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studies journal for emerging scholars

## Performance, Prison Strike, Zombie: Steve McQueen's *Hunger* and the 'Reflection Machines' By Nicholas Fesette

### Abstract

The hunger striker and the zombie are powerful figures of the performance of resistance in a world increasingly affected by the normalization of the logic of mass imprisonment. The hunger strike has a long history and continues to find purchase in the popular imaginary, evidenced in prisons and detainment centers around the world. Director Steve McQueen's 2008 film *Hunger* provides for this phenomenon a visual aesthetic by dramatizing the 1981 Irish Republican Army hunger strike that led to the deaths of Bobby Sands and nine others in HM Prison Maze. Concurrently, "zombie culture" has in recent years exploded in popularity. The living dead are a productive metaphor for the imprisoned, and multimedia franchises like *The Walking Dead* render explicit this connection between the carceral and the undead—in this case by posing the prison space as a commodity of security in a dystopia overrun with zombies. The proliferation of the undead is even effected in activist engagement in the streets, as Occupy protestors don rags and fake blood in "zombie walks." Performers of hunger strikes and zombie can be read as what Rebecca Schneider calls "reflection machines," which paradoxically cast back onto the ideological stage its own illegitimacy; the performers embody their figural subjugation within and to that ideology as decaying, disappearing bodies and reflect this embodiment back onto the powers-that-be. Might reading the performative figures of the hunger striker and the zombie problematize neoliberal ideals at the threshold of the prison? The imprisoned hunger striker radically performs zombie, transforming himself into the figure of the cadaver that he always already is while imprisoned and testifying to the undead qualities of citizen-subjectivity in an era of "hyper-incarceration."

*Etudes* Vol. 1 No. 2

Sept 2015

ISSN 2375-0758

[www.etudesonline.com](http://www.etudesonline.com)

**Performance, Prison Strike, Zombie:  
Steve McQueen's *Hunger* and the "Reflection Machines"**

By Nicholas Fesette

In your head, in your head

Zombie

Zombie

Zombie<sup>1</sup>

I'd like to begin with what might seem like a counterintuitive juxtaposition: on the one hand, the 2008 film *Hunger* directed by Steve McQueen, which examines the 1981 Irish Republican Army's (IRA) hunger strike in the infamous HM Prison Maze that ended with the deaths of 10 men, including Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender). Sands was the face of the imprisoned IRA members—both historically and in the film—and was elected to British Parliament a month before his death in the hunger strike. He became a political martyr and a mural dedicated to his memory is painted on a wall in his home city of Belfast. On the other hand, we have examples of "zombie culture" such as *The Walking Dead*, a multimedia franchise about the struggle to survive in a nightmare vision of the Southern United States overrun by the eponymous flesh-eating ghouls. The third and fourth seasons of the AMC television adaptation of writer Robert Kirkman's graphic novel series depict the ongoing adventures of former sheriff Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) and his ragtag band of survivors as they infiltrate and fortify a maximum-security penitentiary populated by zombies. After violently disposing of the undead infestation, the group barricades itself inside in an attempt to establish a safe settlement for humans, thereby protecting itself from the infinite number

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<sup>1</sup> The Cranberries, "Zombie," *No Need to Argue*, Island, 1994, MP3.

of monsters groaning at the gates and from a rival gang of living humans greedy for the security of the prison walls. Grimes and company soon discover that these walls confine more than they shelter, and, in trying to make themselves safe, they've in fact imprisoned themselves. By the middle of the fourth season, under attack from both living and living dead enemies, they're forced to flee the prison in search of a less claustrophobic home.

