



# **Pandemics and 'Zombies': How to Think Tropical Imaginaries with Cinematic Cosmologies**

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## **Abstract**

The tropics in occidental imaginaries are typically coded as either edenic paradise or as hell. It is in the latter mode that they come to be linked with zombies, diseases, and questions relating to the autonomy of the human body. In this article I first summarise historical connections between colonialism and the tropics as expressed through dealings with disease set against a background of Christian-secular cosmology. I then further think the issue with two films that approach disease and the tropics through the zombie, which I conceive of as radical heteronomy. One film, *Zombi 2*, is a Euro-American engagement with the tropics as imagined from a temperate zone and a Christian tradition. The other, *Cemetery of Splendor*, is a Thai film that engages notions of disease and the autonomy of the human body from within the tropics and a Buddhist imaginary. I tie these questions of disease, 'zombies' and the tropics in with more general discussions of cosmologies, including those of the moderns. The displacement of modern ontological certainty (which is imagined through the zombie and conditioned by cultural and ideological imagination) opens a space for engaging the problem of a pandemic with notions of subjectivity and corporeality. An underlying thematic throughout this article is an argument for the importance of the cinema image in dealing with bio/socio/political issues. Here, in this translation of the cinematic world into discourse we are engaged at the intersection of tropics, disease, bodies and heteronomy.

**Keywords:** cinematic cosmologies, bio-social imaginaries, corporeal heteronomy, zombie cinema, tropical imaginaries, Buddhist imaginaries

Imagine two films, from different eras and film-making traditions. One ends with terrifying visions of an unstoppable disease transforming all human bodies at the very centre of empire. The other closes with a series of scenes: slowed down bodies, dream machines, communal sports in transforming landscapes – and an uncertain gaze into the distance. The argument presented in this paper follows the entanglements of our world, and as it progresses demonstrates how seemingly different entities – such as colonialism, film, bodies, cosmology and zombies – relate, and how these entities help us to think through issues such as disease and pandemics. And, hopefully, this thinking sheds light onto why the Euro-American film had to end apocalyptically with the tropical disease arriving in the metropolis to engulf the bodies of empire; while the Thai film could morph into transformed landscapes and a faraway gaze.

While the relation to the problem of pandemics may at times appear strained, it is because the thinking here is situated in cosmologies which conceptually precede pandemics as natureculture events. By not only showing that uncontrolled spreading disease doesn't necessarily have to be conceived of as a pandemic, but also how the escalation of tropical illness into something larger is built into Occidental cosmological imaginary, I seek to open up a space to think about why contemporary Western societies struggle to culturally innovate and produce more appropriate social imaginaries for dealing with epidemic and pandemic events (which, after all, are not unprecedented).

In order to open up this space for alternative notions of pandemic I will draw on two different yet relatable films, and think bio-social imaginaries through the problem of corporeal autonomy as it connects to disease, society, and the (non-)escalation into a pandemic. Drawing on the concept of the *zombie* enables us to think this issue at the borders of differing cosmologies. Here, a threefold constellation emerges: first, an account of – to put it in the words of Marshall Sahlins (1996) – a mainstream “Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology,” and the consideration of the two films as condensed cosmological propositions. One film, *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979), originating in a non-tropical country but filmed in the tropics, speaks of a colonial subconscious marked by Catholicism. The other, *Cemetery of Splendor* (รักที่ขอนแก่น, literally, Love in Khon Kaen, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015) emerges from a tropical country and is concerned with, among other things, the bio-social weight of historical state-making violence and the ways in which to deal with it today. The former then includes, both in its filmmaking and narrative, a movement to and from the tropics, while the latter only moves from the tropics as a complete artefact; as the finished film it can then enter non-tropical worlds and through such encounters generate thought. On this note, both inquire into the issue of how the past impinges on the present,

articulated through bodies and health. In this paper, I further tease out these below-the-surface differences and similarities at play between the two films.

It should be noted that, contrary to the Italian gore master's work, the Thai director's films are not commonly categorised as horror. This is due to each film's formal conception regardless of the reality that both are populated with ghosts, the dead, disease and other common horror tropes – and are thus involved in thinking similar problems. Analogically, the sciences and humanities similarly actualise related questions within different contexts and with different tools, which likewise does not necessarily make their activities unrelated. The scientific logic I follow here is not one bound to representation, but one involved in problem-solving through generating new types of questions, and imaginaries – here linked by the concept of the zombie.

The figure of the zombie in occidental imagery comes to occupy the space between the implicit ideal of autonomy and the historical reality of heteronomy. As a concept, the zombie is no longer figurative, so I will not look for zombie-like shapes in the world, but rather for a node that connects at least some of the issues in the way zombie does by holding seemingly disparate things or concepts in relation: body / mind, centre / periphery, history / future / present, freedom / slavery, free will (autonomy) / external control (heteronomy), health / illness, temperate rationality / tropical proliferation. Importantly, there have been no zombies per se in Thai worlds (Ancuta, 2016a). There are figures, however – bodies that think some of the aforementioned fault-lines – in other ways. These fit smoothly into a minimal definition of the zombie beyond phenomenal appearance: a body with no evidence of autonomy; a sort of blank, devoid of consciousness.

Zombies are aporetic. In the Western world, they destabilise seemingly distinct metaphysical categories (Lauro & Embry, 2008, p. 91). They come to be limit-points between human and no-longer-human bodies – entities where autonomy deteriorates into a total lack of free-will beyond any hope of regaining some original, taken-for-granted normativity. Because they are not simply reducible to any pre-established categories, making of them a concept enables ingenious ways of connecting and, concomitantly, thinking. As limit-points, zombies operate on the borders where disease (as a manageable event) transforms into a pandemic (as something exceeding manageability). They cannot be contained. The Christian-secular cosmology is rarely able to engage this space, built as it is around radical difference between autonomy and heteronomy, which is why it is necessary to experiment with other worlds in order to think the unthinkable. Here, I demonstrate how and why films can help do exactly that.

