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Carmen Serrano

Abstract: As economies and cultures morph due to technoscience, vampire entities also mutate so as to still provoke fear –their bodies change, their populations grow and their networks expand; yet the way to annihilate them becomes less obvious. Responding to these modern day changes, Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's television series *The Strain* (2014-2017) uncannily echoes, or perhaps foreshadows, the social realities under an informational, networked, and epidemiological paradigm. The filmmakers here present viewers with hybrid monsters and environments that are highly interconnected and pathogenic, reflecting contemporary social fears regarding failing democracies and global pandemics. Drawing from Guillermo del Toro's recent television collaborations, this article examines how twenty-first century vampiric bodies comment on a society altered by informational and technoscientific labyrinths. The labyrinths analyzed here, and the bodies hidden within them, are presented as looming threats that may destroy democracies in order to institute a totalitarian regime. Profit-driven institutions and governments, beholden to ominous masters in a more global and interrelated economy, invite malevolent actors who are allowed to dominate, exploit, and kill everyday citizens.

Keywords: Vampires, zombies, Guillermo del Toro, contagion, pandemics, dark webs, networks, democracies, dictatorships



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Dark Networks and Pathogens Undermining Democracies: Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's *The Strain*

Carmen Serrano

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*We allowed it to happen because
we never believed it could happen.
We were too smart.
Too advanced.
Too Strong.*

del Toro / Hogan (2009)

Compared to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, national economies have become highly interconnected globally, exceptionally informational and technoscientific, inspiring both optimism and anxiety. Our overdependence on technology and science might have made everyday life more convenient, but this is also altering our economy and society in ways that we do not yet fully grasp. Auerbach in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* states that "every age embraces the vampire it needs", suggesting that vampiric bodies will constantly transmogrify informed by their historical present (Auerbach 2006: 145).¹ If vampires can speak to a specific era, what might the newer strains of fictional vampires articulate about our hyper-connected and global society? As economies and cultures morph due to technoscience, the vampire entities also mutate so as to still provoke fear –their bodies change, their populations grow and their networks expand; yet the way to annihilate them becomes less obvious.

Responding to modern day vicissitudes, Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's television series *The Strain* (2014-2017) uncannily echoes, or perhaps foreshadows, the social realities under an informational, networked, and epidemiological paradigm. The filmmakers here present viewers with hybrid monsters and environments that are highly interconnected and pathogenic, reflecting contemporary social fears regarding failing democracies and global pandemics.² Moreover, these texts demonstrate how vampires, like viral strains, mutate into a more contagious creature. Drawing from Guillermo del Toro's recent television collaborations, this article examines how twenty-first century vampiric bodies comment on a society altered by

¹ See the following texts that argue that vampires and monsters are demonstrative: Beal (2001), Butler (2002), Cohen (1996), Gordon / Hollinger (1997), Haraway (1991), Fischer-Hornung / Mueller (2016), Mulvey Roberts (2016).

² Del Toro along with Chuck Hogan co-wrote *The Strain* (2009), *The Fall* (2010), and *The Night Eternal* (2011); these novels have since been adapted for television under the title *The Strain*, first featured on the FX television channel.

informational and technoscientific labyrinths. The labyrinths analyzed here, and the bodies hidden within them, are presented as looming threats that may destroy democracies in order to institute a totalitarian regime.