What do these media have in common? What's the point of connecting the disparate figures of hunger striker and zombie, and what's articulated in that connection? Though radically different in content and presumed audience—one a taciturn historical art-film and the other a science-fiction soap opera—both narratives mark the prison's threshold as the site on which the battle between personal agency and the subjection of the person is waged. *Hunger* does so by re-staging the interned IRA members' hunger strike, an act of willful anorexia with the aim of asserting the agency of the prisoner, and the administration's violently oppressive reactions to the strike; and *The Walking Dead* does so by surrounding the penitentiary setting with zombies, stand-ins for the figure of the prisoner in the hyper-incarcerated neoliberal state. I argue that the prisoner is the real-life ghoul haunting the public imaginary, on whose body and life questions of personal choice, agency, subjection, occupation, disease, and hunger have horrifying and very real consequences. The hunger-striking prisoner, embodied in the film by Fassbender *cum* Sands who, in preparing for the role, lost a significant amount of weight, bears witness to these consequences by radically and paradoxically *performing zombie*. The hunger striker wastes away, decomposes, and disappears, just as the living dead body does by denying himself the satiety that the living dead body compulsively desires. In *The Walking Dead*, too, Lincoln *cum* Grimes looks gaunter and more haggard as he journeys through the food-scarce

dystopia. The wasting hunger of the zombie forces itself on the body of the starving human, the always already potential zombie—the perpetual becoming living dead. As I will argue, the figure of “hunger” —the “graphic embodiment of the intense longing that precedes language,” as Patrick Anderson defines it<sup>2</sup>—in the film *Hunger* and in zombie media like *The Walking Dead* serves to point the finger at the claims the state makes on the body of its subjects, living or dead, as property in the neoliberal state.<sup>3</sup> Where does this “hunger” come from? What does it mean to perform a hunger strike? What does it mean to perform zombie? What does it mean for the hunger striker to resist his hunger? How do performances of zombie relate to this other performance of political resistance?

### **Starving to Death: Subjectivity in Prison**

*Hunger*, with aesthetic clarity, dramatizes the historical events of a British paramilitary penal facility operating in North Ireland, Her Majesty’s Prison Maze (HM Maze), which officially shut down in February 2001. The film is set in 1981 and re-stages the resistance of a group of imprisoned members of the IRA against British rule. The protests started when the British government revoked the imprisoned IRA members’ status as political prisoners. When the British prison officials ordered the men to wear the standard-issue uniforms of the HM Maze—a directive that

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson, Patrick, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, Digital copy, 88.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper “neoliberalism” serves to identify a political ideology that came to prominence in the U.S. with the election of Ronald Reagan and in the U.K. with Margaret Thatcher. States like these privilege personal autonomy and individual responsibility, enacting policies that decentralize and deregulate the economy and eviscerate the social state, while at the same time—and paradoxically—expanding the penal state. In this way, poverty is criminalized, and incarceration serves to capture those among us who would most benefit from a more robust social safety net. Mass, or perhaps more accurately “hyper,” imprisonment then comes to replace social welfare. See Wacquant, Loic. *Prisons of Poverty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2009.

political prisoners as such are not required to follow—the imprisoned IRA members refused to wear any clothes at all. In protest, all they wore were wool blankets. After they were further neglected by the British government and violently abused by the prison officials, the IRA's systematic resistance escalated into the "no wash" protest, in which the prisoners refused to bathe, shave, or cut their hair, smeared their own excrement on the walls of their cells and funneled urine under the cell doors into the hallway. It's in the midst of this protest that the film begins. With little dialogue, the film presents some of these events that precipitated the next and final stage in the IRA's prison protest, the hunger strike, and the violence both inside and outside the prison, punctuated by two brief voiceovers appropriated from audio recordings of strident Margaret Thatcher.

The mounting tension of these events culminates in *Hunger* in a 23-minute long conversation—much of it presented in a single shot—between Michael Fassbender as Bobby Sands and Liam Cunningham as a visiting Catholic priest, in which they debate the morality of the strike. Though the IRA had previously organized prison hunger strikes before the events depicted in the film, those strikes failed to effect the desired results—political legitimacy and the eventual end to British occupation. Sands believes this new strike won't fail. He plans to systematically stagger the strikes so that the participants don't lose courage and will carry their starvations until death. Death haunts the hunger strike as one of its possible endings, and, for Sands, the most politically efficacious when mobilized correctly. Sands is prepared to starve himself to death for the IRA's cause. He argues that his death will be considered a murder, while the priest, believing that Sands's and the rest of the men's faculty for rational judgment is impaired by the squalor of their conditions of confinement, says that, as a representative of the Catholic church, he

considers it suicide. He says that Sands and the rest have lost their sense of reality and even their faith—since suicide is a mortal sin.

