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# Time to Die

## Zombie as Educational Evolution in *The Girl with All the Gifts*

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**H**OW CAN A ZOMBIE STORY END? Unique among horror tropes, the zombie apocalypse narrative must conclude either with a cure or a profoundly transformed new world. The only alternative is fade-to-black nihilism, where everything is presumed lost. Thus, as Hubner (2017) notes, “zombie texts provide insight into what the prospect of survival *means*” (p. 40, emphasis mine). I wonder if, maybe, sometimes, survival ends up not seeming like survival at all. Maybe it ends up seeming like something quite different.

It was Huddleston (2015) who first revealed to me how zombies help us see “how neoliberalism works on bodies” (p. 188). The several philosophical and social transformations that have infected public education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (e.g., ascendance of neoliberal logics, common-sense merit pay schemes, and the metastasis of the career administrative state) constitute a contagion that can be profitably viewed through the lens of zombie narrative (Giroux 2015; McNally 2011). What does it mean to come through infection with your humanity intact? What does it mean to survive a contagion so universal that it’s impossible to transcend it unchanged? Are there ways to change in a zombie apocalypse other than becoming a zombie yourself? Do such distinctions even continue to matter if the only solution to the insoluble in apocalypse isn’t the story’s ending, but rather the telling of the story itself (Osmond, 2017)?

Movies help me understand school. They help me understand the curriculum moment I show up for each day in front of my class. They help me understand the larger historical arc of American public education, an institution presently so beleaguered I venture that it is worth considering if it has, in fact, become quite something else under our feet. Movies are gestures whose denotations are limited, but whose implications, like all poesis, reach beyond their imprints, rising like our hands to gesture into the space where words fail us (Vernon, 1979). They inspire me to dream both alternate histories and possible futures for our curriculum moment—to inspire other ways of experiencing the coursing intersection of energies and possibilities where I live out my days.

And horror films do this work better than any. Horror is a fever dream of possibility, an opportunity to try on the most extreme iterations of story and see what they might refract back upon the everyday humdrum (but always in dialogue with genre convention, so the liberating

power of constraint can work its well-tempered magic). *The Girl with All the Gifts* (Clarke & McCarthy, 2016) is such a film. It is a horror movie that is about school, sort of. But it is also about how we choose to respond to a moment of apocalypse—how our deepest instincts for defense and self-preservation might actually hasten our end and prevent our inevitable evolution. I think we are fin-de-siecle in public education right now, at the point of something dying and something new rising in its place. If I am right, then, *The Girl with All the Gifts* is a story for our educational times.

The movie opens with a bizarre school-morning ritual. Melanie, about thirteen, sits on her bed counting on her fingers. Suddenly the lights come up, revealing her to be dressed in orange institutional wear and living in a prison cell. She hides the two photos she'd tacked to the wall — of a kitten and a forest—and pushes a wheelchair outfitted with wrist, ankle, and head straps into place before the door. Through that door come two fierce leathernecks, in full gear and pointing assault weapons at her. She cheerfully greets them by name; they do not respond. Instead, one keeps the rifle trained on her head while the other locks her into the chair, and we see her wheeled in a line with twenty other similarly-restrained children into a windowless, poorly-lit room, where their chairs are secured in rows facing a teacher's desk. Class is about to start.

We learn subsequently that Melanie is outside London, twenty years after a rampant fungal infection has transformed most of the population into lightning-fast, savage “hungries,” whose only volition is to prowl the countryside for human flesh to sustain them. Melanie and her classmates are also “hungries,” but a second-generation strain. They seem to retain human personalities—capacity for interaction and cognition—but also transform into ravenous monsters when they smell human flesh or wait too long between feedings. They are being subjected to research in a heavily-fortified military bunker by Dr. Caldwell, who believes their hybrid nature makes them a promising source for a cure. But her research requires their vivisection and the reduction of their brains and spinal cords into a vaccine.

We glimpse the approved curriculum of this odd school, the dismal presentation and demanded recall of a series of “data pairs, just names and numbers. Content is not really relevant, is it?” observes Dr. Caldwell, cryptically. Perhaps this curriculum has no pretensions of connecting student to experience—much less threading their previous lives to what awaits them—because these are wards of a state that has no interest in their future beyond their utility. Like all pedagogues, these teachers seek to probe minds to discern who and what their students are by their capacity to respond. According to obscure logic, their school performance relates to when and if they'll be selected for slaughter. Most education's goals regarding their students are instrumental; in this world, far fewer pains are taken to conceal the fact.