Globalized Vampires

The Mexican film director, del Toro, has been successful in producing films internationally as well as in Hollywood as illustrated by *El espinazo del diablo* (2001, *The Devil's Backbone*), *El laberinto del Fauno* (2006, *Pan's Labyrinth*), *Hellboy* (2004), *Crimson Peak* (2015), and, his more recent film, *The Shape of Water* (2018). His debut film *Cronos* (1993) features a scarab-shaped device containing an infectious insect within it. Its victims, after being injected by the device's poison, recover their youth and vigor, but also develop an intense thirst for human blood.³ The film's plot unfolds in Mexico, yet it does not necessarily speak to a national sensibility as illustrated by its Pan-American cast, which includes Ron Perlman (United States), Federico Luppi (Argentina), and Margarita Isabel (Mexico).⁴ The bilingual dialogues between characters also indicate that the target audience was not solely imagined as Spanish-speaking or Mexican, but one that transcends borders. Sánchez Prado is deft in explaining how "*Cronos* is not a film that says anything in particular about Mexico. It is a film that, for the first time in Mexican film tradition, assumes that embodying Mexican national culture is no longer possible" (Sánchez Prado 2014: 166). The film does not address Mexican culture explicitly, but does implicitly address an economic shift due to international trade deals, or as Donahue argues, *Cronos* not only "visually remakes the filmic and literary trope of the vampire" but also "dramatises the transamerican exploitation of NAFTA" (Donahue 2016: 127). Waldron further asserts how contemporary angst informs the film, in which the external threat "takes the most obvious form of NAFTA and the increasing number of maquiladoras in Mexico combined with the mass emigration of the country's people to the north" (Waldron 2004: 16). As the aforementioned critics argue, *Cronos* obliquely addresses the ways in which foreign trade deals and neoliberal policies have been undermining Mexico's economy since the 1990s. However, twenty years later, *The Strain's* vampiric entities speak to a different social and economic paradigm that is less about NAFTA and more about the weakening of democracies and the institution of autocracies on a global scale.⁵

³ See Brahm (1964). The scarab device is reminiscent of the one found in Serling's *Twilight Zone* episode "Queen of the Nile".

⁴ See Stock (1995).

⁵ See Castells (2000: 5f.). He notes that the Information Age replaces the Industrial Age, whereby "human societies perform their activities in a technological paradigm constituted around microelectronics-based information/communication technologies, and genetic engineering" (Castells 2000: 5f.).

The vampires in *The Strain* and *Blade II* are similar in that the vampire attacks, spreading contagion as disease, are more violent and virulent compared to the vampire found in *Cronos*. In *Blade II*, starring Wesley Snipes, a black vampire hunter known as the "daywalker" is a hybrid creature with both human and vampiric qualities, who uses modern medicine along with age-old garlic elixirs to control his thirst for blood. Compared to the original *Blade* (1998), directed by Stephen Norrington, del Toro incorporates a new menacing strain of enemy vampires that corrupts the ancient vampiric hierarchy. These vampires demonstrate excessive bloodlust, surpassing their predecessors' malevolence. *Blade* fashions the customary canine-fangs, however, the new strain of vampires in *Blade II* have stingers and projectile-like tongues that are unlike previous articulations. Their stingers simultaneously suction blood, while injecting their venom. These retractable proboscises mark a stark departure from previous vampire bodies, which will also appear in *The Strain*.⁶

Set in New York City, *The Strain* presents viewers with refashioned vampiric bodies that echo fears of totalitarian politics and genocide on a global scale. The series features a cast of international heroic characters emphasizing how New York City represents a microcosm of the world. That is, New York City with its many migrant communities embodies a 'little world' that represents a macrocosm: The character, Nora Martinez, is an epidemiologist from Argentina seeking a cure from the vampire disease. Abraham Setrakian, a Romanian Holocaust survivor, is in hot pursuit of the villain, known as the Master. Gus Elizalde is a Mexican-American ex-gang member turned into vampire hunter, while Angel Gúzman, a once-famous Mexican masked wrestler, also joins the crew of unlikely heroes aiming to defeat the vampire invasion. The villains are also from other places: Thomas Eichorst, is a former Nazi SS officer from Poland turned vampire who serves the Master, while the Master, in turn, is from Romania –an obvious nod to Stoker's *Dracula*.

These characters from around the globe find themselves embroiled in a struggle at the heart of New York City, which is a not so subtle indication that the globalized city epitomizes the menacing threats bearing down on nations and democracies around the world due to emerging technologies and globalization. The invasion that begins in New York, clearly takes authoritarian regimes of the past as the model to imagine a violent and devouring new system; a model that clearly haunts one of the central characters, Abraham Setrakian, whose lived trauma moves him to pursue the Master in order to stop another mass genocide. Furthermore, the characters in the series migrate from other countries that also suffered under dictatorial

⁶ Biological tentacles as a weapon was popularized by Toshio Maeda, a manga artist who arrived on the graphic arts scene in the 1980s-1990s. That *The Strain's* and del Toro's creations have close ties to graphic novel is another line of inquiry that I cannot fully flesh out here.

regimes: Argentina, Germany, Mexico, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. This further evokes memories of how totalitarian regimes from another times and places, like revenants, can re-materialize and destroy democracies.