## On Using Cinema to Engage the Ineffable

Social imaginaries are intangible and ineffable. Present, yet absent. They structure and co-constitute reality, but when trying to grasp them discursively, they tend to disappear. Often this is because, while being collective, they are actualised through individuation. Their histories are intimately tied to hegemonic productions, or perhaps more accurately, stabilisations (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015, p. 4) within specific geohistories and biospheres. Moreover, imaginaries have an aesthetic dimension; they compose the surface of things. What appears does so from a process of differentiation, which includes even the most self-evidently non-cultural phenomena such as the human body. Thus, I engage bio-social imaginaries. Research has too often been focused *on* words and *through* words, while images and materiality in general tend to be thought about. Since the two orders are different, translation between images and words is necessary. What is not necessary is the hierarchy between word and image. In this instance, I can reorder the direction of thought. First, I present a translation from imagery to discourse; secondly, thought based on discourse. This article is a possible solution to the following problem: *what if one were to recode this order and attempt to think with images (and then translate into words)?* Thus, the aim is not to point to a film and show how it is an ideological codification of a reality beyond cinema, but to take (cinematic) imagery as at the same level of realness as other sensory realms. That is, to think through a more general problem with cinematic imagery, instead of having already thought through the problem in order to compare films with a pre-established image. The question therefore becomes, *how can the worlds created in cinema be of use for thinking through problems such as pandemics?*

Films do more than express a cultural and imageric unconscious, they also make it graspable and transform it. The cinematic apparatus operates materially to make what is present (yet imperceptible for the human sensorial apparatus) enter into consciousness and discourse. It works on those aspects of reality that seemed given but now become malleable; that which Walter Benjamin (1980) referred to as the 'optical unconscious'. The conditions for entering consciousness for these constituents of reality appeared only with camera technology. This includes, by extension of Benjamin, the cultural images formed historically that come to be our second nature. Differing technics at the intersections of power and history create different worlds, worlds that are very real, but also conditioned by history and localised natures. We are now squarely in the field of the post-human: humans as co-constituted by the non-human, including technologies, concepts and images. Here the speed of technological innovation increases and life worlds transform faster, and with them, following Benjamin (2002, p. 104), modes of human perception.

Meanwhile in the sciences, research is (often tacitly) focused on producing new entities for this world. This activity tends to be discursively hidden as science commonly remains tied to finding adequate representations of the world. In a way the products of science have a ghostly existence, as their very real role in producing nature is routinely disavowed. And this occurs by an epistemological slight-of-hand. (N)ature is coded as preceding the human, who belongs to the domain of (C)ulture. This figuration would have human animals incapable of changing (N)ature, despite the reality that entities (re)making nature continue to be produced ever more intensely. In one of his early works, Bruno Latour (1993) termed these entities *hybrids*. Media theory, interested as it is in the medium (that which is in-between) as well as Science & Technology Studies (STS), creates tools to engage precisely those activities that often go ignored, even when those activities prove central to the processes of generating objects (whether material or semiotic/cultural). Hence, such approaches often tend to engage what is called the material-semiotic (Lury, 2012), and clear a path out of the cosmological limits present within Christian-secular worlds.

Keeping this in mind, on the following pages I will engage pandemics as problems related to and co-constituted by colonial tropical imaginaries through two films that I take as sources of and for theory. As such, these pages are themselves acts of theory-fiction (Fisher, 2018). There is no world before techno-culturally constituted images; they are always already part of the world, and humans are constituted within such worlds.<sup>1</sup> The world is a process of fictionalisation, one that happens differently in different places. Euro-American cinematic codes are quite evidently globally dominant and bring about a certain unity (or at least illusion thereof); as European colonial history transformed into American capitalist hegemony, occidental products – including concepts and films – travel here more easily than those from elsewhere. And in traveling, they change through the establishing of new connections by entering new contexts (Tsing, 2005). Here, I am interested in how each of the two cinematic artefacts engages a creative transformation of these mostly unconscious codifications of (the historical layering of) tropical imagery. I confront these codifications as they are created in the geo-cultural position I find myself in, namely that of temperate Europe. What links the topics is the concept of the zombie insofar as it theorises the fault-lines between heteronomy and autonomy. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1994) I take concepts to be composed, connective and subject to change as they connect to other concepts. Hence, I will engage how the zombie also changes when it connects to a Christian-secular cosmos (via a specifically Catholic film) and a more recent, Buddhist-

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1 Note that Said's *Orientalism* is precisely about how Europeans have constructed not just discourse, but images of the Other that tend to be taken as depictions of the Oriental real, even if all the employed codes are taken from Occidental sources and have only a tendentious relation to any reality out there. This does not take away the reality-making power of these images, indeed, for Europeans they are reality and because of Occidental military power they have very real effects on the places they are thought to refer to: "Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (1979, p. 5).

Animist one. With the help of cinematic imageries, I experimentally link concepts to different cosmologies (Hui, 2017). This linkage allows me to transmute the context at play within the two films into more expansive, cosmological accounts.

Cinema is an interesting technology, insofar as it enables us to reframe and slow down ever-changing reality – to make part of the flow of imaginaries concrete, graspable, and thus changeable in a quasi-controlled way. It renders possible the constitution of new realities (Deleuze, 1989). And, by virtue of being repeatable (albeit differentially with each localised projection), films enable an experimental attitude toward the critical creation of such imaginaries. What contemporary reality makes possible, through the globalisation of networks, is the coming together of vastly different objects (such as movies from different traditions). These encounters bring about new combinations, open new horizons by bringing awareness to how certain codes are just that: conventions that could be different. The choice of an Italian and a Thai film is not entirely accidental. The former thinks through the colonial legacy of tropical imaginaries that remain dominant even today, about forty years after the film's premiere. It helps me situate myself in the world, given that all thinking and acting is situated and objectivity resides in acknowledging and articulating one's position in the world (Haraway, 1988). The Thai film makes it possible to enact a difference within this framework, partially because my general research focus is on the Thai Buddhist tradition. Translation from different media spheres is a creative and daunting task, and the descriptions of scenes from the films aim at integrating imageries into discursive thought, all the while maintaining that the images themselves do something different than my quasi-ethnographic transcriptions of them. In order for all this to appear, I must first describe what I take to be common Euro-American imaginations of the tropics. Since – to playfully paraphrase the iconic anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1992, p. 10) – it matters what images we use to think other images with.