The two men's disagreement on this point resonates with Gillian Brown's critique of female anorexia nervosa in "Anorexia, Feminism, Humanism."<sup>4</sup> She believes that anorexia poses "representation" as a problem in and of itself, since the anorectic's view of herself is often radically different than others' views of her: "Her body is a text whose meaning she alone would legislate. Yet, like all texts, and perhaps even more so, this body, this text, inevitably gives rise to different readings."<sup>5</sup> Anorexia, in this formulation, "replicates" the problem of representation that faces all subjects. Accurate self-representation is, in a sense, impossible because of the "disparity between the subject's intentions and the meanings others make of them."<sup>6</sup> Later in the paper, Brown ties self-representation to self-possession: By keeping "her own accounting of herself [...] distant" from others, privileging her own perception over others', the anorectic attempts to assert her ownership of herself.<sup>7</sup> It can be argued that if self-representation is equivalent to self-possession, then the latter too is fraught, and that the self is always already possessed, at least partially, by the "meanings others make" of the self. If not representational and if therefore incapable of allowing the subject to possess herself, how does anorexia make meaning, and what does it mean? For Brown, the female anorectic asserts her self-possession by a non-representational paradox. She confounds the tenets of both Enlightenment humanism and second-wave feminism; she seeks the sort of self-hood via self-proprietorship that both humanism and feminism

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, Gillian, "Anorexia, Humanism, Feminism" *Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol 5, No 1, 1991, 189-215.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

value by *rejecting* the ideals of both points of view. She rejects humanism's ideals of accumulation and food, and also rejects feminism's ideals of community and resistance of social-cultural imperatives (in this case, the imperative to be thin).<sup>8</sup> Brown believes that the anorectic makes meaning and takes possession of herself through paradox and deconstruction. Anorexia is an embodied performative aporia that leads to the anorectic's literal disappearance. The meaning made is the denial of the conditions that make agential self-proprietorship possible; and the anorectic's assumption of personal agency disproves personal agency's legibility. She undoes these terms through a radical embodiment of the terms themselves, which leads to her own undoing. To put it crudely, she punctures a hole in the ship and then goes down with it.

The debate between Sands and the priest dramatizes this problem of personal agency that anorexia poses. During the debate, Sands rehearses the paradoxical meaning-making that he will later embody in his own hunger strike: he vehemently rejects the priest's accusation that he has lost his faith and asserts that it is, in fact, precisely because of his faith that he will starve himself to death. He has faith that it is incumbent upon him to take the necessary fatal step that others are too cowardly to make, and he has faith that it is his life's mission to do so. He recounts this story from his childhood: one day before a cross-country track meet, he and his teammates went exploring in the woods and discovered a suffering foal, wounded and half-submerged in a stream. While his friends stood around debating what to do, young Sands held the foal's head under the water and drowned it, putting it out of its misery. While the rest of the cross-country track team discursively dismantled the foal, Sands moved to enact the dismantling the discourse proposed. *I contend that the starvation and death of the hunger striker re-performs the dismantling of the subject*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 191-199.

*enacted by the state in legal discourse and on the prison threshold.* In other words, I agree with Sands that his death by self-starvation is a murder and not a suicide, and believe that his performance of his death was always already accomplished by the state by imprisoning him in HM Maze and denying his status as a political prisoner. Just as killing the foal was the performance of an accusation directed at his hesitating friends, so too is Sands's self-starvation a performance of an accusation directed at the state. The performance of hunger strike dramatically re-stages the state's subjection of the prisoner, paradoxically re-asserting the striker's personal agency by dramatizing his lack of it.