In *The Strain* vampires, via expansive and intertwined networks, annihilate democracies replacing them with regimes in which vampires are absolute masters. The vampire authoritarian regime is able to come to power with the help of complicit actors that operate behind the scenes to secure more power. In the series, civil societies and humans are overrun and infected with the vampire virus while the institutions that give nations their authority are made almost irrelevant. The series features creatures that within two months cause the dismantling of national institutions, such as the army, the police, and other organizations important to maintaining civil societies and democracies. The mass chaos culminates with the detonation of a nuclear bomb, creating radioactive fallout, which decreases the amount of sunlight on earth, allowing the vampire overlord's world domination, albeit temporarily. Because of the lack of sunlight, the vampire regime's power becomes expansive and they can control all aspects of society and freely harvest humans for their blood, not only in the US, but globally.

Vampiric Networks

Vampires have, in a certain sense, always been networked, global enterprises, yet they have usually been present as smaller cells, or nests, that aim to infect and overtake other nations slowly and methodically. Yet even in these small numbers, the texts emphasize the nation's vulnerability to foreign attacks and pandemic diseases. In Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) foreign-tainted bodies journey from East to West as 'cargo' across oceans aiming to contaminate other nations with the disease implicitly suggesting that infections arrive from outside its borders. Similarly in Murnau's German Expressionist film *Nosferatu* (1922), Browning's Hollywood film *Dracula* (1931), and Méndez's Mexican film *El vampiro* (1957) vampires travel abroad with the intention of conquering another larger territory –Transylvania to London or Germany (*Dracula*, *Nosferatu*) or Eastern Europe to Mexico (*El vampiro*), for example.⁷ This invasion is iterated in almost every vampire plot that harkens back to Stoker's novel, including *The Strain*.

Early vampire societies' mode of operation, like those found in *Dracula*, already echo networks, but contained ones. However, instead of having smaller vampire societies, over time, they have expanded into larger and wider webs, operating across continents, as illustrated in Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and del Toro's *Blade II*. Similarly, del Toro and Hogan imagine entities as sprawling networks that are akin to how wide area networks (WAN) began

⁷See Willis (2007).

to dominate all aspects of society beginning in the 1990s, a phenomenon that has only accelerated in the twenty-first century.⁸

Contemporary vampire societies in recent films have become more global enterprises in which maleficent players within these networked systems help 'turn' democracies into authoritarian regimes. Unlike earlier vampire films, there is not just one singular vampire or a tiny network of them working independently, but rather they function as a multi-connected web in which the various vampiric entities, along with familiars, purposely collaborate to destroy the economy, infect a large portion of its citizens, and cause a nuclear fallout. Here the actors destroy democracies via a wide area network, in order to institute a global authoritarian vampire regime. The vampires are networked entities that first work behind the scenes to destabilize democracies to later allow for usurpation of power in order to establish their autocracy.

The vampire networks also mimic how 'dark web' mechanisms work in which special software allows for the anonymous identity of users rendering them virtually untraceable.⁹ That is, the dark web can hide bad actors aiming to undermine democracies and disrupt social order, creating havoc. Via these webs, computer hackers can also create computer viruses programmed to replicate and expand their virality. The pervasive presence of illicit activities within these networked matrices limit the nation's ability to maintain a civil society: election systems hacked, bombings planned, illegal drugs sold, and politicians suborned.¹⁰

In *The Strain*, the vampire networks correspond to how the dark webs in our material world might operate. The Master's method of communication for example is a type of webbed structure that telepathically shares information with his vampire army. Using this he can summon thousands of beings hidden within the city's subterranean tunnels to destroy and kill. Although his minions receive orders directly, they might also operate independently feeding on humans at night. That is, power in the series is mostly hierarchical, but also decentered, wide, and expansive.

⁸ See Hemmendinger (2016: s.v. *wide area network*). Wide area network refers to networks that expand across regions, countries, or the world, which could also be used to describe how vampiric societies might also be imagined as more expansive in contemporary vampire films. In other words, vampiric bodies and their system of communication have changed to better reflect a technological paradigm informed by broader interconnected networks.

