

Cussans, John. *Undead Uprising: Haiti, Horror, and the Zombie Complex*. London: Strange Attractor, 2017. ISBN 978-1907222474. 404pp. \$26.95 U.S.

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Zombies and “Voodoo” have long served as a shorthand in Anglo-American popular culture for the “barbaric” nature of Haiti and Haitians. In *Undead Uprising: Haiti, Horror and the Zombie Complex*, John Cussans charts this discursive and thematic network of (pseudo-)ethnographic, journalistic, and cinematic representations of Haiti that have served to dehumanize and demonize the nation since at least the events that began the Haitian Revolution in 1791. Cussans approaches the subject of the zombie and Vodou as a scholar of visual culture with background in cultural history. He seeks to demystify the portrayal of the nation in films and other cultural products by contextualizing their production in relation to contemporaneous socio-historic events that shaped Haitian relations with international powers (primarily the United States and France). Through this examination, Cussans elaborates a theory of the “Zombie Complex” mentioned in his title. He states that it “refers to a range of ethical, psychological, and political thought-problems clustered around the central figure of the living-corpse which, though ostensibly fictional, stubbornly reminds us of the horribly actual limits (or lack of limits) of humanity, the individual and the human” (iv). Through this nexus of ontological questions, he is able to link the “apocalyptic cannibal zombie” that emerged with George Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* to the Haitian folkloric zombie, typically a passive victim controlled by a Vodou sorcerer. His research dovetails in this manner with Kaiama Glover’s recent article, “‘Flesh like One’s Own’: Benign Denials of Legitimate Complaint” (*Public Culture*, 2017), which explores how the cannibal zombie can be related to the abject way Haiti is portrayed in American news media.

In the introduction to *Undead Uprising*, Cussans narrates his interest in the subjects of the book. He cites an early encounter with what he calls “Voodoo-horror” in a Hollywood B-movie,

and describes a connection with his doctoral work on imitative behavior in the British Video Nasty<sup>1</sup> controversy in the 1980s and in the work of French philosopher Georges Bataille. These references reflect the author's methodology, which includes critical analysis of sensationalistic popular culture read through the lens of philosophy and cultural history. Cussans examines the role of mimetic behavior as it relates to the Zombie Complex, offering a very interesting account of references to the purported role of Mesmerism in the Haitian Revolution. He examines how the practice—a precursor to hypnotism—arrived in colonial Saint-Domingue, and how it came to be viewed as playing a decisive role in the 1791 revolts inaugurating the Haitian revolution. Given his personal and professional background, Cussans identifies himself as “an armchair historian” (vi) of Haiti, yet his work is thoroughly researched with a highly critical eye towards the exoticizing and othering way in which Haitian Vodou is presented in Western media and popular narratives, even those with a purported journalistic or objective value. He makes extensive reference to critical work within the field of Haitian Studies, which anchors his discourse and helps it to serve as a corrective to the exploitative works he studies.

*Undead Uprising* is divided into two parts, each containing four chapters; the first examines the folkloric Haitian zombie, while the other tracks the evolution of the zombie into a violent flesh-hungry monster through the vehicle of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. The transition between the two major parts of the book is illustrated by a graph labeled “*fig ii* Axis of Living Death” (220) which offers a visual interpretation of the transformation of the zombie myth. The largely chronological organization allows the reader to better understand the changing but enduring significance of Vodou to representations of Haiti globally.

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<sup>1</sup> This series of public debates in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s was focused on a profusion of B-grade horror films that escaped censorship because they were produced on video cassette. The ensuing controversy led to the passing of the Video Recordings Act of 1984.