How does the hunger strike dramatize this problem of subjective agency? Performance theorist Patrick Anderson examines the questions "self-starvation" poses in relation to subjectivity in *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance*, broadening the durational refusal of food into a field all its own, considering the hunger strike on a line with other instantiations of anorexia and refusal, and comparing these scenes of resistance as they appear not only in the prison or detention center, but also in the clinic, the gallery, and the archive.<sup>9</sup> Anderson develops a re-figuration of hunger striking, anorexia nervosa, and aesthetic and religious fasting all as acts of "self-starvation," and uses theories of performance and performativity to situate these acts at the pivot point of subject-formation; what Michel Foucault calls *assujétissement*, translated here as "subjectivation." Invoking and imbricating the writings of Foucault, Althusser, Butler, Brecht, Lacan, Heidegger, and others, Anderson seeks "a kind of witnessing to subjectivation itself, and...to suggest that the practices of self-starvation...stage similar modes of undoing and intervention. Even as these practices involve performances that *subject* their practitioners (in

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson (2010).

both senses of the word), they also bear witness to the function of subjectivation...”<sup>10</sup> He writes toward a concept of resistance already embedded in authoritarian institutions that may still hold the potential to resist by enacting a critical witnessing of that already-embedded quality. Even as the hunger striker radically re-enforces his own subjugation to and in the prison, he bears witness to that scene of subjugation in his starvation.

This is all in service to articulating what Anderson calls the “politics of morbidity,[...] a model in which the subject and the state are entwined as coproductive, in which the specters of death and dying underwrite our most intimate experience of subjectivity, and in which mortality itself becomes a powerful mode of producing the very subjectivity whose final demise it will also eventuate.”<sup>11</sup> In his reiterations and extrapolations of Butler’s theories of gender performativity, he allows for a subject’s improvisation on and augmentation of his identity-forming performance, so that, though one is and always will be trapped in the necropolitical machine that is constituted by one’s behaviors and social performances and the state’s punitive technologies, one may “riff” on those behaviors and potentially perform a change in the machine. Anderson allows a little bit of hope for the subject in what otherwise might be a (literally) fatalistic theoretical model. By highlighting death’s discursive, embodied, and ideological presences as performative tropes, he bears witness to death’s potential to motivate and produce resistance and incite change. Prisons like HM Maze are major sites of performative morbidity, and therefore major sites for staging the subject’s resistance to the state’s oppressive logics. The performance of the hunger strike is one example of the subject assuming a sort of morbid agency in the hope of producing change, and, as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 83.

I will argue later, so are the performances constitutive of so-called zombie culture.

### ***Hunger, hunger, and Violence: Reading the Filmic Performance***

Reading McQueen's filmic (re)presentation of the hunger strike can provide a useful theoretical stage for examining how the strike performs. His background is as a fine artist making works like *Deadpan* (1997), which re-stages the house-fall stunt from Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), and his aesthetic is poetic, often juxtaposing the contemplative with the brutal. McQueen's films—the most recent of which, *12 Years A Slave*, won the 2014 Best Picture Oscar—reflect his thematic interest in duration and alternately collapsing and exploding space, evidenced in *Hunger* by scenes like the custodian sweeping urine down the prison hallway toward the camera. It's a long single take in which the character painstakingly sweeps the prison floor from very far away to very near. The hunger strike, in that it is durational and collapses the space of the body, is therefore ideal subject matter for McQueen's aesthetic.

The scene of the "haircut" is the first major act of violence the film presents to the audience directly, and it is also the first time that it presents the audience with Sands directly: it starts in a hallway lined with solid steel cell doors. Screwed into the walls next to the doors are clear plastic placeholders within which are letter-sized paper identification cards. A guard in a blue uniform and hat, a manila folder in hand, moves from door to door fastidiously removing the ID cards from their places and fitting them in his folder. The film cuts to the inside of one of the cells: two thin men, naked from the waist up with long matted hair and beards, their pale white skin smeared with feces, listen nervously to the sound of the guard's footsteps and the crisp flicks of the index cards. Their sinew tenses. They exchange words: "Get ready," one of them says. The

