sought to identify, classify and govern those subjects considered to be abnormal. The group of individuals collectively classified as the abnormals has three composite elements. The first element is the human monster, an individual whose physiology transgressed the laws of ‘nature’ and judicial laws and so, represented a double violation. Foucault (2000: p.51) gives examples of half-human, half-animal bodies and bodies with ambiguous genders as illustrations and asserts that the human monster “combines the impossible with the forbidden.” The second element, the abnormal individual, emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries alongside the regulatory institutions and disciplinary techniques that developed during this period. Those individuals who were unable, or unwilling, to submit to the disciplinary
regimes of these institutions were considered to be in need of correction. Foucault has demonstrated how correction, in the form of confinement, was utilised on a range of subjects, including criminals, the mentally ill and the ‘perverse’ and was justified on the grounds that confinement was needed “to correct, to improve, to lead to repentance, to restore to “better feelings”” (Foucault, 2000: p.53). The final constitutive element of the ‘abnormals’ is the onanist, based on concerns about the physical and psychological damage caused by masturbation and aimed, almost exclusively at children and young people. Although a diverse range of individuals make up the group of abnormals, Puar and Rai (2002) suggest that monsters and the abnormals have always been sexual deviants, whose correction has required the subjugation of their bodies and the suppression of their desires. Understood in the context of Foucault’s concept of the abnormals, Kieren’s exchange with Dr Shepherd outlined above takes on a greater significance. Dr Shepherd’s correction of Keiren’s use of the term zombie can be seen as a disciplinary technique in a wider strategy of correction and as a means of restoring him to “better feelings” in order to rehabilitate him.

If all monsters can be coded as homosexual, why focus on the zombie or, as Elliott-Smith (2014: p.151) asks “What’s so queer about the zombie?” He suggests that there are a number of ways in which the zombie can be queered. Unlike its undead counterpart, the vampire who, at least in its most recent incarnations, looks like us, the zombie is marked out as different, it is a “visibly ‘outed’ monster forced to inhabit its decaying flesh for eternity” (Elliott-Smith, 2014: p.148). Once identified as different, humans can choose whether to interact with or avoid the zombie and it can be regulated and contained, something that Elliott-Smith (2014: p.149) suggests is not that dissimilar from “The guardedness inherent in homosexual panic”. The
zombie has ‘unnatural’ methods of reproducing itself, for example through a bite or a scratch, which opens up possibilities for queer reproduction and, in so doing challenges patriarchal heterosexuality (Elliott-Smith, 2014). The zombie is an ambiguous figure that troubles a number of taken for granted assumptions and disrupts binary categories of male/female, hetero/homo, subject/object, self/other, dead/alive. It is a disruptive and denaturalising (Jones, 2013) creature and, therefore, can be interpreted as inherently queer.

As a disruptive figure that challenges these dichotomies and exposes them as “constructed illusions” (Jones, 2013: p.535) the zombie is rendered unintelligible. For Judith Butler, the laws that determine intelligibility are based on particular ontological and epistemological assumptions about the “knowability of the human” (Butler, 2006: p.183). As neither dead nor alive, the zombie defies these laws of knowability. The fact that they are frequently referred to in the impersonal pronoun of ‘it’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’ is evidence of their non-human status (Murray, 2013), a way of making them intelligible by characterising them as an object. In In the Flesh, rabid ‘Rotters’ are reanimated corpses, they are dead but they appear to be alive and, therefore, contravene all the ontological and epistemological assumptions of what it is to be human. In this sense, they conform to Foucault’s notion of the abnormals and, specifically, the human monster that transgresses both societal and so-called ‘natural’ laws. Their unintelligibility posits them as abnormal, monstrous and something to be feared. However, once treated the PDSS becomes intelligible because they perform ‘humanness’. The application of foundation make-up to give the appearance of healthy skin and their use of contact lenses to hide their dead eyes gives the appearance of being human and offers reassurance that fundamental belief systems about humanity are stable. In other words, the Post Deceased
Syndrome Sufferer achieves a “performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1998: p.520).

