

Article

“Still Cool as a Zombie”: *Community*, the Zombie Aesthetic, and the Politics of Belonging

Colin A. Cox

Humanities Department, Northeast State Community College, Blountville, TN 37617, USA;
cacox@northeaststate.edu

Abstract: From *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022), zombie media offers a consistent refrain, namely to avoid becoming a zombie. This refrain makes intuitive sense. Why would anyone welcome becoming a member of a roaming, mindless, and often violent undead horde symbolizing humanity’s destruction? However, zombification has affirmative, emancipatory possibilities. In “Epidemiology,” from Season 2 of the NBC sitcom *Community* (2009–2015), we see the zombie’s affirmative and emancipatory potential. In this essay, I argue zombification enlivens *Community* by provoking the show to rethink its relationship to its nominal protagonist, Jeff Winger, and to itself as a piece of avant-garde comedy television produced during the “Golden Age of Television,” what media scholars also call, “Peak” or “Prestige TV.” In this episode, *Community* evolves its understanding of its central protagonist by shifting, in some respects, from a conventional and historically predictable character to a character far less conventional.

Keywords: zombie; *Community*; Dan Harmon; film; television; psychoanalysis; affect theory

1. Introduction

On 17 September 2009, the pilot episode of NBC’s *Community* (2009–2015) aired. Over its six seasons (five on NBC and one on the now-defunct Yahoo! Screen), *Community* gained a cult following, thanks in no small part to its sharp writing, strong performances, and intertextual playfulness. Season 1 episodes such as “Contemporary American Poultry” and “Modern Warfare” cement the show’s reputation for demanding but satisfying intertextual play. By using the referential codes found in many postmodern texts, *Community* situates itself as a sibling text to many television shows that rose in popularity during the early 21st century. Shows like *Arrested Development* and *30 Rock*, for example, became popular and developed a dedicated following, thanks in part to the challenges of their intertextuality and referentiality. In *Complex TV*, Jason Mittell suggests “comprehension is shaped by the intersection of a television text and a viewer’s contextual background within the cognitive process of watching a program” (Mittell 2015, p. 198). Writing specifically about *Community*, Laura Detmering echoes Mittell’s point: “Much of the experience, both intellectually and emotionally, of watching a series like *Community* is being ‘in’ on the joke, feeling that one is part of the community” (Detmering 2014, p. 39). Unlike early television, many shows in the late 20th and throughout the early 21st century operate under the assumption that viewers want and appreciate the challenges of a more ambitious approach to writing, directing, and producing. While *Community* makes specific references to other media, their broad, what creator and show-runner Dan Harmon calls “homage”, episodes are the ones viewers seem to appreciate the most.

Pivoting from this idea that *Community* homage episodes garner the most appreciation from fans and critics alike, in this essay, I address the Season 2 *Community* episode “Epidemiology.” This episode pays homage to zombie films and zombie media. In addition to analyzing how *Community* uses zombie media and the zombie aesthetic, I also explore how this episode’s references to zombies reads *Community*, especially concerning one of



Citation: Cox, Colin A. 2024. “Still Cool as a Zombie”: *Community*, the Zombie Aesthetic, and the Politics of Belonging. *Humanities* 13: 117.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/h13050117>

