

INTRODUCTION

Beings of Many Kinds - Introduction for the Theme Issue “Undead”¹

Kirsi Kanerva

University of Turku

Kaarina Koski

University of Helsinki

What happens if something goes wrong at death and the dead person does not find peace? This question is colourfully answered by innumerable representations of the “undead” in various cultural practices, products, creations and beliefs. Through the history of humankind, the undead appear to be everywhere. They are numerous, and they are of many types. In the dark hours of the night, rotten corpses crawl out of their graves. In an old mouldy castle somewhere in Transylvania, a vampire grins, revealing its yellowish canine teeth. At dusk in a rural cemetery in the remote north, a bunch of immaterial spirits lurk behind a tombstone, about to ambush an unsuspecting old man in search of bones to use for magical purposes. The answers to the question are many, but do we know them all?

This issue of *Thanatos* focuses on various representations of the undead, that is, the deceased who have returned to the world of the living. The aim is to bring together a wide variety of depictions and interpretations of the undead in various sources, ranging from historical accounts to present-day popular culture. More often than not, the undead of modern popular culture appear as various kinds of animated corpses. Yet, the emphasis on corporeality can be seen as a relatively recent phenomenon. The

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presence of a body gives more power to drama and horror, whereas it may be easier to dismiss an immaterial haunting as the personal imagination of the experiencing subject. When we look back at vernacular traditions in earlier centuries, the body and soul were tied together more closely than in our time. The restless dead and ghosts could have both spiritual and physical qualities, even though their bodies were not observable in this world (Koski 2018, 73). Undead could also be threatening in a purely immaterial form. In Christian Europe, the eternal souls of the living could be threatened by the returning dead, who could actually be evil spirits in disguise (see, e.g., Edwards 2015; Harms in this issue).

While the scope of this issue ranges from vernacular belief traditions, in which the dead were assumed to return in many forms, to the fictive monsters of 20th- and 21st-century movies and novels, what is common to the undead is that their activity breaks the rules of living humans, defying expectations of the irreversibility of death or earlier generations' understandings of the rules of coexistence and ritual contact with the deceased. We choose to use the term 'undead' in a broad way to give a comparative view of how the dead have been imagined acting in ways that they should not. In what follows, we will draw a brief outline of the history of the concept of 'undead', discuss the features that appear to be central to the category, and give a brief overview of the characteristics of the phenomenon and its meanings in past and present cultures.

The Undead as a Popular and Travelling Concept

The concept of the undead belongs to popular culture. As such, it does not have a precise scholarly definition, and its meanings vary according to who uses it and for what purpose. In historical English, 'undead' used to mean living and eternal. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) has been regarded as the starting point of the term's present meaning, denoting a being who has died but continues living. However, it was not necessarily Stoker's novel itself but its interpretations that informed the meaning of the word.

Adam Barrows suggests that Stoker's text portrays mortality as "a fundamental part of one's natural being". The immortality of the undead vampire thus deprives him of his humanity. According to Barrows, the true object of fear in *Dracula* is not the blood-sucking or violence but one's eternal fate as an inhuman being. (Barrows 2010.)

In the definition of the undead in general use, eternity has given way to death and decay. Online English dictionaries define the undead - especially vampires and zombies - as fictive beings which are technically dead but continue to live. The *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (OALD) includes vampires and zombies in its definition but also gives an example sentence which contains Frankenstein's monster. The OALD also makes reference to the concept of 'living dead', which only denotes zombies. Because of the relatively recent introduction of the word 'undead' into common usage, printed 20th-century dictionaries - for example, *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* from 1989 - do not yet include the term.

Deriving from fantasy and horror novels and movies, the word 'undead' has gradually permeated the public discourse and even entered the scholarly vocabulary. Until the end of the 20th century, fantasy and horror themes had a marginal role in popular fiction. The flood of supernatural topics into popular films has been called the paranormal, supernatural or spectral turn. (Hill 2011, 1-8; Koski 2016, 17-19.) This development can be connected with the secularisation of the Western world, followed by the rise and popularisation of spiritual movements such as numerous New Age spiritualities. The Internet has also contributed to the boom. The visibility of popular fiction in broadcast media and quotidian social interactions has had an impact on the vocabularies of everyday speech, the media and even scholarly work. On an everyday basis, people use words like 'vampire' or 'zombie' metaphorically when they speak about taxing or burdensome people, about their own tiredness and exhaustion, or people addicted to their mobile device. As fictive representations in novels and movies, the undead have also been interpreted as metaphors for various contemporary issues such as traumatic national history, sexuality, consumerism and health problems (see,

e.g., Etkin 2013; Hobson 2016). The metaphoric use of fictive or supernatural beings has a long and continuous history from the folklore of oral communities to present-day movies and novels (see Carter 1997; Gunnell 2014).