⁹ The dark web generally refers to the "special routing systems [that] are designed to provide anonymity for both *visitors* to websites and *publishers* of these sites" (Gehl 2018: 7). However, the dark web is another part of the internet most often associated with the sharing of information that permits criminals to carry out illicit activities (arms transactions, child pornography, drug deals, human trafficking, money laundering, for example), its privacy and firewall set ups, among other protocols, make tracing and prosecuting these criminals nearly impossible. The dark web also allows computer hackers to create programs or viruses that spread cyber diseases via an expansive web (ransomware, rootkit, and spyware).

¹⁰ See Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (2018), which underscores how dark webs contribute to the dismantling of communities via illegal drug sales.

The series features the customary shrewd and ancient vampires, but also other vampires known as the Strigoi. The Strigoi travel collectively and neither speak nor reason, but rather viscerally and insatiably hunt humans. The filmmakers also present viewers with gruesome, speechless, blind child-vampires, known as the Feelers. They make chirruping sounds and scurry around like spiders with lightning speed. One of the characters, Kelly Goodweather, turned vampire, can communicate and command the young vampire children or Feelers. Compared to the Strigoi, she, along with another vampire, Eichorst, can speak, pass for human (aided by makeup and prosthetics), and, arguably, demonstrate some free will. They are beholden to the Master, but they are also independent entities encoded for infection and destruction. They are akin to the way computer viruses might be programmed to replicate and spread disease via the Internet without always receiving direct commands from the creator/programmer. Regardless, these different sets of characters illustrate how vampiric bodies replicate networked characteristics of contemporary globalized and technoscientific societies.

Nowadays democracies are being tested, as wealthy and influential actors are changing the political landscape with the aim of securing more power and wealth. However, it is also true that illicit activities, including those found in the dark web, have made nations weaker and susceptible to foreign threats. The secret relationship between government administrations and hostile foreign agents might alarm some top officials, political experts, journalists, and well-informed citizens, who have seen how compatriots have made unsavory, secretive, and traitorous deals all for monetary gain. Politicians and other interested parties are beholden to powerful families and bend to their will. The series exemplifies how corporations gain more influence and wealth, while everyday citizens lose their economic footing: The outsourcing of jobs to other countries where workers earn lower salaries; the weakening of unions; wage stagnation; and tax cuts for the wealthiest, are just some examples.

Metaphorically powerful entities in the material world, behaving like vampiric lords, feed off the labor of the working-class and support policies that enrich and embolden the most well-off. This, of course, also recalls Marx's critique of capitalism in which he states that the capitalist or "capital personified" is vampire-like and "lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx in Neocleous 2003: 669). However in *The Strain*, a power-hungry businessman, Eldritch Palmer facilitates the use of humans, not only for labor, but for their blood, and ultimately, life.

Greedy humans form part of the ominous web of power further contributing to the vampiric usurpation of the nation. The unleashing of the vampire contagion is not initiated by the monster

alone but rather is manipulated by Palmer.¹¹ In most classic vampire texts, the monster himself machinates to have his body transported to another country so that he can feed and expand his empire. In Stoker's *Dracula*, the Count hires Jonathan Harker to facilitate the purchase of real estate, so that his body can be shipped to London. Here, it is Palmer who finds the vampire and schemes his transportation to New York City. Palmer, a sickly seventy-six year-old man, has amassed wealth but needs the vampire's supernatural powers to heal and secure immortality. He is the owner of Stoneheart Group, a not too subtle indication that this man has a heart of stone and soon will lose his soul in exchange for power. Most importantly, he wants eternal 'life' so that he can expand his financial empire and sphere of influence. Thus, he finds a vampire in the Old World and together they develop a plan for world domination. These characters might evoke how the powerful, along with their morally corrupt followers, work destructively in unison for personal gain in our material world. Palmer embodies the destructive power of financial entities, which help machinate the exploitation of fellow citizens. The dearth of empathy towards the everyday citizen coupled with the greed associated with multinational corporations drives *The Strain's* plot, and corresponds to themes prevalent in current political discourse and news cycles. Mainly, the short-sightedness of the rich, as presented in the series, affects citizens negatively, thus allowing for the spread of disease and extreme exploitation.