Received: 21 August 2024

Revised: 5 September 2024

Accepted: 9 September 2024

Published: 11 September 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

the show's Black characters (Troy, played by Donald Glover), and to that point, television's treatment of Black characters. Specifically, I argue this episode introduces what becomes the show's growing anxiety with its protagonist, Jeff Winger (Joel McHale). I use psychoanalytic theory (principally Slavoj Žižek and Todd McGowan) to illustrate how Jeff operates as an authority guiding and determining Troy's desire, at least for a time. Despite the power imbalance between these two characters at this point in the show, Troy supplants Jeff in this episode because he becomes a figure of impossibility in ways Jeff cannot. I also consider the significance of Troy's race in relation to the horror genre. I use several ideas lifted from Kevin Wynter's critical study of *Get Out* to complement my understanding of Troy as a figure of impossibility. I also articulate why zombie media is the perfect vehicle for an exploration of the show's growing anxiety with its presumed protagonist. In Section 3, I use affect theory (principally Mari Ruti and Sara Ahmed) to understand what this episode of *Community* says about the zombie genre. While all horror is *affective* in a theoretical sense, "Epidemiology" does more than plagiarize genre tropes to deliver a fun episode of television. Dan Harmon's insistence that episodes like "Epidemiology" are more than spoofs¹ encourages audiences to think not only about the forms these episodes take but also the affective possibilities they offer. In short, most representations of zombification cast it as a horrifying possibility to fear and avoid, but I argue that "Epidemiology" reveals the affirmative contours of the zombie. Ironically enough, zombification enlivens *Community* by provoking the show to rethink its relationship to its nominal protagonist and to itself.

2. The Zombie and the Zombie Film

Since George A. Romero's wildly popular *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), zombies, both metaphorically and psychologically, have occupied a special place in popular media. J.C. Macek III sees the fascination with Romero's film and by extension, zombies, as the product of a film brimming with "biting social satire" (Macek 2012). While social satire is far from a novel idea in the horror genre, like all monsters, zombies must also and do provoke both fear and fascination. R. H. W. Dillard characterizes our fear of zombies as "a fear of the dead and particularly of the known dead, of dead kindred" (Dillard 1987, p. 15). Writing specifically in reference to receptions of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), James McFarland suggests that zombies are "an open-ended metaphor and the most literal depiction possible" (McFarland 2015, p. 26) of, according to J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, "America devouring itself" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1990, p. 125). McFarland concludes that scholars have a "fundamental difficulty in accounting for the strange inevitability of these unprecedented monsters" (McFarland 2015, p. 26).

As McFarland suggests, this "fundamental difficulty" of accounting for zombies may be due in no small part to their lack of a clear literary antecedent. According to Kyle William Bishop, the zombie is "a fundamentally American creation" (Bishop 2010, p. 13). Bishop continues with the following: "it [the zombie] is also perhaps the most unique member of the monster pantheon; that is, although creatures such as ghosts, werewolves, vampires, and reanimated corpses were also born in the depths of folk tradition, the zombie is the only supernatural foe to have almost entirely skipped an initial literary manifestation" (Bishop 2010, pp. 12–13). Since, according to Bishop, the zombie "has no germinal Gothic novel from which it stems" (Bishop 2010, p. 13), it seems at home in film and television. In this respect, the zombie feels like an itinerant figure, which complements the physical characteristics we often associate with zombies, such as roaming, listless, and precarious. Plus, unlike other canonical monsters, zombies often move in hordes, which in this respect, makes it challenging for anyone to identify a particular zombie as a formerly non-zombified person.² All of this is to say, the particularized iterations of the zombie (i.e., each zombie in particular texts of zombie media) mirror their dubious literary origins.³

Another reason why the zombie poses such a challenge is because they embody a clear contradiction. In their anthology on the zombie as a "post-human" phenomenon, Sarah Juliet Lauro and Deborah Christie describe the zombie as "an apt icon for the post-human in its frustrating antipathy: Just as the post-human will always assert what the human is by

that which it supposes itself to be beyond, the zombie both is, and is not, dead and alive” (Christie and Lauro 2011, p. 2). McFarland also echoes this point by suggesting “the zombie-image has no positive content whatsoever but rather accidentally registers a profound crisis in human self-representation” (McFarland 2015, p. 42). McFarland punctuates this point by calling the zombie “a manifestation of a new impossibility of correlating nature and human significance in any durable way” (McFarland 2015, p. 42). The zombie is far from unique in its capacity to embody contradiction, but unlike the vampire,⁴ for example, the zombie heightens the contradiction of appearing alive while being dead, since in its reanimated state, the zombie often appears distinctly, unmistakably alive and dead.