Researchers use vernacular or colloquial concepts in their work for several reasons. Naturally, scholars who study popular culture also use terminology – such as the term ‘undead’ – as part of their object of study. Vernacular concepts are typically not precisely defined, and therefore they are not valid as analytical concepts unless specifically defined and reassessed. There have been scholarly attempts to analyse the meanings and boundaries of the concept of undead (Vargas 2010), yet the practice is heterogeneous. Historians and archaeologists – or the journalists who write about their work – sometimes use the term without analytical framing to make the research more interesting for a wider audience. Calling medieval skeletons with stones in their mouth ‘vampires’ can be seen as more or less in accord with the local folk beliefs of that time (see Gregoricka et al. 2014), but when popular news about recent excavations in Europe report about the remains of zombies, the gap between the actual findings and the terminology is quite wide. Because the term ‘undead’ is less precise, it may be more suitable for referring to deceased people who have been suspected of being restless after death. Popular culture experts may prefer a narrower definition and argue that ‘undead’ only refers to vampires, while zombies are ‘living dead’. However, in popular culture as well, these two figures are increasingly mixed with each other in new productions which seek to make use of both sides of the coin: the erotic and individual appeal of the vampires and the decay and identity loss of the zombies (Abbott 2016, 1–4). Meanwhile, in academia, the term ‘undead’ is broadened still more. A great variety of types of dead are seen coming back in history and popular culture, and researchers seek new and fresh umbrella terms to discuss this as a related phenomenon.

The Undead in Context: Premodern Perspectives on Death

According to the Wittgensteinian model of family resemblance (*Familienähnlichkeit*), the term ‘undead’ has vague boundaries and lacks exactness. It is difficult, if not impossible, to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for “undeadness”. The members of the category ‘undead’ share some properties, and, consequently, like the genetically related members of a human family, they resemble each other, but it is difficult to find a quality that would be common to all uses of the concept, like that required in the classical view of categories. (Koski 2008, 50–51; Biletzki and Matar 2018.) However, there may still be some core features that are central to the category - or more important than the other features that the members of the category may have (Koski 2008, 51).

One of the central features that appears to characterise many of the undead (but not all, as we shall see later below) is that they are objects and entities that were formerly alive but then died and still continued to show some activity. In the course of Western history, the definition of death held by laymen, philosophers and theologians - and later also by physicians and natural scientists - has varied and changed from one time, place, individual and situation to another. Among the oldest definitions of death, which as a state was paralleled with sleep (e.g. in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece), is the idea that an organism dies when the soul or another similar entity responsible for the vital force (a kind of life principle, such as the soul, or souls, spirit, breath or heat in the heart) exits the body. Cessation of breathing has been a widely known and used indicator of death. Ever since Aristotle, and since Aristotle was rediscovered in twelfth-century Western Europe until the 20th century, the heart has remained the central organ whose collapse indicated the complete death of an organism (Rodabough 2003, 284–285; Schäfer 2013, 2671–2674). However, although the heart stopped beating, respiration ceased and the corpse eventually started to decay, death did not necessarily entail complete ending. Along with the heart-centred definition of death, which postulated the existence of some kind of life principle, belief in the immortal soul that

survives bodily death – an idea expressed already in Plato’s *Phaedo* (Lorenz 2009) – lived on in the Christian doctrine. These aspects, in addition to Christian ideas about bodily resurrection and the power of the physical remains of the saints (i.e. relics), were still more or less part of people’s conceptual framework in eleventh-century Germany, as well as in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, as seen in the studies by Andrea Maraschi and Daniel Harms in this issue, respectively.