There are several occasions throughout In the Flesh when this performance is recognised as illusory and, as a consequence, taken for granted belief systems about the knowability of the human are challenged. In one scene (1: 3) Amy Dyer is reminded that her residence in the village of Roarton is conditional on her successful performance of humanness. One morning, shortly after she has decided to stop wearing foundation and contact lenses and go “au naturel” she is visited at her home by Gary Kendal (Kevin Sutton), known to his friends as Gaz and a high ranking member of the HVF, who has come to mark her home in paint to notify others that she is a PDSS. She closes the door on him and returns to her bedroom. A short while later, Gaz, appears at her bedroom door and leans against the frame. Not only has he let himself into Amy’s home without invitation but his sudden appearance at the door of her bedroom, arguably one of the most private spaces in a house, sets the sinister and threatening tone of the following exchange between Gaz and Amy:

Gaz: (Smiles) You’re not like other girls are you?
Amy: If you’ve finished defacing my property I would like you to leave now!
Gaz: It just won’t do
Amy: What won’t?
Gaz: You. Going around like you are.
Amy: I was about to get dressed before you turned up.
Gaz: I mean that (points to his face), walking around bare. It’s a slap in the face to this community, to war heroes like me.
Here, Gaz’s disgust at Amy’s decision not to wear cover up make-up appears to be gendered. His comment that she is not like other girls might refer to her rejection of constructions of femininity that require women to perform and conform to standardised notions of beauty by applying make-up. The smile that accompanies the comment might also be read as a sexual advance to her reclining position on her bed. Amy responds by pulling her dressing gown together in order to cover more of her body and, in so doing, she physically declines Gaz’s advances. In response, Gaz becomes more threatening and violent. He enters her bedroom, lunges forward and grabs Amy by the hair. Forcing her to kneel on the floor at the foot of the bed he grabs items from the nearby dresser and pushes them in Amy’s face but the audience is unaware of what these items are. He tells her “In this village you cover up your Rotter face. Got it?” and walking backwards to exit the bedroom he looks at Amy and says “That’s better’. When Gaz has gone Amy looks in the mirror to see foundation mousse and lipstick crudely smeared all over her face.

Similarly, in series two PDSS are required to enter into a ‘Give Back’ scheme as a form of restorative justice for the distress they caused the community when they were rabid ‘Rotters’, we see a role-play scenario where Dean Halton (Gerrard Thompson), a member of the Human Volunteer Force, is teaching PDSS how to assimilate with the living (2: 4).

Dean: Shake hands (He shakes hand with Connie Furness (Sara Kestelman), a PDSS) I’m alarmed. Your skin is cold to the touch.

Connie: Sorry about that

Dean: Like in the brochure.

Connie: I’m sorry I have caused you anxiety. I am a fully rehabilitated Partially Deceased Syndrome sufferer. I am wearing foundation mousse and contact lenses on account of

Dean: (interrupts) To minimise
Connie: To minimise distress caused to the living.

Dean: I have been administered Neurotriptyline in the last twenty four hours and will not enter a rabid state. You have to have it off [pat] otherwise what are you doing? (Looks around the room for a response) Scaring crap out of folk. (Turning to Connie) You need to work on your mousse application an’ all. Long even strokes. Yeah? Sit down. I’ll give you a six and that’s being generous.

Here, the illusionary nature of performing humanness is explicit. Dean even marks Connie’s performance on how convincing it is. If we return to Benshoff’s argument about the synergy between the monster and the homosexual, it appears that, like the monster, it is only when PDSS appear in public that they elicit fear and anxiety. In Amy’s case, it is her refusal to wear make-up that causes anxiety and in Connie’s case it is the fact that her skin is ‘cold to the touch’. In both scenes they are unintelligible as humans and either ‘out’ themselves as monsters because of the lack of make-up or are ‘outed’ so that they are intelligible to the living.

**Partially Diseased Syndrome Sufferers and the closet**

For much of the twentieth century, homosexuality in Britain was characterised by invisibility and relegated to the private realm, with no or limited public recognition. In part this is a legacy of constructions of sexuality that emerged in the sixteenth century and consolidated in the nineteenth century, which positioned sex as a private matter, something that took place behind closed doors between two consenting adults. Homosexuality was tolerated as long as it remained hidden in the private sphere and did not represent too much of a challenge to the heteronormatively constituted public realm. This position was, perhaps, most clearly articulated in the 1967 Sexual Offences Act which partially decriminalised sexual activity occurring in
private between two men over the age of twenty-one not because homosexuality was recognised as a legitimate lifestyle and identity but rather because it was determined that, unless a crime was being committed, it was not the business of the State to intervene in the private moral conduct of its citizens. The role of the State was to maintain the public/private divide, control “common standards of decency” (Weeks, 1986: p.102) and contain anything that represented a threat to those standards.