## **A Particular Tropicology of the Moderns**

The retrovirus connected to AIDS, as is well known, emerged only in the recent past within spaces of intensified contact between humans and non-humans, amid losses of biodiversity (Quammen, 2012). More often than not, these zones are found within the tropics where biological life is both more dense and highly differentiated, and which offer a plethora of resources for the recurring of modes of expansive capitalism from the temperate zones of the Global North. Resource extraction meanwhile leads to radically reshaped landscapes and, more often than not, to a reduction in the distance between human and non-human habitation. This correspondingly intensifies the transference and spread of ever-emerging, new or variant forms of disease. If life itself is anything, it is an overflowing creativity of organisms seeking to sustain their being for as long as possible. Many have little direct import on human organisms, many are



directly beneficial; while some – those commonly understood as diseases – are actively detrimental. At times, the transformation from beneficial to detrimental is not so much a question of substance, but of quantity. Clear borders between health and disease break down, as well as between body and not-body. After all, by now many of us will have gotten used to seeing and thinking one's body as also made up of allegedly foreign entities such as bacteria. Most readers will at least be aware of how vaccinations work. Taken philosophically, they act as a *pharmakon*; the status of which as either cure or poison is undecidable. Diseases and remedies, then, form in relation to other entities. As HIV travelled and continues to travel, it comes to interact also with social and imaginary bodies, not just organic and pharmacological ones. But, as Paula A. Treichler, pointed out: the “AIDS epidemic is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification” (1999, p. 11). Highlighting such research clarifies the connections and mutual affections between different spheres, including the entanglements with cultural imaginaries. As part of these relations, cinema offers itself as an experimental machine, for the images produced with the apparatus can express a cultural and historical unconscious in a way that makes it graspable for thought and discourse. Cinematic imaginaries, although habitually associated with a locality, in general draw on codes and images from a global film history; this aspect is especially significant for films made in places other than the most hegemonic countries.

The imaginary of the tropics and of disease in the West today is intimately tied to the colonial past and neocolonial present. Among the many figures that express this within popular culture is that of the zombie. By forming it into a more fully-fledged concept, the zombie becomes something particularly useful for contemporary thought as it draws together customarily disparate elements in a way other figures associated with disease cannot. To be precise, the *zombi* is an entity historically formed within Haitian *vodou* practices as a combination of various factors, some of them originating in West African *vodun* (Rath, 2014; Dillon, 2019). It is still articulated for us, Western knowledge makers, through other practices than those it emerged in, and should not be haphazardly conflated. The zombie meanwhile is the conceptual articulation that, while based in *zombi* history (or rather the encounter of Haitian and hegemonic Euro-bourgeois worlds) is a related but not entirely identical entity. As a concept it has no referential functioning in relation to the world. The *zombi* have de facto existence, at least as far as I – who has not lived with *vodou* practitioners but who can consult relevant literature (Montgomery, 2019) – can tell. Zombies of popular culture accordingly really exist, but they do so differently. The film scholar Nicole Brenez (1998) approaches bodies as something to be constructed, where the organic body most of us habitually inhabit, is just one possibility among others. This renders the organic body into something that is not just historical, but always partly imaginary. What is possible in lived bodies (qua assemblages), after all, differs in history/time and

culture/place. Culture is onto-epistemological: or as some like to term it, culture is *natureculture*. The *zombi* becomes something different in various ethnobiological realities; keeping in mind that what is commonly considered biology is also an ethnobiology – that of occidental science (Anderson et al., 2011). Contemporary anthropological and sociological research methods have made it possible to perceive how European biology became popularised specifically within the colonial reality of 19th century England (Strathern, 2017). Further, the very formation of biological taxonomy (Tsing, 2005) and the biological human (Haraway, 1989) was an extrapolation of Christian cosmology – a cosmology which simultaneously disavowed the agency of indigenous peoples constitutive in the creation of the field. All of this is connected to Christian-coded tropes of (N)ature, wherein tropics oscillate between paradise and hell. The human body, famously, is one that devolves from perfection in paradise to imperfection in and as history. And eventually, with the Enlightenment transcoding of medieval debased cosmology, the image of the normativised “healthy” body takes the place of the fallen one. A body that is only secondarily diseased, but which – once encountering the undecidable status of the tropics as both paradise and hell – demands to be rethought. Engaging cosmological imaginaries that do not immediately reterritorialize biomedical research onto variations of the Christian body – a practice which (to me) detracts quite a substantial part of the potential of scientific practice – opens possible paths beyond these ingrained, dualist, exclusionary cosmologies. To paraphrase Deleuze's *Spinoza* (1990): we don't know yet what a body can do. Bodies circulate among cinematic imaginaries in the widest possible sense, just as bodies become with different media spheres.

## The Zombie between Colonialism and Tropical Disease

“The tropical diseases posed an immediate and pressing problem: 'Could the white races colonise the tropics?' Or would they be unable to do so because of the hostile environment”? (Lock & Nguyen, 2010, p. 149). Tropical disease is intimately linked with colonial expansion and the making docile of bodies for capitalist production. European bodies in all their variety were, for a long time, unable to sustain themselves in the tropics. The solution to this problem is tied to both slavery and later, as well as concurrently, indentured servanthood, technoculture, and the remaking of worlds through material intervention. This remaking transformed the tropics into something liveable for (at least the minimal amount of) European bodies required to stabilise the flow of goods and energy from the South to the North (Headrick, 1981; Curtin, 1998; Schiebinger, 2004). Disease was thus to be eradicated from the tropics – but more precisely, what was being produced was a reality from which human bodies could gain a more robust independence from the environment.<sup>2</sup> The organisation of knowledge

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<sup>2</sup> The effect of vaccines and Western medicine on non-white bodies being incidental and still very much contested, as we see with pharmaceutical companies and their ongoing knowledge extraction from indigenous



around autonomy, the pre-philosophical supposition that humans are autonomous, effectuated material realities wherein some privileged bodies actually became, in a sense, more autonomous (by virtue of no longer being as affected by the different tropical diseases). The implementation of networks of medicinal institutions, the gradual eradication of certain dangerous species (the negative effects of chemicals coming to haunt reality only with a delay) and similar reality-building material interventions created the conditions for experiencing a body as largely autonomous, only secondarily prone to illness. What was at a time a position tenable only by ardent idealists eventually became self-evident for life as lived by the privileged. For a materialist such as myself, embodied experience may very well be one of autonomy (at least if one was raised in a society that presupposes such a concept), all the while remaining heteronomous in material reality (to be discursively constructed through scientific means) – ontologically, bodies are never fully heteronomous, but constituted differently according to variable material-semiotics. The reality of experienced autonomy that so comes to be, requires the reorganisation of flows toward imperial centres and the paths that lead there, which include modernising science and medical infrastructure. However, as is well known, not all bodies in the tropics are granted access to said infrastructure. One cannot thus say that the tropics have simply become more like temperate zones, insofar as they support the experience of self as autonomous and disease as the incursion of an outside. Other bodies complexify such a description. The very positionality of non-privileged bodies as not fully inside the material reality of medical infrastructures or, less materially, a Cartesian cosmology, enables the understanding of local reality as multiple and to discursively extract alternative, critical descriptions of the conditions for bodies in the tropics. Lock and Nguyen explicitly point out the intertwining of biomedicine and the imperial project (Lock & Nguyen, p. 146ff.); while Achille Mbembe singles out quinine in an example that demonstrates how colonial networks make certain biomedical realities possible in order to increase “the white man’s capacities to acclimatize to the tropics” (2019, pp. 23-24). What is articulated in these biomedical histories is that the condition which seemingly granted autonomy for privileged bodies also spelled the reduction of autonomy for the exploited. However, tropical diseases such as malaria remain stark reminders of the limits of such autonomy, contra Enlightenment thought and imaginaries that presuppose a conceptual and real autonomy. I propose here that the zombie articulates this gap between implicit cultural presuppositions (autonomy-granting order) and real-world problematics (autonomy-reducing exploitation) in excess of the tools that the Western tradition I work in (and seek to transform) offer. The point is not to contest the scientific creation of medicines, the power of which can be tested; rather, I want to make explicit the commonly suppressed connection between biomedicine and colonialism enabled through the substantivist conception of