Even though ecclesiastical writers situated the souls of the dead either in Heaven or in Hell, and later also in Purgatory, Maraschi and Harms show that both the dead and the living could cross the boundary between their domains, albeit by different means. As Maraschi demonstrates in his study of the *Corrector*, the nineteenth book of the *Decretum* of Burchard of Worms, written around 1000 in Germany, in contemporary folk belief the boundary between the two realms was a source of great concern. Clerics, many of whom considered that the dead were incapable of returning, insisted that the living and the undead that crossed the boundary were tricked or reanimated, respectively, by the Devil. However, earlier studies on medieval West Scandinavian sources suggest that in Germanic tradition, the dead who had literally ‘lost their breath’ (inf. *týna öndu*) the moment they died (Tolley 2009, 180) could become undead of their own free will. Their corpses still contained some vital force, and their undeadness was of a particularly material essence (Caciola 1996, 12, 19, 26–35; Vésteinn Ólason 2003, 167; Kanerva 2018, 31–35). The material bodies of the revenants would not decay, and the corpses preserved “energy still unexpended” (Little 1994, 151), which could be exploited for magical or medicinal purposes, or could enable posthumous activity, as long as there was flesh on their bones.

In early modern European folklore, vampires did not gradually lose this energy, because they preyed on the living. If disturbances or attacks were experienced in the community, or if a suspect person – for example, a witch, drunkard, troublemaker or someone who had died in sinister circumstances – had been buried lately, the body could be exhumed and found to be undead, if the corpse had not decayed but was

“alive”. What were seen as signs of life in the dead body have later been interpreted as the process of decomposition. In local beliefs, this persistent animation turned the deceased into a monster, which was dangerous as long as the dead body was “alive”. The intact condition of the body was not a sufficient criterion for undeadness, however. A contrary example was offered by the saints, whose bodies’ failure to decompose was a miracle. (Barber 1988, 15-17, 108-109.) The point was that the life force preserved in dead bodies was used for bad deeds. In normal circumstances, the life force residing in the corpse would gradually be drained, but it could be used – or it had to be avoided – by the living as well, as long as there was some left.

Similarly, in Finno-Ugric folklore materials from the 19th and 20th centuries, the ability of the deceased to act depended on the life force remaining in the flesh. The probability of returning increased if the person had been a sinner or a witch, reluctant to die, or if s/he had left unfinished business in this world. The deceased could be angered and driven to return, in order to complain or avenge themselves, if their propitiation was neglected. (Paulaharju 1995, 209-210.) However, propitiation was only necessary until the flesh decayed away. After that, the deceased had no power to complain. (Harva 1948, 497-498.) In the folk belief traditions of Lutheran Finland, the “return” could manifest itself as invisible haunting or disturbing clatter (Koski 2011, 236-237). The returning dead were understood as otherworldly beings, and their materiality was able to affect this world only partially and in exceptional circumstances. The boundary between everyday reality and the other world was thinner at night and during certain festivals, and also when serious breaches of social mores had been committed. In these circumstances, the dead could be encountered in material form. The features of the returning dead also depended on the genre. In entertaining and fabulous legends, they were corporeal, with mould growing on their face, their bony arms outstretched to reach the living. However, when adapted to everyday beliefs and norms, they were hardly visible. (Koski 2008, 342-348.) The vernacular belief system in 19th-century Lutheran Finland emphasised that the power substance of the dead

remained dormant in graveyards unless the social order was disturbed. However, the force residing in the remains of the dead could also be ritually used in healing and for problem-solving – such as finding stolen goods – as well as to cause magical harm. The dead – or the so-called churchyard *väki*, which represented the agency of the dead and the graveyard – could be harnessed to a variety of uses, but they also actively resisted violations of the peace of the hallowed ground and could punish norm-breakers even violently. (Koski 2011, 273–274; Koski 2019, 175–177, 179.) Thus, in Finnish vernacular tradition, the vital force of the deceased was a well-recognised phenomenon. It was problematic only if the deceased were restless or provoked. Lutheran ethics aimed at addressing both of these problems.

Daniel Harms’s discussion on the so-called “Keeper of the Bones” ritual, a necromantic practice known from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English sources, which was meant to be used when contacting the dead, suggests that similar conceptions of death and undeadness existed also in the premodern insular society. The death of the body did not mean total annihilation. The bodies, bones and spirits of the dead continued to possess magic power or immaterial knowledge, and the dead were invoked by necromantic rituals for various reasons, such as to reassert social order. The act was strictly condemned by ecclesiastical and legal authorities in the premodern context studied by Harms, even though in the early third century the necromancy practised by Egyptians still raised interest among Christians, since it was thought to support belief in the immortality of the soul (on the history of necromancy, see Bremmer 2015, 136–137).