The primary teacher for these sessions is Miss Gustineau. We can tell by her outfit that she is a soldier too—but unarmed, as well as pretty and compassionate. We briefly see her interact with these students, just enough to see her choose to offer them stories instead of the periodic table to memorize and regurgitate. But these few gestures are enough to echo a hundred hero teacher movies (Bulman 2002)—a hundred ingenues who enter a blackboard jungle armed only with love and energy and eventually transform it, but not before being ritually punished by the old guard for heresy. We wonder if we've seen the movie before, with “undead” identity limning overdetermined racial, socioeconomic, and generational difference as the gap into which our hero will step, suffer, and prevail.

But we haven't seen *this* movie. Because even though Gustineau's relationship with Melanie seems like warmed-over, feel-good, teachermovie essentialism at first, the mystery of what constitutes Melanie's core self won't let it be. There are familiar signs of a warm and straightforward teacher-student relationship, to be sure. Melanie melts at Miss Gustineau's loving

hand on her head; she beams when she gets a right answer, warmed by the eternal fire of top marks; when given a chance, she spins her own story of teacher crush, how she might protect Gustineau from the degraded world outside—from herself—and spirit her away to a safe place. For the teacher's part, Gustineau loves Melanie. She enacts the caring, *en loco parentis* role reflexively assigned to a teacher, perhaps more poignantly in the still-unexplained-but-imagined absence of Melanie's actual parents.

But there's more here than that. Gustineau is an agent, not just a social functionary. She discerns the essential ambivalence of what she is encountering in Melanie. She reads the students the myth of Pandora—how the gods, who “never forget,” create a curious woman who opens the box that releases all the evils and pains into the world that humankind endures. But, it is made clear, Pandora also releases hope—the energy to persist in the face of annihilation. Which of “all the gifts” Melanie will ultimately embody is what we watch to discover.

Gustineau's pedagogic liberties—the stories, the connections, the touches—trouble the ruling paradigm about “hungries.” Central to Dr. Caldwell's understanding is that they are essentially rapidly-evolving parasites, capable of “exquisite mimicry of observed behaviors,” though still not people. But she isn't sure. She doesn't know if she's witnessing the devolution of humanity or its transformation in Melanie and her classmates—and, therefore, also doesn't know if slaughtering them for research is murder or harvest. Interestingly, where Gustineau lets ambivalence lead to pause and reflection, Caldwell uses it as fuel to barge ahead with the plan. She doubles down on her commitment to the ideas she came in with, rather than staying open to emerging possibilities. This will prove to have been a mistake.

The third member of this trio of creatures finding their way in a new world is Melanie herself—who, unique among the “hungries,” seems aware that she embodies the bleeding edge of an evolution into something new. We see as much when Melanie prods Caldwell into this exchange:

“I don't want to be a hungry.”

“But that's what you are. In dissection, it's very clear. The fungus is wrapped around your brain like ivy around an oak tree.”

“But I can talk. I'm like you.”

“You're not like anything that's ever existed before.”

Caldwell quizzes Melanie, the brightest among the children, with logic puzzles, including Schrodinger's Cat—the perplex that seems to indicate that one can in fact belong to two worlds, as long as one is willing to leave some big questions unanswered as the price of admission.

So this film is about the moment of in-between-ness. It thrusts us into a world of inevitable change and presents us with three perspectives on how one might persevere. Everyone is past the tipping point, though not everyone realizes it. Everyone's inherited versions of how the world works are failing them, though not everyone is eyes-up about what else could happen.

Maybe any tale of surviving a zombie apocalypse is about in-between: of being between life and death, either in the transformation between animation and sentience or a mad flight from it. So much energy in this genre is usually spent on the horror of realization that former life is over and detailing the gory forms that the transformation assumes. Remember the ghastly opening scenes of *28 Days Later* (Macdonald & Boyle, 2002) as our protagonist wakes from a coma in a hospital ward and has to read his world and deduce what it has become and his new place in it. And that film, like all zombie stories, has to unfold toward a final showdown: victory over the

pathogen or complete absorption of one world by the next. It is always either *World War Z* (Forster & Pitt, 2013) or *Train to Busan* (Lee & Yeon, 2016): victory or tentative regrouping with a gesture toward the futility of it.