However, over the last two decades, successive British governments have introduced a raft of legislative reforms to the extent that lesbians and gay men now have almost full equality under the law and enjoy public recognition in most areas of life. Despite these advances a number of commentators (Cooper, 1993, 1994; Phelan, 2000, 2001; Warner, 1999) have suggested that visibility and acceptance in the public sphere comes at the cost of increased regulation and surveillance and is predicated on adherence to heteronormative values. Leo Bersani (1995) refers to this as the gay absence, a paradox whereby successful campaigning for greater visibility and public recognition has rendered lesbians and gay men invisible as their difference and distinctiveness to their heterosexual counterparts becomes diluted. Sceptics of a linear and incremental reading of sexual progress warn us against accepting public recognition uncritically.

Throughout *In the Flesh*, the public / private divide, the limits to public recognition and the desire to keep the ‘monster’ hidden are recurrent themes. On his return to Roarton following his rehabilitation, Kieren is escorted into his parents’ house under the cover of his father’s coat so he is hidden from public view (1: 2). The following day Kieren is sitting in his lounge while his father, Steve, administers his daily dose of Neurotriptyline. The doorbell rings. Steve panics as he does not
want the visitor to see that there is a PDSS in the house. He hastily ushers Kieren to the cupboard under the stairs. When Kieren protests that he does not like confined spaces, Steve reassures him that "It'll only be for five minutes. I promise." Kieren is literally forced into the closet. He experiences a flashback to his rising and his confinement in his coffin but this flashback can also be read as symbolic of his feelings of confinement regarding his sexuality and the disapproval that that his close relationship with Rick engendered amongst the community.

After this incident and unbeknown to his parents, Kieren leaves his house wearing a long hooded coat tightly pulled to his face so that he cannot be recognised and walks to the graveyard. As he sits in front of his desecrated grave Amy Dyer notices him and approaches. She suggests that they go on a day trip together and, although he does not know where they are going, Kieren agrees. When he realises that Amy has taken him to a local amusement park he expresses concern.

Kieren: I thought we were going somewhere secluded, not Grand Central Station
Amy: You call this Grand Central Station?
Kieren: I call this being out in public
Amy: So! We've got our contacts in, our cover up on. You wear too much of that stuff by the way.
Kieren: You don't wear enough

If we return to Benshoff's (1997) analogy that monster is to normality as homosexual is to heterosexual, this scene can be read as a commentary on the limits of lesbian and gay men's acceptance in public. Kieren's comment about being out in public does reflect his fear about being recognised as a PDSS. However, 'being out' can also be understood in terms of its contemporary usage of 'coming
out’, ‘being out’ and ‘being outed’ to refer to disclosures of sexuality, particularly as this scene comes shortly after Kieren’s father forced him into the cupboard/closet. The panic attack that ensued can be read as his fear about having to return to the closet now that he is back in the small community of Roarton, while his anxiety at the amusement park seems to be concerned with being outed, a situation in which he lacks control over disclosures about his status and sexuality. As it happens, Kieren is right to be concerned about being outed when he is spotted by someone who attended his funeral and shouts “He’s a Rotter”. A small crowd gather, turn on Kieren and chase him out of the park. Despite advances in lesbian and gay rights, being out or outed in public can still be dangerous, with the threat of hate crime a real possibility. A 2013 British crime survey reported that one in six lesbian, gay and bisexual people, approximately 630,000, had experienced a homophobic hate crime or incident in the previous three years, with “Insults, intimidation and harassment [...] the most common, affecting more than one in four (27 per cent) lesbian, gay and bisexual people” (Guasp, Gammon & Ellison, 2013: p,6)

Amy and Kieren’s exchange about the amount of cover up they use can be interpreted as evidence of the different degrees of conformity and normalisation and as a metaphor for their different political and ideological positions regarding their undead status, with Kieren’s overuse of foundation reflecting a reformist, assimilationist approach and Amy’s minimal coverage denoting a more transgressive and disruptive strategy. This is analogous with what some sexuality theorists have referred to as the good gay / bad queer dichotomy.

Comment [AM4]: Thank you for your suggestions regarding Amy’s dress and the analogy with Goth. I do think this is an interesting point but I feel that, to do it justice, I would need to include a more detailed discussion of Goth and violence towards Goths that the remit of the article does not allow.
Domesticating Zombies / Domesticating Queers

If the acceptance and public recognition of lesbians and gay men is predicated on adherence to heteronormatively defined norms and values, the logical conclusion is that “The more you are willing to articulate political issues in a way that plays to a normal [heterosexual] audience the more success you are likely to have” (Warner, 1999: p.44) However, Warner (1999: p.60) suggests that this “embrace of normal” is based on blending in, being invisible and denying differences on the grounds of sexuality. When Kieren’s parents collect him from the Norfolk treatment centre, the “embrace of normal” (Warner, 1999: p.60, the importance attached to blending in and having no visible difference from the living becomes obvious (1: 1).