The Undead in Context: Escaping Death

The soul nevertheless lost its important role when physicians started to gain a monopoly on the clinical diagnosis of death by the end of the nineteenth century and, consequently, the definition of death became medicalised. (Schäfer 2013, 2671, 2674–

2675.) By that time, clinical death had become reversible; various resuscitation techniques made it possible to revive people who had been at the brink of death (Pernick 1988, 22), while new scientific discoveries suggested that it was possible to maintain blood circulation and respiration artificially. Later in the twentieth century, death even became postponable: breathing could be maintained by external pumps for longer periods of time, and defibrillators enabled the resuscitation of patients suffering from cardiopulmonary problems. (Schäfer 2013, 2673–2675.) When the first organ transplants were completed in the second half of the twentieth century, the role of the heart as the “seat of life” was problematised, and the definition of death (and thus also the definition of a potential organ donor) became an ethical, legal and moral issue. (Rodabough 2003, 285–287; Monteverde and Rid 2012, 1; Schäfer 2013, 2675.)

The Ad Hoc Committee of Harvard Medical School was an influential panel that established brain death as the valid criterion for death in 1968. According to its standards, a person whose entire brain had ceased to function was unresponsive to any external stimuli, exhibited no reflexes, and had no spontaneous muscle movements or respiration; in addition, no electric activity could be detected in their brains. (Rodabough 2003, 287; Monteverde and Rid 2012, 1; Schäfer 2013, 2675–2676.) However, there are two approaches to brain death: the so-called whole-brain approach and the higher-brain approach. The whole-brain definition followed in the Ad Hoc Committee criterion “involves the destruction of the entire brain, both the higher brain and the brainstem”. A permanent vegetative state (PVS) does not meet the whole-brain standard, since the brainstems of patients in that state tend to mostly be intact. As a consequence, PVS patients may still cough and swallow, their pupils may react to light, their heart may beat without assistance and they may exhibit cycles of waking and sleeping. (DeGrazia 2017; Rodabough 2003, 289–290.) However, critical views of whole-brain standards have pointed out that patients diagnosed as being whole-brain dead may, for instance, still gestate foetuses, grow taller or fight infections. (Monteverde and Rid 2012, 2–3.)

The higher-brain standard suggests that “human death is the irreversible cessation of the capacity for consciousness” (DeGrazia 2017). According to this approach, PVS patients, for instance, are dead even though their brainstems are largely intact and their hearts may still be beating, since they are not capable of returning to consciousness (DeGrazia 2017; Rodabough 2003, 288). According to the higher-brain approach, human death is different from the death of animals and plants. The emphasis is on the death of a person, that is, the human self instead of the human organism. In Ben Sarbey’s words, “[i]n a person the self is the mind”, and mental states and processes are regarded as “identical to states and processes of the brain”; this reflects the so-called identity theory of mind. What makes a human being a person, according to this approach, are such cerebral functions as consciousness, memory and personality (since a self/person has a biography), whereas the physical body is just an organism, which “houses” the person and may survive their death. (Sarbey 2016.)

The indefiniteness of the modern definition of death is also reflected in the sources discussed by Outi Hakola (in this issue) in her article “Zombies, Vampires and Frankenstein’s Monster: Embodied Experiences of Illness in Living Dead Films”. Even though many of the cinematic vampires and zombies are dead people who have formerly been alive or, like Frankenstein’s monster, are an assemblage of various (both human and non-human, as well as engineered) parts that originate from once living but now dead organisms, some of the undead in living dead films do not necessarily die in the biological sense of the word when they become undead. Instead, they may be infected and transformed into zombies by a virus or into vampires by consuming pills that contain vampire blood. In other words, it is not necessary to die (a biological death) to become undead.

Even though the inherently human bodies of these cinematic undead who have escaped biological death may be decaying and rotting, and some zombies have lost their memories as well as their identity (to follow the higher-brain standard of death, they would thus no longer be persons), the bloodthirstiness of the people infected by

vampirism and the actions of the zombified people that betray a sense of direction suggest that the undead Hakola discusses in her article have not actually lost their mental functions. They still have desires and intentions, they are capable of using language (e.g. the bloodthirsty vampires speak and interact with humans), or they can recognise and interpret sensory stimuli (e.g. the predatory zombified people who follow the living, eventually finding and attacking the place where the last surviving human beings are hiding). They are still objects capable of mental functions, but their personalities have grown unrecognisable to the people who once knew them; indeed, they have become “soulless monsters”. The undead studied by Hakola epitomise the modern medical conceptions of death; they appear to embody the idea that persons who lose their memory and identity, such as demented people, or who succumb to non-normative or illegal behaviour which negatively affects members of society, such as drug abuse or committing homicide, are actually dead, even though their biological bodies are still functioning and they appear to have the capability of mental processes, that is, their consciousness is at least partially intact.