audience witnesses the embodied affective results of the Foucauldian biopolitical technologies of the prison—inasmuch as the ID cards represent “knowledge” of the prisoners. The two prisoners listen in edgy anticipation to the loud clang of a cell door sliding open, and the angry screaming of a fellow prisoner and the swearing guards that are dragging him down the hallway by his long hair to the bathroom. McQueen performs an audio-visual bait-and-switch, presenting the audience with the image of two figures while presenting the sound of another figure. The film’s images then deliver on the violence promised in the audio, and cut to the hallway. The naked man strikes out with his arms and legs wildly. The guards beat him, and force him down the hall. Bodies crash against the walls. The guards kick him to his knees, and present his bearded face to a man wearing a suit standing impassively in a doorway. The audience gathers that this is some sort of warden, making an inspection. The guards grab the naked man by his hair again and force him toward the bathroom. They shove him against the wall and punch him. One of the guards accidentally punches the concrete wall in the process and roars in pain. They push the man onto the tiled floor of the bathroom and retrieve a short wooden stool. They slam the man’s head down onto the stool, and the injured guard takes a pair of shears to his head, savagely and heedlessly snipping at hair and beard. Blood sprays when he misses and clips the struggling prisoner’s scalp. Then they bodily toss him into a bathtub filled with water and scrub him with a long-handled brush. We learn later that this man being snipped and scrubbed is Bobby Sands. In a sense, the character of Sands, at the moment that the image of prison violence enters the filmic frame, is born on film in the entrance of those images of violent acts. Though this scene occurs before the prisoners initiate the hunger strike that will eventually kill Sands and nine of his comrades, the scene marks the prison as a space of *waste*: if bodies are

not “wasting away” from starvation or the durational refusal of food, then those bodies are being “wasted” in the colloquial sense of the word meaning murdered or destroyed.

Joseph Roach, building on Georges Bataille in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, defines violence as “the performance of waste”:

To that definition I offer three corollaries: first, that violence is never senseless but always meaningful, because violence in human culture always serves, one way or another, to make a point; second, that all violence is excessive, because to be fully demonstrative, to make its point, it must *spend* things—material objects, blood, environments...; and third, that all violence is performative, for the simple reason that it must have an audience—even if that audience is only the victim, even if that audience is only God.<sup>12</sup>

The prison, therefore, according to this scene in the film, is the violent performative stage *par excellence*: The “point” HM Prison Maze makes is that the IRA are not political prisoners but criminal terrorists, blood is “spent” excessively in the beatings and the scissors slicing Sands’s scalp, and there are several audiences to this performance of waste—Sands, the other guards, the British and Irish populations, and even the audience watching the film. Sands, birthed on film in and alongside violence, is an exemplary performer of waste, and when he goes on to inflict great violence on himself via the hunger strike, he literally wastes away. His hunger strike performs the waste of his body via the durational waste of

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<sup>12</sup> Roach, Joseph, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 41.

his hunger. To durationally waste hunger means to repeatedly refuse to sate its appetite, and Sands and the other IRA hunger strikers, in rebuttal to the prison's performance of waste, excessively spend their hunger to prove a point to the British hegemony. By attending to its affects and effects, we see that this durational refusal is violent: a performance of waste. Wasted hunger results in pain, lack of strength, hallucinations, and eventually death.

However, the hunger strike's entrance into the film is signaled by non-violent imagery: In the extreme foreground, a floating white down feather, dreamily flitting in the air, and in the background, out of focus, Sands on a hospital bed wrapped in white sheets. This visual pun marks the violent effects of the performance with an aesthetic splendor; light suffuses the prison hospital room as "lightness" suffuses the starving body. As the film continues, McQueen develops the strike systematically, as if it were an argument, first showing Sands's willful duration of the fast in a short montage in which plate after plate of food is placed on his bedside table and then removed untouched. In the background his contorted and increasingly gaunt face writhes lethargically on the pillow in tormented inanition. This doubles the actor Fassbender's own durational refusal to eat, that, though not to the degree it affected Sands and his comrades, shrank his body mass to a visible and alarming extent, as evidenced in the film. McQueen then clinically presents the wounds and sores that fester on the hunger striker's skin as the prison doctor applies a creamy unction, his finger pressing gently into the bloody spots, making Sands twitch in pain. The skeletal Sands, hunched in a chair, tenderly caresses with bony fingers his ribs jutting under his pale skin. Finally, his gray skin now stretched tight over the crags of his cheekbones, Sands's glassy eyes grown impossibly huge in his hollow face scan aimlessly the room in which he will die, his visage now matching that of a corpse.

Sands's hunger—after 66 days, according to the film's after-titles—wastes his body into the decaying figure of *the living dead*. The image of the performance, presented with a complex mix of the realistic and the oneiric, offers a compelling figure of hunger as the privileged site for the prisoner's performance of resistance in the prison.