Steve: You look .......... well
Kieren: It’s the cover up mousse. It makes me look ............ better.

What is not said in this exchange is the word ‘normal’ but the inference is clear. Kieren’s cover up mousse helps him blend in, pass as living, and look normal. Here, normalisation equals conformity and results in domestication. In a later scene in this episode, at the first Walker family dinner, Steve tells Kieren that his mum has made his favourite meal. When Kieren reminds them that he cannot eat anymore, his mum, Sue (Marie Critchley), replies “Just pretend” With an empty plate in front of him and a knife and fork in each hand Kieren pretends to eat imaginary food just so he can engage in the family mealtime food practices. Sue’s request that Kieren just pretends to eat food illustrates that it is more accurate to talk about ‘doing normal’ rather than ‘being normal’, it is an acknowledgement that ‘doing normal’ is a performative act.
For Warner, the embrace of normal is profoundly antipolitical. When gay men and lesbians blend into heteronormative society they become what Bersani (1995: p.32) refers to as “Invisibly visible, unlocatably everywhere.” Not only do they become invisibly visible to heterosexuals they also become less visible to each other, limiting the opportunities for collective action and consciousness raising. We are reminded of this when Kieren meets Simon Monroe (Emmett J Scanlan) for the first time (2: 1). Simon is a member of the Undead Liberation Army and is committed to educating other PDSS that the requirement that they were make-up and contact lenses is a cage preventing them from being free. Kieren’s first encounter with Simon, who does not cover up his PDS status by wearing make-up, takes place in the village graveyard where he finds him sitting on his gravestone. Kieren shouts out that he is sitting on his grave, to which Simon replies “Is this you? I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you were one of us. All that ellipsis... on your face”

Diane Richardson (2005: p.516) has noted that assimilation into mainstream heteronormative society relies on a neoliberal model of governance whereby lesbians and gay men are expected to be “self-governing subjects to become normal/responsible citizens who voluntarily comply with the interests and needs of the state.” For Warner (1999:p.68), the ‘normal’ and responsible lesbian/gay subject becomes de-sexualised because of a “false antinomy between dignity and sex.” Perhaps the most recent legislative example of the de-sexualised lesbian/gay subject in England and Wales is the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. This piece of legislation extends marriage and most of the rights and entitlements it confers to same-sex couples but there is a complete absence of references to consummation or adultery, both of which are central to the way in which heterosexual marriage is defined under the law. So, on the one hand, gay men and
lesbians have the right to have public recognition of their relationships but, on the other, the law is notably silent on the subject of sex. It is with regards to discussions and representations of lesbian/gay sex that the limits to their public recognition are evident.

Elliott-Smith (2014: p.15) has suggested that zombie attacks are frequently coded in sexualised ways which focus on how the zombie “tears open victims and consumes flesh .... [and emphasise] .... the zombie’s own body as essentially penetrable and penetrating, objectifying the corporeal in all its messy goriness.” The sexualisation of the zombie attack and the desexualisation of the lesbian/gay subject becomes apparent in a scene depicting a family meal. Kieren has brought Simon, who is now his boyfriend, to his parents’ house for Sunday lunch (2: 4). Jem is late for lunch so they start without her. The meal gets off to an awkward start, exacerbated by the fact that Kieren and Simon are expected to pretend to eat food. To break the silence Simon asks Steve where he met Kieren’s mum.

Steve: Work

Sue: Work. What about you two?

Kieren: The same. Work.

Simon: I liked the way he gave back.

As PDSS Kieren and Simon were both required to take part on the restorative ‘Give Back’ scheme, which is clearly what Simon is referring to here. However, it could also be read as a sexually coded comment about reciprocity in a sexual act. The ambiguity in meaning is not lost on Kieren’s parents as they both look at each other with embarrassment on their face. Fortunately, this embarrassment is short
lived as Jem arrives with Gaz, who is now her boyfriend. They are both wearing their HVF uniform. When Steve asks Jem if she would like to change before lunch as he recognises that this may be offensive to Kieren and Simon she replies “Not really, I’m starving.” Over lunch, Gaz regales the guests about a situation that he and Jem had experienced during the Rising and provides explicit details of how she saved his life by killing three ‘Rotters’. Although Steve tries to change the subject of the conversation he does not stop Gaz from telling his story and both Kieren and Simon become visibly uncomfortable. Kieren becomes angry and begins to tell the story of his rising. Although Steve and Sue appeal to him to stop Kieren continues to explain how he felt when he rose.