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practices without any concomitant reciprocity when it comes to formalised medicine (See especially Schiebinger, 2009, for a critical discussion).

man as biologically, simply, “there”. Fear of exotic disease is not merely metaphorical of the fear of non-white bodies; it is also very literal, as there remain figures lurking in the world we are not or cannot be accustomed to. Even as the most privileged person with access to all the healthcare in the world, in going to the tropics one might still get infected; one’s life may become radically transformed into a being full of dependence on others and technology. And exotic disease can also infect from the periphery; the colonised tropics to the centre of the colonial metropolis – for now, at least. Probably forever.<sup>3</sup> Such events become coded as pandemics and Lucio Fulci’s 1979 film *Zombi 2* enables us to grasp their relation with Christian cosmology.

### Catholic Zombi(e) Apocalypse

*Darkness. A shape, barely outlined, fills most of the frame. To the left, an out of focus green background, light giving shape to a piece of fabric. A hand is raised into the frame, turns a gun straight at me. Drums beating faintly somewhere in the background. Counter image. A body wrapped in white cloth raises itself. Haltingly, miraculously. I see the gun, barrel deliberately turning. A shot. The head explodes as the torn cloth exposes red, fleshy insides, now hanging out. The mass reverberates from the impact. The camera lingers on the gore. It insists on the horror as an objective witness of that which rationality cannot grasp. Back to the gun, that other source of all pervasive all pervasive in the American cinema, the one Fulci at times seems to lampoon. It is slowly lowered as I am zoomed out to the dark shape of a body inside a tropical hut. Paradise seems already lost. No face is visible. All is lit from the back, the outside. I am in the dark. The human soul, the integrated body, has no place here. “The boat can leave now. Tell the crew.” Abrupt cut to black. Zombie, the alternative title. Pumping beat jolts into existence. Somewhere between synthesizer and heartbeat. All is already mediated by technology. The titles commence, engulfed by hauntingly melancholy music. The beat becomes part of the tapestry. The music transforms its affectivity into a pressing expectation that something cosmic will occur. Or has it already?*

The Catholic-Italian filmmaker and medicine dropout Lucio Fulci’s output is entrenched in the horrors of the flesh, where the organic body rarely holds onto its optimal contours. These figures often take on a muddy, boggy quality. Their borders less distinct. The insides of vertebrate organisms take over the skin. This is also very literal cinema, an excess of gore, for which Fulci is known. In these works, the temporariness

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<sup>3</sup> As a side note, this reframes the narrative trope of Amerindian bodies as being especially prone to disease, through which their active and metaphysically motivated extermination at the hands of Europeans becomes merely an unintended consequence, perhaps made most famous through the misinformed work of Jared Diamond. The white man will do all he can to rid himself of culpability in the perpetration of extractive capitalism based on racial hierarchies. As it becomes ever clearer that civilisation is barbarism, it becomes the role of Godlike Nature to do the dirty work for him. Alas, feminist and other critical work in science studies keep showing the intertwining of nature and culture, driving the God of the white man, the one who could always be referenced for any imperial project, hopefully finally out of History and Nature, present and future.

of the vessel that is the body, is to be perceived sensually, not intellectually. “Bodies simply live and die, but the soul truly lives through Christ. Christ’s own suffering is a focal point in that God became flesh and thus experienced all of the suffering that this corruptible, sinful flesh is equated with. As Paul says, ‘the wages of sin is death,’ and it is this sinful death-world of pain, suffering, and decay from which Christ saved us through his sacrifice” (Moreman, 2018, p. 103). Fulci insisted that his work was not to be taken as social commentary (Moreman, 2018, p. 76) and watching this cinema of little narrative but much visceral sense, it becomes surprising that anybody would insist otherwise. This is especially the case for his Lovecraftian phase from the late 70s to the early 80s, during which the imaginaries put together lack any redemption, any sense of possible escape from the base senselessness of the world. One might take them as prime examples of the baroque in Walter Benjamin’s conception: the material world, including bodies, disintegrates into pieces that can never be fully part of any unity; hence Benjamin focuses on the role of corpses in the *Trauerspiel* (Moreman, 2018, pp. 235ff.). Corpses bring close the horror of being a body, the heaviness of corporeal existence – a very Catholic thing indeed. Here is not so much a perversion of resurrection (as the zombie, the undead often come to be), but rather a refusal of resurrection as these brown corpora appear to be made of the earth. And in *Zombi 2*, this perversion is clearly articulated through the ambivalent status of tropical paradise as, in this place, very real infestation transforms bodies.<sup>4</sup> Physical, maggoty, from the earth, the underneath. Zombies here are not articulated as slave bodies cannibalized by colonial masters, or relatedly as images of social death (Dalton, 2018); what is put forward is apocalyptic transformation, limitless contagion. In a dualist world, where body and soul are essentially different, there is no check on the terrors of always already sinful flesh. Echoes of this ring through the common words employed to describe radical contagion: *Epidemia*, “Upon People”; *Pandemia*, “All People”. Disease comes from outside the human. As it makes its way into organic and social bodies, all people become othered in the baroque underbelly of modernity. In this Catholic world, a body is already that other, as it was enacted in the very origins of humanity as told in the Biblical story of the Fall; which makes man the origin of evil (or at least the co-origin, depending on the status given to the devil). Humanity becomes inherently wicked, even corporeally disposed to evil: “Man cannot not sin, as Augustine said” (Sahlins, 1996, p. 396). This is more than a mere misfortune, as in foundational myths of other realities, it is constitutive: “Bodies simply live and die, but the soul truly