The ideas reflected in these cinematic figures do not suggest what the definition of death should be, but, like a Freudian slip, some of the undead in modern horror movies do reveal what we living people may think. As a kind of modern vernacular standard of death, this finds a parallel in the theoretical concept of social death, which may precede biological death. The condition is linked to the debilitation of all or crucial social roles, which results in a loss of social identity and a loss of connectedness; as the socially dead are marginalised (based, for example, on their ethnicity, age, behaviour or state of health), they become “non-persons”. (Králová 2015, 238–240, 245.) In light of the cinematic vampires and zombies, in certain contexts social death appears as a sufficient condition for undeadness. However, being socially dead is not a central feature in undeadness per se.

Coming Back Changed: Threats and Opportunities

The undead are both living and dead, which entails that they are neither living nor properly dead. Seen as extraordinary beings or marginalised as hideous others, they are absent from the society of the living but still present in the ordinary world; because they are socially dead, they have been stripped of their humanity (see also Králová 2015, 239). This liminal position of the undead, which resembles the ontological position of monsters (Cohen 1996, 6), makes them uncanny and frightening.

Following the ideas presented by Noël Carroll in his discussion on “art-horror” (i.e. the effects of a specific (post)modern cinematic and literary genre), the undead are also potentially impure (as defined by Mary Douglas in her 1966 book *Purity and Danger*) in that reanimated, sometimes putrefying corpses – bodies that have been infected and thus transformed into zombies or vampires – can cause repulsion and disgust. The undead are impure because they violate and transgress “schemes of cultural categorization” (Carroll 1987, 55). In Carroll’s words, these impure objects, entities or beings are (not exhaustively or exclusively but often) “categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, categorically incomplete, or formless” (ibid.), or they may transgress categories, like the Frankenstein monster, which is an assemblage of human, non-human and engineered parts. Being both (or neither) dead and (nor) alive makes the undead categorically contradictory and interstitial; they transgress the intransgressible boundary of life and death and/or stay on the threshold. (Carroll 1987, 53, 55) The undead may also be categorically incomplete in that they do not possess a soul, or their bodies may be visibly decaying. Restless corpses may possess superhuman strength, and as vaporous and ethereal ghosts the undead are formless. The undead escape classification; they refuse to fit into culture’s pre-existing standard categories and taxonomies, which are based on common knowledge of the world and the (socially and culturally constructed) order of things. (See, e.g., Carroll 1987, 55–57; Cohen 1996, 6–7.)

In addition to their exceptional or interstitial status, the undead often pose a threat to the subjects who define them as undead. As Manuel Vargas (2010) notes, we would probably not define as undead those people who, having been cryogenically frozen, might someday be revived. Nor is it common to find interpretations of the risen Christ as undead. Return from death as such does not make someone undead. Vargas argues that vampires and zombies are not necessarily evil; they only harm people for instrumental reasons. They desire human brains or blood, which makes their actions injurious for living people (Vargas 2010). If not their evil nature, it is these beings' otherness which makes their existence and intentions a threat to the living.

In the Christian outlook, however, the undead are reanimated by the Devil; they are anti-Christian and thus unequivocally evil. Despite the hegemonic position of Christianity in European societies, other views on the dead and undead have been preserved and developed for centuries in the vernacular culture, as well as in esoteric practices among the learned. In 21st-century cinematic presentations of the undead, the Christian view is dismissed. The vampires of Victorian popular culture and their successors were still anti-Christian figures whose characteristics, especially sexuality, presented the demonic other. They symbolised desires and intentions which had to be suppressed and excluded from society. By the end of the 20th century, the nature of the vampire's otherness had changed, together with attitudes towards the dangerous other. (Carter 1997, 27-29; Zanger 1997, 25.) In films and television series, this change can be seen as a domestication of the vampire (Gordon and Hollinger 1997, 2) or as a shift from an "old" demonic and metaphysical vampire to a "new" socially deviant one during the 1970s and 1980s (Zanger 1997, 17-19). In today's Western secularised societies, respect towards authorities has declined, and individuality and freedom to choose are celebrated. The undead can be used as signposts to explore alternative possibilities for sexual roles and human identity. They stand for ethnic, sexual or other minorities, or other races or species. While Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has been criticised for reinforcing social, racial and sexual prejudices, the current trend since the 1980s

instead shows understanding towards the other and critiques on prejudices. (Carter 1997, 29–39.)