But I've never seen a zombie story that lingers so agonizingly—even compassionately—on the plight of those for whom the box has just been opened but for whom the ultimate import of the “gifts” bestowed is not yet clear. How each character deals with “something not like anything that has existed before” *is* the story.

This is where the film opens to curriculum analysis. It's crucial to note that the zombie infection in this story is fungal, not viral. It seeks symbiosis with its human host, not annihilation and domination. While *The Girl with All the Gifts* is a little fuzzy on when humans are attacked for food and when they are colonized for transformation, none of the humans we come to know die of the pandemic itself. Dr. Caldwell has really been a dead woman walking since five minutes after we meet her; she sustains a deep cut on her hand when “hungries” overrun her lab early on, and her hardheadedness about addressing it leads to the sepsis that as good as kills her. Other minor characters are infected at the end but choose to end their own lives before the infection runs its course. The story gets us thinking not about ways to die in an apocalypse—which are uninteresting, pedestrian—but ways to live, though living may mean accepting radically different terms for living than may have been considered—or even available—previously.

Miss Gustineau does survive, in her human form, untransformed—at least by infection. In the final scene, we see the world through her eyes as she awakens as a specimen in a terrarium (the airlock mobile lab where Dr. Caldwell planned to make a last attempt to find a cure). We learn that she was locked in carefully and deliberately by Melanie, to ensure she survives the spore release that infects the entire world. Gustineau, agent of transformative education who we first met as a maverick system-bucker, is now brought to heel. But she is not silenced. Melanie rallies the feral second-gen children into the clearing around Gustineau's lab and its large window. We see that the dozens of “hungry” children include many from her first class. They sit on the ground as Miss Gustineau puts up a whiteboard before the window and begins class over the loudspeaker.

“We're going to continue getting the new kids up to speed,” she says, as Melanie snarls at stragglers to sit and be still. “Everyone else, if you can just be patient while they catch up with us, okay?”

“Can we have stories?” asks Melanie, from the back of the crowd.

“Later,” Gustineau answers—like Scheherazade spinning tales to ensure her own survival, like Wendy trapped to tell stories to the Lost Boys. “There's time.”

“There will be lots of time,” agrees Melanie, smiling. *fin.*

And we are left wondering which part of Melanie calculated to keep Miss Gustineau? Is she now merely a pet? Or perhaps a future experimental subject, the tables turned? Or is she a human connection, an insistence on Melanie's part to maintain her humanity through the love she feels for a dear teacher even as she changes? Or is she some third thing, required for some additional transformation that is forthcoming that we've not seen yet? We are after all in a new world; anything is possible. In the last frame, Melanie's smile is enigmatic and bottomless.

Carrington (2016) helps us see how zombie stories are not just about the zombies and their prey, but about how society responds to an unanticipated insult—especially one that is self-inflicted, that is ontologically inseparable from the society itself.

The “self” is constructed in relation to the norms and practices of the society around us. When that society crumbles, as it always seems to do when confronted by waves of zombies, the structures that have contributed to the construction and maintenance of “self” dissolve...the zombie is not just an attack on the identity and self of the infected. It challenges the identities and constructions of self of the entire society as well as the ways in which we treat each other (p. 28).

And, therefore, a zombie story—especially one about youth, even more so one about school—must necessarily be both about loss and gain, about death and rebirth.

Zombie characters...represent an emergent shift in the zombie metaphor: from abject monster caught between life and death to evolutionary lifeform armed with the skills to survive the post-apocalyptic landscape...it is fascinating to note that many of the most recent depictions of zombies speak to a sense of hope and belief in the capacity of the young to flourish in the changed global condition...the world for which much of the schooling system has traditionally prepared young people does not exist for them. (Carrington, 2016, pp. 32-33).

So zombie youth become a container for hopes that somehow those who come behind us will evolve to meet the demands of the rapidly changing world we have left for them. But nonetheless, we—the not-young, or not-so-young—remain their teachers; their *paidagogos*, taking upon ourselves the responsibility to decide what is most worthy of their attention and what most important to avoid. Here we stand, unevolved teachers before transformed youth, presuming to know what to say—children and teachers, faced off within institutions that crumble around us. The youth evolve—and their grown-ups must also, in order to stay relevant and coherent to them, in order to reach them. And yet, however convincingly we scan to them as relevant, we are always not of them. We are of another time, breathing another time’s air. We are the bridge between whatever worthy legacy the past leaves them and the new world they will form long after we are here to see it. We force them into our institutions to experience this legacy—but eventually, it will reverse, as we inhabit the spaces they permit us to. We are in their world, not they in ours.