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4 Lucio Fulci makes his understanding of Paradise and Hell very explicit in discussing another of his films: “[M]y idea was to make an absolute film, with all the horrors of our world. It’s a plotless film: a house, people, and dead men coming from The Beyond. There’s no logic to it, just a succession of images. The Sea of Darkness, for instance, is an absolute world, an immobile world where every horizon is similar. I think each man chooses his own inner hell, corresponding to his hidden vices. So I am not afraid of Hell, since Hell is already in us. Curiously enough, I can’t imagine a Paradise exists, though I am a Catholic - but perhaps God has left me? - yet I have often envisaged Hell, since we live in a society where only Hell can be perceived. Finally, I realize that Paradise is indescribable. Imagination is much stronger when it is pressed by the terrors of Hell” (Schlockoff, 1982, p. 54).

lives through Christ. Christ's own suffering is a focal point in that God became flesh and thus experienced all of the suffering that this corruptible, sinful flesh is equated with. As Paul says, "the wages of sin is death," and it is this sinful death-world of pain, suffering, and decay from which Christ saved us through his sacrifice" (Moreman, 2018, p. 103). Sahlins notes this dualism remains constitutive of modernity: "Still, God was merciful. He gave us Economics. By Adam Smith's time, human misery had been transformed into the positive science of how we make the best of our eternal insufficiencies, the most possible satisfaction from means that are less than our wants. It was the same miserable condition envisioned in Christian cosmology, only bourgeoisified, an elevation of free will into rational choice, which offered a more cheerful view of the material opportunities afforded by human suffering. The genesis of Economics was the economics of Genesis" (Sahlins, 1996 p. 397). Fulci's film radicalizes the constitutive paradox within the integration of a rational soul and the fallen body, conceptually linked to the inanimate. Treating the organism as merely dead flesh was central in the emergence of modern medicine. Much psychology, not just in its pop variations, continues to locate the self in the mind or the brain, as mere structural variants of the soul (McKinnon 2005; Ohnuki-Tierney 1994; Lock-Farquhar 2007). Common sense remains proudly Cartesian. Healing here becomes located in the ephemerality of some inner space of a human, not in the reorganisation of social ties and material conditions. The Enlightenment self becomes exposed in Fulci's radicalised Catholic cinema as the projection of the soul onto the body, always exceeded by it. However, consciousness is – as contemporary critical research keeps showing – the mere tip of the iceberg of complex entanglements. In the film it becomes clear that intentional action is useless in the course of the world; little wonder when the whole world has changed. The petrifying terror experienced by the characters shocks their bodies into paralysis. They cannot move, even as the infested steadily approach. The body is already beyond control of the mind, already disassociated. There is no escaping the horrors of disease and decay.

*A boat, the skyline of New York barely visible through its sails. The blues of a light ocean now render the image. Brightness, sunlight, daylight. The vessel advances to the left, swaying, almost directionless. As the camera-eye tilts to follow the swaying movement I am made aware of boats abandon. Immediately, I connect this to an earlier statement, bringing to mind the crew's uncanny disappearance. Calming sounds of the sea, of waves rocking the boat. From all kinds of half-possible camera angles the boat is constructed as being by itself, the tows and sails wantonly move against the azure seas and skies. Now a clear framing against the iconic skyline. Detritus seen on the deck, trash moving as the boat continues to sway. Gradually, images integrate into the world of New York City. Picture perfect postcard associations are mobilised. (And will continue to be once the story moves back to the tropics: diving, clear waters, sunlit palm havens). Beneath the beauty lies death and decay. Not quite*

*a full apocalypse of course; rather, radical otherness, as zombies continue to move. Something other lurks beneath these ideals. "Yeah, she looks abandoned. The only question is, why?" remarks a presumed representative of the harbour patrol. As officers scramble on board they encounter chaos but no real clues. Something is afoot; one of them, given the privilege of a point of view shot, notices millipedes on the piano. Suddenly a grotesque body crawls into the space, the shocked officer is inexplicably overcome by it's slow strength, as if predestined to perish. As he rips away part of the body's flesh, we see his face, confused and desperate, his neck gets bitten by the body. Fragmented editing as another encounter follows. The camera unexpectedly leaves behind clear continuity as lens changes produce dizzying hypersubjectivism. On the deck, the other cop shoots the figure as it approaches him. Repeatedly. Only the thrust of the shots appears to redirect the body as it is hurled into the sea. The sun flares behind the skyscrapers of the city, and the image commonly associated with tourism takes on a dark undertone, regardless of its surface pleasures. This cannot be the end of the zombie. And immediately I am thrown into a journalist office, bustling, working, the sun being kept out by shades. The white walls and desks make the red and blue bits pop. There was blood, now there is plastic.*

Here it started in the tropics. A witty and consequential inversion of a more common beginning in the cosmopolitan centre that can be linked to the reorganisation of perception enacted by research on plantations in the Caribbean and their links to the emergence of industrial capitalism. "As Sidney Mintz has argued, sugarcane plantations were the model for factories during industrialization; factories built plantation-style alienation into their plans" (Tsing, 2016, p. 40). As seen from the tropics, European modernity becomes something other. As seen from the tropics, the incursion of the Americas by zombies becomes something other. Fulci creates a film as if drenched in tropicalia, he does not mobilise the darkness of expressionist imagery; if anything the camera actualises almost documentary realism in its insistence on wide frames and over-lit scenes. Sun and summer are not exactly the opposite of darkness, they are merely something that has not yet become what it is destined to be. Fulci will consistently draw on clichéd images of tropical paradise, including the overt sexualisation of female bodies basking in the sun or under water. But all are idyllic activities to be touched by the d(r)ead. A zombie, from which a female diver makes a lucky escape, attacks a shark and bites off a chunk of its flesh. Non-human nature isn't safe either. Images of decay and death recur. Bodies full of blood and pus, as if turned inside out, populate this world. Even the nominally healthy are usually shown to be sweating and unkempt. The tropics are a space where human bodies suffer, where any easy sense of autonomy goes to die. They are a space where white bodies filled with hubris come, certain of their autonomy, only to bring back with them unknown terrors.



The island where much of the film takes place has a clear hierarchy. The white doctor making experiments, “doing science”, is indisputably the most powerful person. His wife is shown in their luxurious house which, if not for her death through a zombie attack, would be any colonial tourist's dream. Meanwhile the Afro-Caribbean natives are poor, and dying of this mysterious disease. They, unlike the white characters, are never shown to be able to go back and forth from the island. Unless, that is, they become zombies. The colonial situation is laid out concisely, without the necessity of words. The doctor, later shown to be the person in the first image of the film, further links the themes of disease, tropics and zombies. “Fulci’s zombie films not only pick up on the idea that the colonial encounter is a medical encounter, but medical power is always linked to the supernatural – and sovereign – power to raise the dead” (Thacker, 2015, p. 37). The construction of paradisiacal (N)ature is deployed to overcode the reality of the Americas having been inhabited before colonisation, and to obscure the fact that America's indigenous peoples had long been shaping the landscape (just not in the ways Europeans were able or willing to notice). This overcoding draws heavily on Christian cosmology and imagery. The Fulci film, critically, does so in respect to its potential for perversion. After all, the zombie in a Christian context is a perversion of the rite of communion (Moreman, 2018, pp. 93ff.). Here, the land from which the zombie springs becomes part of the inversion. Paradise becomes hell. In the world of Fulci's variant of Catholicism, paradise has always been hell.