Robin Wood offers one of the earliest and most important pieces of scholarship about zombie films in his heavily anthologized essay, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” which was recently included in the horror anthology *The Monster Theory Reader*. While analyzing *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), he claims “Above all, *I Walked with a Zombie* explicitly locates horror at the heart of the family, identifying it with sexual repressiveness in the cause of preserving family unity” (Wood 2020). He also suggests that the best zombie films explore the fact that “no one escapes contamination” (Wood 2020). As I discuss later, “Epidemiology” understands this fear of ubiquitous contamination, since no character enjoys a privileged position free from contamination. By choosing zombies instead of, for example, vampires, mythological figures often understood as selective, even elitist, we see *Community* reinforcing one of its overarching, existential claims that everyone has a place here (i.e., Greendale Community College) because the thing we share, the unavoidable ontological reality that defines us all, is our lack of belonging, which is to say, our inability to fit seamlessly into any social order. In this respect, the zombie, this roaming, unrelenting hoard, is the perfect affirmative metaphor for *Community* as a show.

However, a survey of zombie scholarship is incomplete without some attention paid to the zombie’s Haitian roots. “The zombie archetype,” as Mike Mariani writes, “was a projection of the African slaves’ relentless misery and subjugation” (Mariani 2015). Additionally, according to Hans Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier, “The victim [zombie] becomes a slave of the sorcerer who zombified it” (Ackermann and Gauthier 1991, p. 474). Amy Wilentz suggests “Death was better than slavery for many” because while it was “bad to be a slave. Worse would be to die and discover that, rather than returning to Africa, you continued to be enslaved as a dead person, run by a master, doing his bidding” (Wilentz n.d.). Sarah Juliet Lauro sees “the zombie horde of twentieth-century cinema” as “the specter of the angry mob,” but “in the Haitian zombie, we see an allegory of slavery” (Lauro 2015, p. 7). For Lauro, we should complicate “the figure of the zombie as we conceptualize it today” and instead realize how the zombie “began as a figure allegorizing the plight of the colonial slave” (Lauro 2015, p. 8). In short, “The contemporary zombie is the descendant of an immigrant mythology heralding from the French colony of Saint Dominique, which would become the nation of Haiti after a thirteen-year battle between rebel slaves and free blacks and several European armies” (Lauro 2015, p. 8). But one of the reasons why the zombie lacks a literary antecedent is because the zombie’s history is one we understand “through the literary fragments of empire, histories written almost entirely by the colonial oppressors, slaveholders, and French and Spanish monks” (Lauro 2015, p. 8). These sparse textual fragments, in conjunction with the zombie’s slavery metaphor origin, leads Lauro to harbor ambivalence toward the popularity of the zombie in popular media. We cannot forget that “in the case of the zombie we find a myth that is centrally important to the national identity of Haiti being appropriated by its former colonizers and occupiers” (Lauro 2015, p. 11). Therefore, any attempts to understand and explicate contemporary concerns by deploying the zombie-as-slave metaphor runs the risk of indulging, whether intentional or not, in “second-degree blackface” through “an appropriation of a people’s cultural narrative of struggle and empowerment for entertainment purposes” (Lauro 2015, p. 11).

A misrepresentation of Lauro’s position might suggest that any intellectual property that uses zombies must do so with a full and complete understanding of the zombie’s Haitian roots. In effect, when we use zombies, we must do so with complete fidelity to

its sources. This is a mistake and clearly not what Lauro means. Instead, she cautions writers, filmmakers, producers, and, frankly, anyone in creative positions, to use the zombie with caution. As Linda Hutcheon writes regarding the art of adaptation, “An adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (Hutcheon 2006, p. 9). Therefore, creators at large have a license to do whatever they like with the zombie. However, by not attending to the complex political history the zombie entails, one risks, in a sense, zombifying the zombie by rendering it less than what it is and stripping it of its radical political contours. With “Epidemiology,” *Community* attends to the zombie’s complex political history by staging a confrontation with the sitcom’s political history. That is to say, there are reasons why characters like Jeff are often the default choice for a show’s protagonist and characters like Troy are an aberration.