Biological Amorphous Material

The Strain's vampire is unlike *Dracula*, since the Master exists as a body 'and' as an amorphous vampiric viscous substance that needs a host body to survive. Cutting off the head of the vampire or driving a stake through the heart does not completely annihilate it, because the bloodlike liquid is also a vector of disease. Here the vampire body is not a singular, encapsulated whole that can be destroyed easily, but a highly infectious and ephemeral entity. The master's vampiric matter lives within the host body to survive and perpetuate its strain. Once the body is injured or rendered useless, the vampire must find another host body in order to spew amorphous fluid into its mouth, wherein the body will then contain the Master's essence. More precisely, the vampiric creamy fluid, which contains visible worm-like strains, is emptied into host bodies so that the virus can continue to multiply within him and through him. Furthermore, the Master, whose fluid can possess and overtake bodies, expands the disease through the infectious network of his minions.

According to Abbott after the publication of Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) "the iconography of the vampire would be re-imagined through the language of science, virology

¹¹ Palmer Eldrich is also a character in Philip K. Dick's *The Three Stigmata* (1965), a science fiction novel. Arguably del Toro and Hogan's text could also be read as a hybrid one that is both Gothic and science fiction.

and global pandemic" (Abbott 2016). The same could also be said about *The Strain*. Here the contagion spreads quickly globally, thus allowing for a vampiric all-encompassing regime. This strain of vampires is purely visceral and destructive as its virulence infects the rest of the world in less than two months. The narrators of the novel best describe how the vampire has metamorphosed into something that is a far cry from how they had been imagined in the first part of the twentieth century:

It takes great energy to change –painful, catastrophic changes are taking place inside his body now. The development of a parasitic organ system to accommodate his new state of being. He is metamorphosing into a feeding organism. Soon, twelve to thirty-six hours from the time of infection, but most likely tonight, he will arise. He will thirst. He will stop at nothing to satisfy his craving (del Toro / Hogan 2009: 196).

The manner in which bodies transmogrify from human to vampire correspond to how viruses multiply as described in most medical journals or books, illustrating how viruses take a cell hostage: "They must find the particular cells in which they can replicate and also survive multiple layers of defenses. [...] Finally, they must engineer the release of their progeny virus particles for transmission to a new host" (Cordingley 2017: 66). The description of how viruses need a host to perpetuate their strain also could describe how the vampiric disease is transmitted in *The Strain*. The infection is transmitted through a type of stinger that releases a white liquid substance that contains visible viral strains, resembling tiny worms. Moreover, viruses are unlike bacteria, which are a single cell living organism. In contrast, as non-living agents, viruses perpetuate their strain by taking over a host body, which uncannily echoes the vampire's ethos. Being pathogens, not single cell living microorganisms like bacteria, viruses seek to perpetuate their strain by seizing living cells. Viruses, akin to vampires, are also 'unliving' and like this new strain of vampires, they must multiply and can only survive by taking over a body, while destroying the host cell or body, along the way.

Vampires in fiction consistently embody notions of contagion, whereby close physical contact or the exchange of bodily fluids allows for global contagion, but the possibility of the spread of disease has accelerated in our era due to globalization and corresponding networks. Arguably, fear of biological viruses informs *The Strain's* vampiric bodies. Sampson further illustrates our vulnerability to contagion as disease in *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, in which he explains how "the proliferation of global transport networks makes this model of society susceptible to the spreading of biological disease" (Sampson 2012: 1). Del Toro and Hogan's vampire bodies clearly mirror these new anxieties associated with viruses and pandemics threatening nations by featuring monsters that multiply quickly whose infection can be spread through an amorphous liquid, and not just through a singular bite.

Del Toro and Hogan create epidemic fantasies that reflect upon pandemic fears in the 'real world'. This contagious fluid containing 'worms' might enter through the victim's eyes, skin, or other orifices, making the disease all the more dreadful. This vampiric invasion through contagion as disease obviously evokes societal fears about the Ebola, SARS, or Zika viruses, for example. These viral outbreaks, which seemed to appear from nowhere and destroy populations rapidly, have received international attention over the last two decades. They continue to cause widespread panic, because the new antibodies needed to fight them have become more difficult to develop. Also, if an outbreak were to become widespread, for example in an urban population, there are simply not enough vaccines to meet the need. Even today, according to the World Health Organization more than 30,000 people die of yellow fever, which is incurable once contracted. Victims of this disease suffer fever, nausea, and might bleed internally, hence provoking the sick to hemorrhage from all orifices, including the eyes. These viruses, like yellow fever, cause dreadful deaths that are similar to the symptoms that the characters experience in the series.¹² *The Strain* emphasizes how, in a more globalized world, such outbreaks could have lethal far-reaching consequences.