### **The Spread of the Zombie (Culture) Virus: Wasting Hunger Surrogated**

The rules of *The Walking Dead* universe are largely the same as in other zombie narratives: legions of human beings rise from death, hungry for flesh and devoid of rationality and motor function, and they can only be stopped if their brains are destroyed. To make matters worse, should a living human survive a bite from a zombie, he eventually dies from the "virus" and returns as a zombie. Surprising and gruesome encounters with the mutant munchers in addition to the brilliant makeup design of their gory, decomposing bodies provide no small amount of titillation for the viewer.

However, the franchise offers an interesting twist on the zombie genre. To be subject to undead transformation, one must not only be a victim to the bite of a virally infected "walker." Every living human body is *already* infected (somehow), automatically resurrecting into a flesh-eating ghoul moments after death unless head-pulverizing action is taken. This creates an added level of paranoia and dread, as well as raises new questions about what it means *to be* and *to become* a zombie, since the franchise figures mortality itself as a horrific curse. It exacerbates the sense of imprisonment Rick Grimes and the other survivors feel inside their penal fortress. While they remain relatively secure within the prison, they must periodically patrol the perimeter, puncturing the skulls of the crowding hordes of mindless zombies that threaten to topple the chain-link fences and invade the facility. Yet even if they were hypothetically

able to destroy them all, leaving a mountain of twice-dead cadavers as an additional barrier outside the prison fence, they would still have to fear their own inevitable deaths, after which they might walk again to consume (or be consumed by) loved ones and comrades. The zombie's wasted hunger is therefore not only contagion, but moves between bodies in a different way: through a performative mode that Joseph Roach calls surrogation.

The hunger on which converge the hunger strike, the zombie, and their respective performances exemplified by the scenes described in this paper, and the *proliferation* of this hunger in contemporary culture can be articulated by Roach's concept of surrogation. He defines it as the process by which cultural themes, tropes, and relations are repeated and multiplied in society:

[C]ulture reproduces and re-creates itself by a process that can best be described by the word *surrogation*. In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric...The process requires many trials and at least as many errors. The fit cannot be exact.<sup>13</sup>

Societies "reproduce" themselves by "electing," in a sense, individual elements to embody and enact the roles they deem necessary to their survival and future propagation. It does not solely describe the surrogate's agential embodiment of a given role, but also the generalized desire of a given community for the surrogate to assume that role. Surrogates are *chosen* to be/do as much as they make the choice themselves. This is

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<sup>13</sup> Roach, 2.

particularly useful when considering the surrogation of figures and subjects that are not typically thought of as having agency of their own, for example, a figure of hunger as the performance of waste, i.e. zombification. In *The Walking Dead*, the why or the how of the spread of zombification are irrelevant. Rather, zombification circulates between bodies through a chain of morbid surrogated performances: death, decomposition, resurrection, walking, and biting. So what then do these morbid performances mean?

In the context of the carceral, this hunger concomitantly surrogates the following: the intersecting consumption of the zombie and the hunger strike, and the consumption of the subject by the state. *The Walking Dead* depicts the prison as a sort of impregnable castle on the apocalyptic horizon and the apotheosis of waste. The zombies around the prison, feasting on human flesh, exemplify the performance of waste: it is violent, the zombie's hunger will never be sated, and, since the zombie is dead, the flesh it eats does not nourish. *The hunger striker can therefore be said to perform the zombific devouring of his own flesh: a consuming that doesn't nourish but only wastes away, only weakens, and only negates.* In fact, it can be said that the hunger striker surrogates the zombie and vice versa *vis a vis* the figure of hunger as wasted/wasting. Following Roach's three corollaries to the definition of violence as the performance of waste listed above, I believe that the statement the hunger striker makes is to reflect back onto the prison and the state the wasting of his body. The hunger striker makes himself a zombie just as the state makes its "negative persons"—to borrow Colin Dayan's term—into zombies with its prisons. Dayan, in *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*, argues that the "traditions of penalty" and the law's rituals

“transform persons into cadavers.”<sup>14</sup> Building on her brilliant and suggestive demonstration of the function of ritual in the law’s morbid remaking of its subjects, I believe that hunger strikers paradoxically perform resistance to this macabre “transformation” by manifesting its dramatic appearance on their bodies.