The zombie thus emerged from the tropics, where the (N)ature that whites encountered was ever more than the paradise imagined. A rift opens between Nature as paradise and purity, and tropics as biological excess and hell. The zombie then – as approached through the generally Christian structuring of modern cosmology at the crossroads of humanity and paradise, and specifically Catholic practices relating the finite human body and the infinite body of God through consumption – enables us to productively explore the laden history of European colonialism without losing its cosmological specificity. In particular, exploring this issue through the concept of the zombie makes it possible to link general attitudes toward medicine, health and the fears of tropical disease (more often than not linked to human bodies arriving from warmer lands as carriers of disease, literal or metaphorical). Fulci's film suggests that perhaps the overdeveloped countries have no choice but to be radically transformed once the tropicalised unconscious returns, both metaphorically and physically. And it will return, at least as long as the tropics as spaces of intensified transformation remain classified with the outside, the other. In direct relation to contemporary popular discourses, the pandemic is coded to some kind of other, say 'bat soup' or the endangered tropical pangolin – mystifying a reality wherein capitalism creates the conditions of intensified encounters between species. And capitalist Euro-America is already part of this connected reality. A world where the lives and health of those to

whom whiteness is accessible are actually entangled with those to whom it's inaccessible.

The final scene – the living dead walking the Brooklyn Bridge – is only one of horror for those to whom radical becomings go against a putative human nature based in free will as over or against the relationality of a sinful body. The zombie meanwhile can act as a radical affirmation of heteronomy and an impersonal will to persist in life.

### **Taking Care of Tropical Zombies**

While Fulci's film clearly situates itself within the relation between the imaginary of 'Euro-American' temperate zones and the colonised tropical other, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 2015, *Cemetery of Splendor*, is a film from a tropical country, which has never been 'colonised', and in which the relation to the Occident is present at the edges of the film through the protagonist's American husband. Both films mobilise imaginaries of course: the geographical Euro-America film very much constituted by zones other than the temperate one, as much as the current state of Thailand is by a variety of climates. However, the fears of mass contagion by a tropical disease cannot be articulated in the same way, for, from a Siamese position, there can be no space fully outside the tropics, except as a hypothetical other constituted through circulating popular imaginaries. Furthermore, Weerasethakul's films think even the most gruesome of histories as part of the contemporary, unlike what is common in Euro-America as well as official modern Thai state policy, where the suppression of the real history of violence that created and continues to condition these modernist projects is discursively and symbolically hidden and generally disavowed.

*Heavy machinery renders the surrounding workers insignificant. Earth has already been displaced just outside the porch. The labourers stand idle, in a semi circle, their legs covered by grass. The excavator turns and brings forth soil out of a ditch. The workers seem entranced. A flag moves in the wind. On a decaying basketball court soldiers leisurely wave in a military green truck so as to help navigate the uneven terrain. "Stop!" Nothing happens. It is impossible to tell whether this occurs as a dream or not. The eerie presence of the soldiers enabling connections with the violent pasts of state-making and US supported suppression of communists. A male body is lying in a hospital bed by open windows in a wooden building. The leaves outside move in a barely discernible breeze. Intravenous gear hangs by the bed, a line leads from the bag. Pills are on the night table. Barely any movement is present. Immediately three lines connected in an air of mystery. The past unearthed that affects the present. Bodies slowed down, barely moving. All framed by omnipresent, buoyant nature.*

A film as material culture is made up of internal and external relations, intertwined and changeable. While formed in one environment, it enters others. Internal relations appear in relation to external ones. Here, in this translation of the cinematic world into discourse, the external is formed as the intersection of tropics, disease, bodies and heteronomy. Yet the internal carries relations from where it emerged: some traces of Thai practices, already drawing on a globalised space. To externalise some of these relations for the reader to perceive, I have to necessarily propose some anthropological categories created in relation to Siamese *worldings*. I urge the reader to treat them tentatively and not as simple or full representations of something other. Rather, they are meant as conceptual or imageric transformations into academic discourse as one world-making practice among many. The same, of course, goes for the Euro-American worlds engaged previously.

The images locate the viewer in a city (presumably, given the title, *Khon Kaen*) at the confluence of two abstract lines produced by disruptions: vertical – machinery digs up the past from the lower archaeological layers in the earth, a past, as we will later learn, that has now come to have direct impact on some present bodies; horizontal – the obviously human-made, such as buildings, and that which more directly escapes simple human control, the natural world. The Thai *thammachaat* (ธรรมชาต) has the literal translated meaning “order of what is” (Renesson, 2019, p. 10) and as such is closer to the Ancient Greek word for order, *kosmos*. The nature/culture distinction subterraneously organising the Fulci film is displaced in Weerasethakul's film onto one of gradual change in a movement from centres of culture/power/order to the peripheries of wilderness/disorder. These are not mutually exclusive, rather they are (or at least were traditionally) multiple circles of competing influence (Tambiah, 2013). One has to find a place so that everything is in order, but this order is always prone to disruptions (Renesson, 2019, p. 10); for example, by construction work. The disorderly wild *pa thuean* (ป่าเถื่อน) becomes a space of intensified change, as boundaries between entities turn even more porous (Langford, 2013). Here, rapid change might lead to full disintegration at the limit-point of death (and subsequent rebirth) or to becoming some other entity, as borders between beings have never been stable. Weerasethakul's work actualises this jungle systematically as a border zone world in different variations through each single film (Boehler, 2011). Yet, with disease the distance between body and jungle imaginary is disrupted, no longer at the outside, it is brought inside us.