Earlier studies of premodern death cultures suggest that the returning dead can be either good or bad, depending on the context of the encounter or its intention. Some may be benevolent, in that their main reason for returning is to help the living – or, from the point of view of the living, their appearance leads to a favourable result. For instance, in medieval Scandinavian vernacular tradition, when Christianity had been adopted only recently, the dead could return (or their posthumous power could “emanate” from beyond the grave) to offer the living encouragement and support, to give knowledge that would assist in future tasks and efforts, to transmit skills that would contribute to the status of the living person, or to protect the living from various kinds of supernatural harm. The benevolent dead were often (but not always) dead relatives; sometimes they were saint-like figures, or they could be more or less selfish cadavers who wished to enhance their own aims and glory by offering assistance and support. In many cases, interaction with the undead was reciprocal, following the norms and conventions of appropriate social behaviour in the realm of the living; accordingly, the living were polite towards the dead, who could contribute to their wellbeing and help them to prosper. (Kanerva 2013; Vanherpen 2013, 75–76; Kanerva 2017, 64–67.)

In preindustrial Karelia, similar reciprocal communication between the living (relatives or ritual specialists as mediators) and the deceased could occur through laments, or the dead could come to the living and communicate with them in dreams, for instance, to warn them, to give them advice, or to present requests (Stepanova 2011, 138–139). Laments advised the dead to contact the living in dreams or to return as birds, but appearing as a ghost or a walking corpse was unwanted (Honko 1963, 114–115). In premodern and traditional cultures, the demarcation between the worlds of the dead and the living (and other alternative worlds that may have existed in premodern thought) has not always been clear and precise. Boundaries were seen as porous and permeable, and the frontiers could be zones rather than clear and fixed borders.

(Bradford Smith 2013, 133–139; see also Maraschi in this issue.) However, there were more and less acceptable contexts for crossing over. Contact needed to be controllable by the living; otherwise it was unacceptable and terrifying. In the former case, the dead who returned were perhaps categorically less contradictory. Encountering the undead thus corresponded to cultural expectations and was in line with people's common knowledge of the world. Still, those premodern undead who were malevolent towards the living were just as threatening to people in real life as modern cinematic and literary zombies and vampires are to the living protagonists in the stories.

Reasons for Posthumous Activity

Why do the undead return? European folk tradition gives both moral and technical reasons for vampirism: for example, the person has been a witch; he has died violently and not received a proper burial in time; he has been contaminated (that is, attacked) by a vampire in his life; he has specific personal qualities (for example, two hearts or red hair, which in certain areas are thought to inevitably lead to vampirism); or he is a victim of a spell. The body continues to live after death because some spirit or soul animates it. It can be the person's own soul which returns to the body instead of finding its way to the land of death. The animating agent can also be an evil spirit who found the body unguarded. (Barber 1988, 29–39.)

In medieval Scandinavian vernacular tradition, restless corpses usually returned of their own free will, because they had some things to attend to and wanted to exert their influence on the realm of the living. The undead were not passive agents but active ones, reanimated by their own “unexpended energy”, such as anger, which survived death and remained in their corpses. They could return to help the living or, because of their greedy nature that persisted even after their demise, to defend the possessions they had once owned and to prevent others from enjoying their property. Like the dead in preindustrial Finnish folklore (e.g. Harva 1948), the dead could also be

guardians of morals, returning to communities where social norms had been broken. Later, Christian conceptions fused with indigenous ideas: the dead corpses became more like passive objects that could be reanimated by unclean spirits or raised by means of magic, such as necromantic practices found in medieval learned Latin literature. (Ármann Jakobsson 2005; Kanerva 2011; Kanerva 2017, 45-62; Kanerva 2018, 29-37.)