For my purposes, the zombie and its hunger also represent rich and complex figures of and for surrogation, particularly when examined through the carceral lens. The zombie was perhaps first conceived of in its contemporary iteration in the films of George Romero such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). The figure has far older antecedents, however, and can be traced back to racist discourse surrounding the African diaspora, specifically in Haiti, where it was purported that Voodoo practitioners raised the dead as their mindless slaves and cannibalized white interlopers.<sup>15</sup> This racial discourse is inscribed onto the zombie, though it has mutated over the years. For example, *Night of the Living Dead* features a black main character Ben (Duane Jones) who, through his resourceful ingenuity, survives a zombie onslaught only to be murdered in the end by a posse of white zombie exterminators. Also, in a clip from an episode of the television game show *Family Feud* hosted by Steve Harvey that recently went viral on YouTube, when asked to free associate one thing she knew about zombies, a white female contestant said, “They’re black.”<sup>16</sup> Her slip offers compelling

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<sup>14</sup> Dayan, Colin, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, xii.

<sup>15</sup> See Kee, Chera, “‘They are not men...they are dead bodies!’: From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again,” 9-23; and Degoul, Franck, “‘We are the mirror of your fears’: Haitian Identity and Zombification,” trans. Elisabeth M. Lore, 24-38; both from *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, New York: Fordham University Press, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> “Shut Up White Lady! Steve Harvey Tells Off ‘Black Zombie’ Contestant (Family Feud),” *YouTube*, 12 Dec 2013, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eLHG72iFlc>>.

testimony to the role race plays in the contemporary cultural conception of the zombie. Reading this inscription in tandem with critiques of the explosive rise of mass incarceration and the racial disparity therein—especially in the United States—by scholars like Angela Davis, Loïc Wacquant, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Michelle Alexander, and Marc Mauer, it can be argued that the recent representations of zombies surrogate the contemporary prisoner and, more specifically, the 1.3 million people of color currently incarcerated in the U.S., which is around 60% of the nation's total prison population. *The Walking Dead*, both graphic serial and TV show, has made this connection explicit by setting a major plotline within a prison's walls in the U.S. South—a region where notorious prisons such as Angola hold a special place in the American imaginary—but I believe the operation of surrogation tying the prison and the zombie penetrates all examples of zombie culture, from the novel and film franchise *World War Z* to the video game *Plants Vs. Zombies*.

The process of surrogation at work in the performance of zombie can of course be read in any number of different and sometimes contradictory ways, and one must take care to read the process carefully. Even the zombie's surrogation of the prisoner may be seen either as expressing a racist anxiety about the potential threat people of color pose to society-at-large, or as the symbolic justification for racism itself, which has seeded the phenomenon of "doomsday prepping." For example, Michael Jackson's music video for *Thriller* (1983) directed by John Landis, in which Jackson, made up as a zombie, performs with a horde of dancing living dead, was reenacted in 2007 by the prisoners of the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center (CPDRC) in the Philippines in another

YouTube viral video.<sup>17</sup> While it may be argued that Jackson's surrogation of zombie was made in an attempt to confront the burgeoning irruption of African American males into prison, the CPDRC video, as dance scholar J. Lorenzo Perillo argues, doubles a panoptic program of confinement and surveillance as millions of YouTubers adopt the point of view of the guards filming the dance from the tower.<sup>18</sup> These zombies reductively buttress the oppressive logics of incarceration. The performance of zombie is therefore useful for tyrants as well as for revolutionaries, as Richard Schechner noted about performance in general.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, for the performers of the "zombie walks" at Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and London, as examined by Rebecca Schneider in "It Seems As If...I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor," the zombie represents late late capitalism—"late" as in "deceased"—and a complicated imbrication of not only the precarious protestors themselves, but also the capitalists they are protesting:

[T]he protestors, acting zombie, intended to bounce zombieness back onto those who, classically, live off living labor without care for infrastructural means of accountability...[F]or OWS, the zombies are reflection machines, flexible theatres of the crowd, aimed to catch the visages of those who worship corporate wealth. The

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<sup>17</sup> Jackson, Michael, *Thriller*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOnqjkJTMaA>>; and "Thriller (original upload)," <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMnk7lh9M3o>>, both from *YouTube*, 12 Dec 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Perillo, J. Lorenzo, "'If I Was Not in Prison, I Would Not Be Famous': Discipline, Choreography, and Mimicry in the Philippines," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 4, 2011, 607–21.