Disease – in this case a strange sleeping sickness – thus takes on a special role, as it engages the disintegration of organic and social bodies in the very centre of the order. As all kinds of bodies move between the force fields of integration through civilisation and disintegration through the wild (traversing along the lines of the good/bad more than the good/evil distinction), health as such is never simply given but

already enacted through “good” social and material practices of care (Cassaniti, 2018; Aulino, 2019). The questions the film asks can then be formulated as: *what if these boundaries have become more radically unstable close to the centre due to past socially karmic* (Walters, 2003) *offenses*, and *what possible course of action can alleviate the resulting paralysis?* The sleeping sickness that afflicts some bodies in this film and cannot be clearly grasped medically expresses itself as a radical heteronomy, a limit point in a world where full autonomy, as conceived within the Buddhist tradition, can only be achieved as a liberating social and historical unbecoming by achieving *nibbana*. At the other end of (dis)continuity is full heteronomy, as in total determination by karmic laws which bring about a subject. The anthropologist Alan Klima (2002, p. 269ff) mediated a Thai monk's explanation of this concept for Western academic readers with a focus on awareness of karmic consequences, or the lack thereof. *Kamma*, apart from being laws governing the universe, is also action (physical or mental), and actions produce consequences – leaving traces that will constitute your future self. Instinct here becomes not the true nature of the animals we are, as in post-Darwinian common sense, but a lack of awareness and/or conscious ignorance of being embedded in *kammic* laws that go far beyond superficial materialist cause and effect. It comes of little surprise then that it is better to be reborn as a human than as an animal or deity, as the latter are much more strongly entwined with *kammic* effects. And being reborn human is better than as an animal, asserting that the more instinctive, the more simply built an entity is, the more defined it is by karmic webs. It is better than being a deity, because their lives and material conditions are much more blissful than those of humans. In other words, being reborn as a human means having the conditions, internal and external, for stronger autonomy. In the film, the recurring imagery of bodies as imperfect and subject to change, and often explicitly tied to the outside through medical equipment, potently expresses the post-human condition. Further, the director's work is known for how it connects past and present, memories and sci-fi elements into realities without a clearly accessible ground for the really real, and as such they are filled with imagery generative for thinking in post-human ways without falling back onto common tropes of organic bodies clearly separated from their surroundings.

This film presents a special case. The heteronomy of the zombie-like bound to hospital beds is tied to physical context, which implies a cessation of *kammic* production as there is neither bodily nor intellectual activity. The bodies are fully dependent on outside circumstance, generated by the irruption of a violent past into the present. The unknown and seemingly unknowable disease creates social and, if left untreated, physical death – if not for the activity of others, the medical staff and non-medical relations that keep the singular being within reality. As the characters try to engage this new situation, no single explanation, no single frame of reference takes precedence. The discussions around the disease in the film – where it comes from,

how it can be dealt with – never fall into an assertion of superiority of the one over the other. Rather, the possibility that people do not, or cannot know, is being held open. Such a reality is not a postmodern hellscape of random assertions; rather, it is one where entirely different procedures to account for social-biological effectiveness are being created. This differs strongly from Modern Western ontology organised around one Truth. Of course, there are advantages to the latter, as the creativity of science has abundantly shown. When it comes to dealing with people and the wider world, the insistence on one correct solution to a problem, however, becomes a hegemonic, exclusionary practice that cuts off possibilities of (scientific) collaborative innovation.

*Quiet, calm, intimate, knowing voices. Two women in the make-shift hospital converse. Later we will learn, from a doctor, that this is indeed a new hospital. They refer to a young woman who will become one of the main recurring characters. She is a spirit medium, said to work with the police, contacting murder victims and missing persons. Rumour has it she was approached by the FBI, but turned down the lucrative offer. She only serves her country, it is said. Though she herself will never confirm this.*

*A bag holding urine emerges. Bodies in the hospital are always connected to something outside them: as intake or outpouring. Shadowplay on the floor, the sun is setting. Doctors and nurses surround one of the beds. An unfamiliar apparatus is seen behind the head of the patient. The whole row of beds is fitted with them. White light tubes, slightly bent at the top. As the hospital personnel chatter about the machine and shut the windows, one of the tubes begins to change colour. First blue, then green.*

*Attach this tube to his nose. - Like this? - Yes, and press this button. This machine works very well. They used it with American soldiers in Afghanistan. - They also have nightmares? - Yes. - I'd like to try one at home. - Good. Will it stop the snoring? Yes, it will help them sleep with good dreams. - Should I turn it on? - Yes. - Should we close the windows? - Let's close them. - Doctor, please give me a hand. - Close them please. Looks like funeral lights. - Yes, I felt so too.*

What can be learned about this strange machinery? It acts upon the general atmosphere, the *genius loci*, as a medium to create better conditions for the patients. Apparently, the patients not only have a sleeping sickness, but lack healthy dreams. The anthropologist Scott Stonington remarks in a recent article (2020) that Thai people prefer to die at home, because that place is full of positivity from personal relations and homemaking; positivity that will be carried onward toward future rebirth. Hospitals are full of negativity from disease and suffering, not good places to die. These lights might perhaps turn the hospital's karmic generative power into something more pleasant and with positive effects for future rebirths. Here, borders between present and future, bodies and machines, dreams and external reality are ever shifting. At one



point, a chicken followed by its chicks enters the hospital, stressing the openness of the building. Talk of past lives, of old days, of the external world of America and Europe too will recur. The main character, Jen with her club foot, will encounter two goddesses after making offerings at their shrine. The pair are nonchalant – as if passing between realms was as common as breathing. Later, she will be taken by the medium, now possessed by a soldier of old, for a walk through the grounds where a palace once lay. The past and present are there at the same time, if one is open to it. What once was, is never fully behind us. Soldiers from the past continue their battles; and in order to do so, they draw the energy from today's bodies for their actions. The bodies today become narcoleptic, passive and beyond control of the subject's will. The glowing machines, it seems, ought to introduce a layer between the past and the present, reconfiguring the aura of the place. This is a world of continuity, not duality, where realms, entities, and effects flow into one another, where random encounters of strangeness are not immediately to be expelled but raise questions as to how to approach them and what they could mean and produce. As anthropological research from Thailand shows, many local practices are concerned with hardening permeable borders of humans, to keep things out (Cassaniti, 2018; Aulino, 2019). Entities always threaten the integrity of other entities precisely because integrity is not pre-given. Fears, then, would not so much surround the loss of autonomy and will, but the breakdown of vital relations as relations with 'evil' entities become stronger than those with entities more conducive to a good life as understood in the local society. And, to put it in a Spinozist way, joyous (bodily) affects come to be replaced by sad passions.

Returning to the local world, wherein the film was formed, where nature exists differently than the nature many readers will be accustomed to, it is important to note that – what, for an Occidental reader – is commonly taken as supernatural (ghosts and deities) is said to be very real for most Thai. That is, natural – even if some such entities tend toward chaos. This, following Asian/tropical gothic scholar Katarzyna Ancuta, plays an important frame for horror cinema: Western zombies and other creatures not historically present in Thailand do not elicit horror, because they are not taken as real, or possibly real. Implicitly then, entities are local and not universal. While, for most Western viewers it would seem that some oriental horror travels well, because of the formal conventions of making cinema scary; in general, Thai audiences don't appear to be scared by what are for them unreal entities (2016b). Ghosts and other such beings are very much part of the natural world and cannot be presumed to just live anywhere. Buddhist tradition often expresses the adage that people should experiment and verify what is and isn't real, what works and what does not, without already foreclosing the reality of improbable entities. The fault line is not organised around real/unreal but around friendly/unfriendly, and these are subject to change based on how one interacts with the entity.