Kieren: That feeling is like what being born must be like except you’ve got context because, honestly, everything up until then was fear. Everything, even when I was alive, just different levels of fear and then it’s gone and you’re like ‘Yeah, come on, give it to me, fill me up’ and do you know what, Gary? This hunger, this appetite, could not wait to get started.

Steve: (Bangs his hand on the table) That’s enough. Do you hear me? I will not have it.

Kieren: What? Did I cross the line, Dad?

Sue: Kieren, please

Kieren: No, they sit around high fiving each other about killing us like it’s a big joke. Oh, no. That’s fine with everyone. I say one thing and that is indecent. I’m sorry but that is bullshit.

Sexuality is frequently described as a drive or an instinct, in both everyday discourse and in some academic theories of sexuality, in particular the essentialist perspectives. Here, Kieren’s reference to his ‘hunger’ and ‘appetite’ might allude to an essentialist understanding of sexuality and, the fact that he directs this statement to Gaz can be read as an inference that Kieren’s hunger/sexuality is different to Gaz. It might also be read as a demand for the recognition that Kieren’s hunger/sexuality
is as valid and worthy of discussion as Gaz’s ‘hunger’. It is noteworthy that it is at the point that Kieren mentions his ‘Rotter'/sexual drives that his dad feels compelled to intervene. If the ‘Rotters/Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers of In the Flesh are taken as metaphors for homosexuality and we accept Elliott-Smith’s argument about the sexually coded portrayal of the zombie attack then Kieren’s family’s refusal to hear about his pre-treated experiences of feeding on the living can be seen as illustrative of the desexualisation of the ‘normal’ and responsible lesbian/gay subject.

Conclusion

This article has argued that, read as a persuasive metaphor for contemporary lesbian and gay politics and sexual rights, In the Flesh acts as a warning about the limitations of the sexual freedoms and progress that have been granted to gay men and lesbians in recent years. Perhaps Andrew Sullivan was right to claim that lesbians and gay men are virtually normal. Dictionary definitions of ‘virtual’ indicate that, as an adjective, it can be used to mean ‘almost’ or ‘nearly’ as described but not completely so. In others words, to be seen as virtually normal, where normal is taken to mean heterosexual, heteronormative and, increasingly, homonormative, is to be seen as almost or nearly normal. It continues to reinforce a dichotomous model of sexuality where heterosexuality is privileged and serves as the benchmark against which all other sexualities are judged. As has been suggested the extent to which homosexuality has been accepted and publically recognised has been shaped by the extent to which it is seen to pose a threat to the heteronormative order. In In the Flesh, Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferers can be returned to the treatment centre if they become non-compliant or a threat to themselves or the community, evidence of the conditionality of their acceptance by the living. As with Foucault’s abnormals they are confined and required to undergo a process of correction.
Standing in front of the parish council, accused of breaking and entering and releasing rabid 'Rotters', Kieren is presented with precisely this threat by Councillor Pearl Pinder (Gillian Waugh)

Kieren: I'm not a threat to the community

Pearl: Are you the community?

Kieren: Yeah, I am. (Looks confused) I don’t understand the question.

Pearl: It’s simple. I’m asking are you the community?

Kieren: No.

Pearl: That’s right. You’re not. We are the community and we have deemed you a threat to it.

References

Austin, J. (2010) So now you’re a zombie: A handbook for the newly undead Brookline, Zephyr Press


In the Flesh (2013) BBC Three, BBC Drama Productions


https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/mcst
Mitchell, D. (writer, 2013) *In the Flesh* BBC Three


Tudor, Andrew (1973) “Genre” in Grant, B.K. (ed) (1995) *Film Genre Reader II*, University of Texas Press, pp. 3-10


Filmography
I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Torneur, 1943)

Night of the Living Dead (George A. Romero, 1968)

Shaun of the Dead (Edgar Wright, 2004)

28 Days Later (Danny Boyle, 2002)

28 Weeks Later (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007)

White Zombie (Victor Halperin, 1932)