In the first chapter, the author studies William Seabrook's 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island*, which introduced the Haitian zombie to North American audiences. In addition to interrogating the zombie's role as justification for the U.S. Occupation of Haiti, the chapter elaborates on Bataille's significance to the Zombie Complex. Cussans notes a potential connection between the French philosopher and Seabrook through the intermediary of ethnographer Michel Leiris. The second chapter explores the concept of the individual being controlled by an external force through the phenomena of somnambulism, hypnotism and Mesmerism and, and the ways that these ideas influenced early zombie films such as the 1932 *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). In addition to studying contemporaneous accounts of Mesmerism around the time of the 1791 insurrections in Saint-Domingue, Cussans identifies what he calls the "Classical Cinematic zombie." He writes that "as the Haitian *zombi* finds a new form of spectral after-life in the medium of modern cinema, it becomes an allegory for states of mass mindlessness and economic powerlessness induced by remote, hypnotizing agents" (108). In the following chapter, the author analyzes how Haitian writers and scholars of the *Indigéniste* movement and the Griots sought to reclaim Vodou as part of Haiti's cultural heritage at the time of the U.S. Occupation and the anti-superstition campaign led by the Catholic church in the early 1940s. He also traces the transformation of the Bois Caïman ceremony through a textual genealogy. The final chapter in this section begins by chronicling the emergence and metamorphosis of a different Vodou icon: Baron Samedi. Cussans explores the popular association of François Duvalier with the *lwa* of death, interpreting it in light of the James Bond novel and film *Live and Let Die* (released in 1954 and 1973 respectively), offering an insightful take on the international origins of the figure of a Black supervillain. He brings this analysis to bear on the contexts of the Cold War, as well as international and national movements including *Noirisme* and the Black Panthers. The author notes in his conclusion that the "complex play of endogenous and exogenous representations of Haiti seem to have emerged most markedly during the Duvalier

era when the myth and reality of the Voodoo Dictator and the Zombie Nation became muddled by the play of cold war politics and covert intelligence operations” (352).

The second section of *Undead Uprising* investigates how George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) signaled a significant departure from the Haitian folkloric zombie, yet continued to engage with similar philosophical and ontological questions, as the film and its Black protagonist emerged against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement and other events marking significant social upheaval in the United States. Two decades later, after the cannibal zombie was widely established in North American popular culture, the horror film *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) renewed interest in the Haitian zombie. Cussans considers how the work, based on the book of the same name by ethnobotanist Wade Davis, also revives stereotypes about Haiti during the AIDS crisis and at the end of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s dictatorial rule. In the following chapter investigating the 2006 docu-drama *Ghosts of Cité Soleil*, Cussans extends his theory of the Zombie Complex to the *Chimères*—both the idea of hybrid, mythic monsters and the gangs from Port-au-Prince associated with Jean-Bertrand Aristide during his second presidential term. Finally, the book concludes with an examination of the lesser-known film *A Voodoo Possession* (2014), which continues the denigrating representation of Vodou in Haiti in a post-2010 context. While the film seems to refer to the squandering of billions of dollars in aid by NGOs following the earthquake—its premise is that an American must travel to Haiti following his brother’s disappearance with “thousands of dollars of earthquake relief money” (339)—Cussans argues that *A Voodoo Possession* ultimately reveals nothing about the country.

The primary strength of *Undead Uprising* lies in Cussans’ thorough intellectual and textual histories of concepts and events central to Haitian national identity (as represented both in the global and local imaginaries). For example, his charting of the shifting narratives of the 1791 Bois Caïman ceremony and of Baron Samedi are particularly fascinating case studies. As for any weaknesses in the

text, readers interested in the work for its contributions to the field of *Zombie Studies* should note that only the first two chapters of each section pertain directly to the monster despite the title's emphasis on the living dead. However, the work does make up for this through its clear and convincing elaboration of the *Zombie Complex*, which puts the zombie figure into relation with other figures such as Baron Samedi. Scholars of literature and cinema might wish for less plot summary and more close-readings of cinematic and popular prose texts, and those who seek perspectives on French and Francophone Studies may be disappointed by the lack of references to significant literary works in French by writers such as Dany Laferrière (although Cussans does refer to René Depestre's *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude*).

Cussans' *Undead Uprising* offers an important, critical and well-researched account of the ways Haiti has been (mis)represented through the lens of "Voodoo-horror"—a topic that remains very timely (unfortunately). It will serve as a valuable resource for anyone interested in understanding the ways Haiti has been portrayed since the late-eighteenth century, and how international relations have shaped such popular culture and mass media representations. Indeed, Cussans has succeeded in his attempt "to look through the refracted image of a diabolical Haiti to the real Haiti that ostensibly lies beyond" (vi). For this reason, teachers of Haitian studies, zombie studies, and history will also find his accessible writing a useful resource in the classroom.