*A meditation class is held, for nurses and patients. Previously, when Jen conversed with a nurse, it was clearly stated that many different medical approaches can be effective, and the people in the hospital are not entirely sure which of these actually help. There is no hierarchy, just a focus on care and patients becoming quasi-functioning, adapted mostly to the contemporary and not any of the many other temporalities and frameworks that remain present. The very physical un-burrowing of the past by the construction workers and machines is interspersed with the other images; framing, what one sees and doesn't see, becomes crucial. At one moment, one of the sick, lying bodies, appears to awaken. But it cannot move, except for its mouth. He asks Jen, sitting next to the bed, for help. Only after she moves an arm of the body, twice, does it reconnect with the web of the present and the body-mind appears as functioning conventionally. Full presence, however, will never be achieved – with sudden narcolepsy setting in, often humorously, as the narrative continues. In a world where nothing is ever fully given and self-evident from within, care becomes paramount. All bodies are depicted in complex entanglements with others – humans, machines, spaces, urine bags – unable to exist without that support. Whether awake and aware, or not. “When you sleep, your mind is still active.”*

Just as full autonomy is never an option, neither is total heteronomy as in the Euro-American tropical zombie film previously discussed. Disease is a relation, not an ultimate condition or cessation of “healthy” relations. In the world of *Cemetery of Splendor*, even dreams become entangled, without it ever becoming clear what is real and for whom. Everything flows into everything else, separate yet connecting, transforming. Bodies and subjectivities thus arise from complex interactions of past, present, future, in relation to other bodies and entities in general. Heteronomy and autonomy are entwined, their pure instantiations being limit points of (social) death. Biology and socio-cultural reality too, are enmeshed. Not secondarily, as one might take it where I am writing from in Europe, but primarily. Dreaming mobilises the ineffability of (media) ambiance, which if created correctly enhances the autonomy of subjects. Anybody who has ever been to Buddhist temples that are not yet overrun by tourists will notice how conducive they are for meditation and a calm disposition. This is also known as affect. Hundreds of years of forming Buddhist precepts into architecture, into a material reshaping of the world, make this possible. Culture becomes nature; material, external realities become interior human worlds. Reality differs. The film proposes that a solution to the emergence of zombie-like entities, almost fully heteronomous bodies, is the practice of care. Eventually, gradually, inconsistently, the sick – or at least the sick one the images focus on – becomes more human again (save for narcoleptic episodes). Care here is post-human, it means not only direct human interaction, but also the organisation of space and technology in a way that is conducive to reintegration into the common world of conscious reciprocity as fleeting, as impermanent as it cosmically is. An anthropologist researching severe

illness in Northern Thailand described a world not unlike the one of the film: “Their stories introduced me to an ethical world very different from those I had encountered in both Western ethical philosophy and academic accounts of Buddhism. Specifically, they pointed to a kind of ethics built out of complex and nonbounded personhood, involving combinations of beings (like people and buffaloes) and things (like nasogastric tubes)” (Stonington, 2020, p. 2). He goes on to discuss how the place for illness and of death enters into this whole, as a home, in contrast to a hospital, as a space of positive karmic residues. One is tempted to think that such an approach, where health and the organisation of space are explicitly linked, would be of benefit in engaging the current global pandemic.

### **Conclusion: Cinema as Experimental Science**

Occidental imaginaries, as much as they are currently limited by historical and structural conditions, can change and have changed. Our world does not have to play out according to the logics so clearly, gruesomely, laid out in *Zombi 2*. That film enacts a deconstruction, but offers no way out. With the help of creators like Weerasethakul – who, by engaging the region's violent political past, here explicitly through the presence of soldiers, searches for ways to deal with unsavoury histories that keep shaping the present – we may work on constructing futures without denying pasts. Emergent diseases do not have to turn into fully fledged pandemics, at least not as uncontrollably as it may at times seem. Denying the colonial legacy doesn't make it go away, but exacerbates the impact of the current pandemic. Note, for instance, how vaccines distributed for profit, keep them out of reach of large segments of the global population – poor nations, old colonies, tropical countries – which creates the conditions for rapid transformation of the virus, and so it keeps returning to the colonial heartlands. I hope to have demonstrated that it is not just a question of institutions, politics and a science disconnected from imaginaries. Imagery, such as coding the tropics as edenic or hellish, and seeing the body as primarily separate from an environment, preconditions the ways the world is thought and solutions are enacted. Indeed, the limits of how the current pandemic is dealt with directly map on to some of the most essential parts of the make-up of modernity, namely ontological individualism and the positing of clear borders. Cinema, by enabling the forging of new connections and establishing unexpected contexts, can generate other worlds that don't fall into the traps set by established cultural logics. Films, as ethnographic texts, can be treated as epistemic objects, as sources for thought, ones that enable reformulating the non-cinematic in generative ways. “Hence the relevance of concepts as a matter of ethnographic concern: as analytic tools – tools used to produce knowledge – they carry a self-duplicating potential that may 'explain difference away” (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 7). Here, film comparison – from different natureculture perspectives – enables the displacement of disease and tropical imageries as they are routinely

thought in my non-tropical context (a temperate Christian cosmology) through a tropical world (as Buddhist-Animist entangled cosmology) wherein all these relations are thought differently. Both of these might coexist in the same space, as when privileged bodies travel to formerly in/directly colonised areas and live next to other bodies and imaginaries. The self and the other, the Occident and its putative Others, always already coexist, and are to a degree fictionalised. Without the comparative framework these sets of similarities and differences would not appear; if any of the objects employed here were to come into contact with a different set of objects, other possibilities would be generated. As cinematic objects (films) can travel much more fluidly than local practices, they can come to be plugged into other worlds enacting a difference. Here, they are “plugged in” as a conceptual operation embedded in discursive worldbuilding. Such encounters with cinematic worlds, if slowed down and formed into scientific explorations, excavate layers that would otherwise remain discursively hidden and impossible to consciously act upon. Concrete films, accompanied by anthropological knowledge, made it possible for me to work through an under-analysed aspect of pandemics. Cinema, as employed here, is not merely thought, but also an onto-ethics and experimental science.

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