Another Strain

The vampire is hard to kill and its disease is easily transmittable because of its amorphous quality. These new vampires have become contagious and virulent in a different way than Dracula or Rice's vampires, for example. When the vampires open their mouths, their jaws become dislocated so that the stinger-like tongue can reach its human target, which might be as far away as six feet. The following words from the novel best describe how they are portrayed in the television series:

His lower jaw descended and out wriggled something pink and fleshy that was not his tongue. It was longer, more muscular and complex [...] and squirming. As though he had swallowed a live squid, and one of its tentacles was still thrashing about desperately inside his mouth (del Toro / Hogan 2009: 174).

In this example, the contagion expert, Ephraim Goodweather, is able to cut off the tentacle and destroy the head (a more traditional form of destroying both vampires and zombies). The body can be beheaded, but that does not mean that the entity has been killed because there is a viscous liquid that holds hundreds of little worm-like viruses that spill out of the body looking for another host.¹³

¹² See World Health Organization (2016).

¹³ The uses of the word 'tentacles' also recall Matt Taibbi's critique of financial institutions that are like a "great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money" (Taibbi 2010).

Most poignantly, the directors themselves illustrate how viruses and genetic engineering are at the heart of their creations. In the past, film directors such as Murnau, Browning, and Méndez were, in a certain sense, mutating distinctive physical features and methods of infection. Del Toro and Hogan continue with the tradition of mutating vampiric entities by recombining two viral organisms –vampires’ and zombies’– that also recall Matheson’s renditions in *I Am Legend*. That is, *The Strain*’s creatures reflect how viruses not only mutate but pool with other strains mimicking how viruses "undergo subtle genetic changes through mutation and major genetic changes through recombination" (Fleischmann 1996). Furthermore, informed by an epidemiological paradigm, del Toro and Hogan also evoke a different type of virulent body in *The Strain*, which is not only vampiric, but zombielike. As in most vampire tales, once infected, victim’s skin turns pale and fangs surface. They, as would be expected, show irresistible hunger and seek out victims at night. However, they also resemble zombies because they decay in the process of transformation: they lose their hair, their nose, and genitals. Like vampires these entities drain blood from their victims and hide in underground tunnels at night, and like zombies, they emerge en masse to hunt. They might also eat victims’ brains, reminiscent of zombie behavior.¹⁴ In this series, the zombie and the vampire characteristics are combined into one, thus making them a frightening type of monster, whose annihilation is harder to achieve. Unless destroyed, they will bring about a worldwide pandemic. Through recombination the filmmakers create an army of heterogeneous vampiric entities, which include the Strigoi, the Feelers, and the Master.

Historically, vampires and zombies have been treated as two separate and distinct monsters. Vampires usually have been imagined as aristocratic and astute, whose bodies remain ageless and, at times, erotic. They are calculating and usually, after identifying their victim, slowly plot their seduction and demise. If it were not for their vulnerabilities to specific divine objects or ingredients (sunlight, holy water, crosses, and silver, for example), they could foreseeably succeed in their aim to dominate the world. Yet the Van Helsing-like, quintessential vampire killers, usually destroy the master and stop the spread. Zombies, also imagined as created through contagious disease, are mindless rotting bodies that pursue humans to convert them into victims, rapidly and exponentially. Zombies, like viruses, viscerally aim to infect and feed, yet they have no higher evil purpose as a vampire master might.

The slow-moving calculating vampires, along with their fangs, of yesteryear have become an outdated mode of reproduction in a fast moving intricately networked viral culture. Thus their societies and bites have been adapted to correspond to a new social reality susceptible to

¹⁴ See episode 1 of season 2.

pandemic diseases. By combining the zombie and vampire genetic qualities, del Toro and Hogan present viewers with powerful monsters that are sentient and cunning, like vampires, but also ravenous creatures that multiply exponentially, like zombies. To borrow Antonio Cordoba's term, they are "vampire-biozombies".¹⁵ Furthermore, unlike vampire movie plots – in which vampires secretly move within civil society and pose as humans during the night– zombie storylines usually unfold in post-apocalyptic settings, and the zombies attack openly, widely, and globally. In zombie narratives, the earth usually has been wrecked by climate change, epidemics, and nuclear fallout, among other life-destroying forces. The mass multiplication of zombielike vampires brings about a type of apocalypse reminiscent of plots already iterated in the novel *I Am Legend* (1954) and in films based on Matheson's novel *Last Man on Earth* (1964) directed by Ragona and Salkow; *Omega Man* (1971) directed by Sagal; and *I Am Legend* (2007) directed by Lawrence.