Watching *The Girl with All the Gifts* moves me to think about what is dying, what is gone, and what is evolving. Perhaps public school is dying. Perhaps it was mortally wounded by a cut sustained early in the struggle. Perhaps there is something in the air.

Maybe it was cut by the *Nation at Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), when the national psyche most vividly realized how easy and productive it was to punch down at schools for whatever ailed it. Or maybe the spore was released with the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 and the grinding 15-year war of attrition it waged on public schools by both defining what their success looked like and ensuring that they never could achieve it. Or maybe it was *Waiting for Superman* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010), which cemented in the public mind through top-notch production values and rhetorical massage that big public schools were money vampires that sought to pad teacher pensions at the expense of students and that the only stake to drive through its heart were charter schools.

I find myself wondering if there’s a zombie logic at work in the way that I and my fellow travelers conceptualize education reform. Are we fixed on only established notions of what school’s evolution must look like? Locked into a fugue state of doing the same thing over and

over, ignoring what is new and repeating responses to what is old? Again, Huddleston (2015) is on the money:

It could be that neoliberal education reform heightens an already existing condition of nostalgia for an imperfect past, that is [itself] a product of neoliberalism's influence on education reforms.... Could it be those of us who see ourselves defending public education from neoliberal education reforms are guilty of the same? It certainly is not a stretch, considering that the discourse around public education reform has been shaped so much by neoliberalism. Indeed, neoliberal reformers often attack those who question the purported reforms as "defending the status quo" and ask, "What is your plan to fix public education?" This strategy positions those against the current round of reforms as relics of the past. We do ourselves no favors when our entire position comes down to the removal of neoliberal reform as the solution to public education's problems. (p. 192)

Case in point: last year, my college screened *Backpack Full of Cash* (Aranow & Mondale, 2016), a terrific documentary that landed powerful body blows against the privatization of public school. It was a rip-snorter. People were fired up. But I couldn't help think it was a seven-year-late rejoinder to *Waiting for Superman* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010), the first counterpunch I'd seen that matched it pound for pound, but the crowd had already left the building. And I wondered if maybe the fight for hearts and minds has been over for years—that the rhetoric of competition and meritocracy was too strong, the picture of fat-cat unions on the public teat too indelible, by now. Even as I small-group-discussed the film's valid, factual points, and even as I continue to teach my future teachers about privatization and neoliberalism and vouchers and the whole megillah, I wondered in the back of my mind if we are not already dead. If we have not already sustained the cut that has killed us.

And so *The Girl with All the Gifts* asks difficult questions for a champion of public school. Especially one who believes in the promise of direct action, of the arc of justice bending, of the innate wholeness of our culture. If public school is no longer alive, is it dead? If it is neither—

what might its evolution look like? Does holding on to old ideas about what victory must entail doom us to die by our own hand? Is it worth surviving if all we get is a fishbowl, cut off from what we grew to expect as our due? What if that also means we get to keep the megaphone on and get to keep teaching?

I don't think this is accommodationist talk. I believe that history holds lessons and that we can resist and maintain a true relation to the elements of democracy that doublespeak and fascist muscle have historically obscured and eventually dismantled. I do.

But I also wonder if we're sacrificing ourselves on the altar of our own paucity of imagination about what a future might look like. If we are inexorably moving toward a hybridity—"something that's not like anything that's existed before"—are we well-served to pretend we are not? Or are we—especially we teacher educators—only preparing folks who, when the change comes, will elect their own death (burnout, walking wounded, attrition) over staying and thriving in the new reality, on its terms?

In that same conversation where Caldwell tells Melanie about the ivy wrapped around her brain, she also shares her horrific origin story:

"Dr. Caldwell, what am I?"

"We don't really have a term for it."

“But...you know where I came from? Tell me, please.”

“Where all babies come from, but by a slightly eccentric route...(You and the other children) were found in a maternity hospital. The mothers were there too. They were empty. Cored. All their organs devoured—from the inside—the mothers were probably all infected at once in a single incident, then the embryos were infected as well. Through the placenta. They ate their way out.”

Not the first chestbuster to be described (though not depicted, mercifully) in a horror film, but a wholly different one. This time it’s a human cycle interrupted and requisitioned to other ends. This time a sacrificed host is consumed on the very terms that it negotiated with its offspring since sexual reproduction began (“I will feed you with and through my body”). The violation, then, is one of degree and not of kind; the evolution requires one moment of disequilibrium in its growth cycle, in which a first-generation host is sacrificed so that the second-gen may leap into being more than anything before or since has ever been.