<sup>19</sup> Schechner, Richard, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*, New York: Routledge, 1995, 1.

multitude of money-munching zombies marching on Wall Street, then, represent the few global hoarders themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Just as the prison hunger strike intends to dramatize and project the incarcerated protestor's oppression onto the prison apparatus, the performing OWS zombies intend to reflect back onto the capitalists the undead qualities of neoliberal citizen-subjectivity. The protestors perform a sort of political necromancy, summoning their own inanimate labor powers as staggering flesh-eaters to re-cast capitalism as diabolical contagion that disables huge populations in order to resuscitate capital for those "infected" by greed. In this instance, performing zombie offers a radical resistant potentiality.

What does the zombie provide the performers surrogating it, and why stage an intervention on this figure and this performance? By examining the figure of the zombie in relation to *Hunger* and the prison hunger strike more generally, we can problematize the neoliberal ideals of self-possession and self-proprietorship, and write toward these performances as offering testimony to the undoing and dissolution always already constitutive of these ideals. Recalling and re-appropriating Schneider's critique of OWS's zombie walks, the hunger striker can also be considered a "reflection machine." The zombie is a slave—to the necromancer in the Haitian Voodoo myth, and to its own insatiable hunger in the contemporary form—and the hunger striker is a subjugated weakling—unable to fight back physically because of his precarious state of starvation. Therefore, performing zombie is performing slave and performing hunger strike is performing subjugation, performances that reflexively and paradoxically reflect back onto the neoliberal ideological

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<sup>20</sup> Schneider, Rebecca, "It Seems As If...I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Winter 2012, 152-153.

stage its illegitimacy by asserting the performer's agential embodiment of his own figural enslavement and subjugation within and to that ideology. In short, zombies and hunger strikes carry the potential to hold the mirror up to the dominant political, cultural, and social realities, revealing that they are also enslaved and starving. These performances re-stage the subjects' precarity in the neoliberal state and rehearse the neoliberal state's precarity for the future.

## Conclusion

The prison, as painter Sandow Birk depicts in his 2000-2001 landscapes, *Prisonation: Visions of California in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, stands in an indelible position, not only in the contemporary cultural imaginary, but also as a visual reminder and reassurance of the state's presence. The hunger strike is a mode of resistance and protest that finds great purchase today in places like California, Guantánamo Bay, Russia, and even the streets of Washington D.C.,<sup>21</sup> and the zombie is a cultural trope whose popularity seems only to be increasing, evidenced in books, films, television shows, and in performances in everyday life. By pursuing a connection between these two phenomena, it's possible to offer critical testimony to the methods and modes by and in which repressive societal and cultural practices reproduce themselves in the neoliberal state. Reading zombies and hunger strikes through a performative comparative

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<sup>21</sup> *Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity: amplifying the voices of CA prisoners on hunger strike*, 12 Dec 2013, <<http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/>>; al-Alwi, Moath, "Guantanamo inmate: 'We will remain on hunger strike,'" *Aljazeera America*, 12 Dec 2013, <<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/10/15/hunger-strike-guantanamo.html>>; Butenko, Victoria and Laura Smith-Spark, "Ukraine's Tymoshenko ends hunger strike at pro-EU protestors' behest," *CNN*, 12 Dec 2013, <<http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/06/world/europe/ukraine-protests/>>; and Leitsinger, Miranda, "Fasting for immigration reform: Strikers go hungry in push for change," *U.S. News on NBCnews.com*, 12 Dec 2013, <<http://usnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/12/07/21795253-fasting-for-immigration-reform-strikers-go-hungry-in-push-for-change>>.

lens can reveal that these phenomena themselves offer critical testimony to these repressive conditions, and more specifically, to the repressive conditions constitutive of penalty.