Thought Contagion

Contemporary vampire films also express an informational and technological angst escalating on a global scale. Nowadays, intricate webs made up of links and nodes allow for quick and extensive information exchange among users. Yet, these complex and interconnected systems also allow for the rapid transmission of computer viruses and contagious ideas (conspiracy theories, fake news) via malware, bots (short for robots), and memetic transmissions (memes), which can infect freely and reproduce exponentially. Much like how viruses infect a human body and perpetuate disease, the term "virus" is also used to speak of an idea that might poison the mind via misinformation. That is, virulence can be spread by humans but also dispersed among non-human entities via the worldwide web. In hidden networks, propaganda, like a disease, spreads within and throughout the web infecting the vulnerable, perhaps illustrating how frightful networks, such as ISIS or other terrorists might 'turn' people to join their army. Viruses, such as bots or malware, do not necessarily cause bodily harm but can destroy computers, businesses, economies, and perhaps even democracies. Particularly, the way misinformation is spread through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, highly networked systems might also seem to function like a pathogen. One person receives faulty information, perhaps perpetuated by a hostile actor or government, and these infectious ideas spread like a contagion. An apparent innocuous *meme* (defined as a virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea) also might have a profound effect in the public's understanding of the facts, thus undermining truth.

¹⁵ Personal communication, 19th of January 2018.

The Information Age contains within it an ominous double, the Misinformation Age that is infectious and destructive and undermining democracies. In our current environment, citizens may not be fully aware of how malicious bots or malware viruses function. Spreading untruths through social media, they misjudge how such fake news might spread, and perhaps contribute to the undermining of democracies, as recent events indicate.¹⁶ *The Strain's* plot echoes the ways in which citizens misconstrue their complicity due to the spread of misinformation. The rich mogul Eldritch Palmer is a willing accomplice, but he is misinformed and, therefore, misunderstands how this particular strain of vampire functions. The vampire at its core, as already mentioned, is a vector of disease that will infect his body, taking him hostage while annihilating his persona. His body will simply act as a temporary vehicle or a mortal vessel. Blinded by ambition, Palmer does not fully realize that, by inviting the vampire to enter his domain, he has also executed his own death sentence. The following quote from the novel illustrates how the vampire usually takes the form of someone else: "He has had many forms. Currently, he has taken the body of a Polish nobleman named Jusuf Sardu, who went missing during a hunting expedition in the north country of Romania, in the spring of 1873" (del Toro 2009: 302). Like Sardu, Palmer simply becomes the new host body and a shell of his former self.

The aforementioned examples illustrate how notions of virality permeate the text: It can refer to a biological material that infects humans, as well as to infectious ideas that spread throughout society via social networks. Vampires, as well as viral networks, serve as portentous metaphors that articulate unease about the cultural and economic present. Pandemics can infect the body, but might also condition the mind so that people behave in ways that are solely self-centered, lacking empathy. Moreover, the filmmakers' explicit contagious, viral, and networked vampires correspond to changing societies and economies of the twenty-first century. If the former filmic vampires of the previous century mostly belonged to a smaller aristocratic web, these newer entities correspond to a more expansive and virulent one. The social context in which *The Strain* exists, uncannily echoes, or perhaps foreshadows, the social realities under an informational, networked, and epidemiological paradigm illustrating a weakening of democracies, which are also becoming readymade victims for an authoritarian takeover. Democracies might become a decaying form of governance—a lifeless host shell—poisoned and replaced by a regime that can fully dominate, silence, and exploit everyday citizens. Through its vampiric entities *The Strain* portends that democracies might very well be on the path to becoming a body politic that once was.

¹⁶ See Emerging Technology from the arXiv (2017).

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