I wonder if we who work for education right now are that generation—those whose work, whose energy, whose very substance will ultimately be consumed on the way to our kind becoming something else—if we’re not part of a larger metabolism that demands all our victories be pyrrhic in order to establish rich ground for what is next to grow and thrive.

This is becoming even more fin-de-siecle than I had expected. I apologize. I hope it does not land as nihilistic. But all the humans in *The Girl with All the Gifts*—save one—essentially perish from a lack of imagination. Dr. Caldwell breaks herself upon the single-minded, modernist quest for a cure. Others break themselves against an unwillingness to consider mutation as a viable option for survival. The only one who does come through, intact, is one who allows herself to imagine into the possibilities of connection with something (a hungry) that everyone else insisted was inhuman (a “friggin abortion,” in the guards’ parlance)—whose connection was tentative and filled with doubt, but who sustained it nonetheless—who read the stories to the children, even if it meant her own punishment. The one who held out hope that her unique voice and way of being in this strange and horrifying new world would be sufficient, in the last reckoning, is the only one for whom it was.

All Gustineau is afforded in this new balance is her voice, tremulous over a loudspeaker—her voice, and an assembly of children who, to varying degrees, will attend to what she has to say. This isn’t the end of a typical teacher movie, with a standing ovation (literal or implied) for a life in service to other people’s children. It’s the obverse, the bizarro. The teacher is rewarded for her teaching by the surgical excision of all aspects of her life except...her teaching.

And it all feels perversely right, even though it is horrifying. The bones are familiar. What could a (young, single, white, female) teacher need to thrive other than an opportunity to teach? After all, in the American public school imaginary, teaching makes the teacher whole. She is incomplete without it—and, as we still hear regularly from state legislators opposed to salary increases, the really good ones would do it for free. This conceit has been baked into every compulsory school proposal since Horace Mann, who happily propagated an understanding of young unwed female teachers as vessels of virtue who were called into their fullness of being by the opportunity to be completed by caring for other peoples’ children. That they could be had on the cheap—two women to one man—just sealed the deal (Goldstein, 2014). It also underpins the dualistic misogyny re-enacted in so many children and young adult literature depictions of female teachers as monsters themselves, through books that present:

a corporeal pedagogy of monstrosity that requires the presence of a white, straight, and nurturing human teacher, who presents as “normal” in relationship to the monstrous female teacher figure; the focalization of the woman teacher as monster through the perspective of a vulnerable schoolboy; and the destruction or the remediation of the monster into a more motherly figure. (Marshall, 2016, p. 3)

We love our teachers so much we would exploit them, then demean them for not becoming something else.

So it is hard—and *should* be—to cast responsibility to evolve in an inhospitable world onto the body of the teacher, which has already borne so much. Once again we blame the victim. We see with new clarity the unique vulnerability of the teacher who teaches from a sense of vocation (Hansen, 1996). Perhaps, in a different world, she *would* in fact consider “doing it for free,” because the work itself *does* complete her. But that does not mean she should or should be required to. And yet we do ask her to do more—and my analysis, from one perspective, only adds to the long list of ways that the teacher’s plight is no one’s fault but her own.

But the zombie story tells us that extreme moments call for consideration of options that heretofore seemed too extreme. And Gustineau will after all persist, and thrive, in the new meaning of “thriving.” The last scene opens with her asleep on the floor. She wakes to Melanie’s knocking on the window—this is clearly not the first morning of the new regime. A tear trickles down Gustineau’s cheek. What does she mourn? That which is lost and past on the way to becoming found, now? To quote another imagining of a cruel future, where we nonetheless persist in different form: “All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die” (Scott, Fancher, & Peoples, 1982).

And yet she does not die. Like the million teachers before her who felt like dying in the moments before waking, she instead gets up and pulls herself together and goes out to meet her students. Class is always about to start.

Perhaps, then, we shall die—we who cry repentance at the end of times—we who champion the public and the pluralistic in a moment obsessed with privatization and fragmentation.

Or perhaps we will not—if, and only if, we can hold to what has brought us this far, while releasing so much else. Perhaps we are diminished by the terms of our survival, almost unrecognizably. But we who choose to evolve in ways we have never imagined will still be around. And we will still raise a voice, to teach.

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