In medieval and post-Reformation Europe, the Church emphasised in its teaching that the dead who returned were actually corpses reanimated by demons and inclined to deception. Communication with the dead for the purpose of divination was strictly banned in both religious and legal contexts. However, such communication was apparently found to be effective by laypeople; surviving necromantic manuals suggest that the evocation of dead spirits was considered possible if the appropriate rites and spells were performed to bring the ghost back from the otherworld. As such, the ideas of necromancy that circulated in premodern England (discussed by Harms in this issue) represent a continuation in the long history of Western necromancy, which in Ancient Greece often aimed at gaining information about the past instead of the future by communicating with immaterial shadows and ghosts, whereas Latin sources from the first century BCE introduced the use of corpses for the purpose of divination (on necromancy in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, see Bremmer 2015).

In European folklore, the dead were able to walk not because they were exceptionally reanimated, like vampires, but simply because they were dead and for some reason restless. According to popular legends and rumours, the deceased could return if they had personal unfinished business in this world, or they were restless because of their sins and crimes, or because they had been mistreated or murdered (see, e.g., Pentikäinen 1969). Traditions concerning revenants have been first and foremost a way to discuss social norms in an entertaining manner. Central European folklore includes a rich variety of beings that derive from dead people, and usually the haunting resulted from the deviance of the person or their breaching of norms. The innocent became

immaterial and light ghosts, while those suspected of witchcraft or crimes were dark or had more repulsive forms, including such material bodies as werewolves and vampires. The soul was thought to part from the body only after it had decayed. Therefore, as long as the body existed, it could be useful to the soul if the latter had bad intentions. This is why (for example, in Czech lands) the bodies of those who had been suspected of witchcraft were destroyed, in order to prevent impure souls from using them anymore. (Navrátilová 2004, 292–310.)

The popular culture of our time still makes use of old folklore motifs, but instead of moral reasons the technical frames are emphasised. In popular novels and movies, the reasons for posthumous activities are countless, and new ones are constantly created to update the imagery. Manuel Vargas has listed a number of technical reasons for the activity of the undead. The undead can emerge because of supernatural activity, such as spells or demons. Another reason, given especially for zombies, is science gone wrong, such as a bioweapons program or an accidentally released virus. A third explanation for the undead is natural development, for instance, the mutation of a virus. (Vargas 2010.) In the last cases, the undead may not have literally died yet. Their transformation into zombies has involved another route but with the same result, such as losing essential human characteristics that constituted the person prior to the contamination or mutation, including memory and (the previous) personality; in this way, they are no longer identifiable as themselves. The individuals have been lost, and they have joined a crowd or species which cannot be integrated into human society. Popular fiction has also developed alternative narratives in which undead are not derived from death at all: for example, vampires are simply another species or race, which preys on humans (Carter 1997).

The Role of the Undead

In our modern world, the undead have appeared widely in cultural products such as films, television series, music videos and literature. Interest in the undead is not a new phenomenon. For instance, in her review article “The Evolution of the Vampire in Popular Narrative from the Nineteenth Century to the Present” (this issue), which gives an overview of the changing roles of vampires in literature and cinema from the “birth” of the vampire in the West in 18th-century Gothic fiction to 21st-century cinematic sources, Charmaine Tanti shows that the modern Western form of the vampire is not a recent innovation. Based on research on other cultural and historical contexts, we can also say that the roots of the vampire, depending on how exactly we define the term, stretch a long way back. Vampiric qualities have characterised various undead beings at various times in various cultures: for instance, in Ancient Egypt, India, Eastern Europe and medieval Scandinavia (see Beresford 2008; Ármann Jakobsson 2011). Other articles in this theme issue (Maraschi; Harms), as well as earlier studies on the subject, suggest that even though visual and verbal narratives prior to the birth of the modern entertainment industry and mass media have not been available for large audiences, the undead have inspired and stirred interest among many people across a range of historical and cultural contexts.

The power of the undead – including their potential to play a significant role in such forms of communication as art, literature and narrative tradition – is in their monstrousness. The undead can be seen as extra-geographically unknown others; they participate in this world but are simultaneously outside it, being excluded. This makes them potential bridges between two worlds, the world of actuality on the one hand and the domain of myth and allegory on the other (see, e.g., Carroll 1987, 57; Williams 1996, 13–14; Cohen 1996, 6). To follow Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, as objects and entities that do not signify themselves but (as sign vehicles) stand for others, the undead – in their monstrous way – carry with them a plethora of semiotic potential. They reveal things, teach, advise and instruct, and they make (hidden and unspoken) things known

(Lat. *monstrare*) if they are read, but they are also characterised with uncertainty: they are not “either/or” but “and/or”. In times of crisis, they question things, but they also allow “safe expression” of “potent escapist fantasies” and delimit the boundaries of possibility. To understand their message and grasp their meanings before they vanish, the undead need to be viewed in the cultural and historical context where they have been constructed and which they reflect. (See Cohen 1996, 4-7, 12-13, 16-17.) The symbolic value of the undead is not diminished by belief in their physical existence (Williams 1996, 11-14, 76-77); thus, a ghost story may describe the life of the undead and its origin, but at the same time the undead being serves as a sign that carries meanings.

In European folklore, stories about ghosts and revenants dealt with the relationship between everyday reality and other worlds, as well as morals and the social order. In belief narratives, immoral behaviour and breaches of norms were often followed by supernatural disturbances and punishments. The undead were one of the terrifying results of ill-will of people towards each other, or they resulted from the negligence of decent behaviour and the proper performance of death rituals (see, e.g., Pentikäinen 1969; Navratilová 2004). However, the undead could also arise accidentally without any possibility for the living to prevent the process. This unexpectedness also corresponded with general experiences: life was not fair, and terrible accidents could occur at any time. The juiciest stories were entertaining and hardly connected to the everyday reality of the listeners. (Koski 2008.) But much of the narrative tradition around the undead was experienced as real. In early modern Europe, a rumour about vampires terrorising the region could cause a panic. Knowing that the victims of a vampire would also become vampires, it was necessary to kill the vampire before there would then be more vampires than living people. (Barber 1988, 22-23, 57.)

In the popular culture of our time, the focus is on this reality instead of possible other worlds, and the monstrosity or otherness of the vampires or zombies often refers metaphorically to contemporary societal problems. In a vampire the audience can find

the racial or sexual other, while zombies can be seen as an allegory of the consumerist society in which people lose their individuality. There is a vast range of possible interpretations. Once these characters have become mainstream in popular culture, it is also possible to identify with them. Vampires or ghosts as protagonists thus become identifiable with one's own feelings of alienation or otherness in contemporary society. (See Gunnell 2014.)

In her article, Outi Hakola examines vampires, zombies and Frankenstein's monster in contemporary horror films, in order to discuss allegories of illness. As Hakola shows, the living dead of cinema have been an appropriate vehicle to transmit meanings linked to maladies and various health issues, such as organ transplantations. As symbols, these "monstrous beings" have offered an arena for discussion about subjects of sociocultural concern, sources of anxiety and uncertainties, or issues that have been feared or considered taboo. Through their semiotic potential, the undead generate meanings concerning the experience of long-term illnesses and stigmatisation, as well as the marginalisation associated with them, or concerning questions of identity, personality and organ transplantation. They represent the abnormal and undesired. Hakola argues that the undead expose the ambiguous nature of experiences of illness and the fragile body. However, it remains unclear whether the monstrous nature of the undead eventually signifies the monstrousness of the illness or of the person suffering from it.

Like monsters, even though they will be destroyed in the end, the undead escape and reappear in new places where they again adopt new meanings and stand for new referents (Cohen 1996, 4-6). In this issue, Charmaine Tanti shows, for instance, that over the centuries, from the nineteenth century to the present, Western vampires have been first created, then recreated and reinvented. They have taken various roles in the different cultural and historical contexts, according to the needs of each era and society. Vampires have occasionally aroused sympathy instead of being seen as just monstrous and evil. Like the group of undead discussed by Hakola in this issue they

have also served to express cultural fears and concerns, as well as the desires typical of specific time periods.

* * *

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Biographical notes:

Kirsi Kanerva is a cultural historian specialised in Nordic cultural and mental history. In her previous research projects, she has studied the history of mind and emotions in medieval Scandinavia, the restless dead in medieval Icelandic saga sources, and the history of suicide in medieval Scandinavia. Her current research project deals with the agency and social networks of the Swedish-speaking population in rural eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Finnish Southern Ostrobothnia. Contact: kirsi.kanerva@utu.fi.

Kaarina Koski is a folklorist specialised in vernacular belief traditions and narrative genres. Her previous research projects have dealt with folk legends about the dead and graveyards, church buildings, and supernatural beings in preindustrial Finland. She has also studied interpretations and discourses concerning uncanny experiences, as well as internet cultures. Her current project focuses on ideas of contemporary Finns about the dead and the afterlife. Contact: kaakos@utu.fi.

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