This brief and far-from-exhaustive survey of zombie scholarship illustrates the challenges anyone faces when reckoning with zombies, at least theoretically. But if someone finds themselves in an apocalyptic zombie situation, part of the challenge is simply not knowing the kind of zombie they may encounter. Zombie media from the past two decades illustrates the symbolic and embodied elasticity of the zombie. In *28 Days Later* (2002) and *World War Z* (2013), zombies are extremely fast, which enhances how formidable they are while challenging certain established genre expectations. Yet, in the romantic zombie comedy *Warm Bodies* (2013), thanks in no small part to genre expectations, the zombie threat feels less acute. Once again, I repeat the claim Sarah Juliet Lauro and Deborah Christie make regarding zombies. They suggest zombies embody a “frustrating antipathy” because they are “both . . . dead and alive” (Christie and Lauro 2011, p. 2). Therefore, we must understand the zombie (both the literal figures and the genre) as an embodiment of contradiction, and this explains why the psychoanalysis in Section II and affect theory in Section III are useful; psychoanalysis and affect theory are theoretical models that value and champion contradiction. By appearing so unstable, which is to say, contradictory, the zombie offers endless potential and possibility. From George A. Romero’s critique of American culture in 1970s cinema to the exploration of sitcom protagonists in *Community*, the zombie is an ever-shifting signifier and by remaining flexible, it allows for impossibilities.

3. *Community* through the Zombie Film

“Oh, Great! Nobody’s Special!”—Jeff Winger, “Epidemiology”

From the show’s pilot episode, Harmon clearly identifies his protagonist, namely Jeff Winger (Joel McHale). Jeff is a disgraced, recently disbarred, fraudulent lawyer (he lacks a degree of any kind, which explains his presence at Greendale Community College). There are narrative and non-narrative ways *Community* frames Jeff as the protagonist. In the pilot, Jeff experiences an episode-specific micro-arc that the show repeats in future episodes and seasons. For Jeff, he often transforms from a figure of reluctance to acceptance, but his defining characteristic is reluctance.

In the pilot episode, he masquerades as a Spanish language tutor and forms a study group to assist his struggling classmates. But his unspoken intentions are far more nefarious. Jeff concocts these machinations to sleep with Britta (Gillan Jacobs), the attractive, mysterious student from his Spanish class. To his surprise, Britta invites Abed (Danny Pudi) to join and he, in turn, invites Troy (Donald Glover), Pierce (Chevy Chase), Shirley (Yvette Nicole Brown), and Annie (Allison Brie). These six characters become “The Study Group.” After manipulating the group to fight with one another, thus creating discord, which he hopes will persuade Britta to leave, Jeff offers a rousing monologue that speaks to the importance of “community.” Much like a Shakespearean comedy, conflict, separation, and discontent end with a reunion, which symbolizes both narrative closure and the return of social stability. But to his chagrin, Britta reveals his machinations. As a result, Jeff becomes a figure of exclusion (a common narrative motif for the show). Jeff often fluctuates between inclusion and exclusion throughout the series, especially in Season 1. Reluctance becomes Jeff’s defining characteristic and, for Harmon, the defining characteristic of the

ideal protagonist, at least in Season 1. Jeff's inability to commit to this nascent friend group equips *Community* with a steady, predictable arc for its protagonist.⁵

However, the pilot offers a second moment of reconciliation. After revealing Jeff's sinister plot and expelling him from the study group, he leaves the study room and sits outside the library alone. The study group finds him and invites him back. Britta says, "You know what, Jeff, actually, we didn't get that far without you, so if you want to come back upstairs . . ." to which Jeff responds, "Really?" and Britta replies, "Well, it is your study group." (Harmon et al. 2009, 00:20:15–00:20:32). This second moment of reconciliation further solidifies Jeff's status as the show's protagonist. After Britta's invitation, Jeff follows the group back inside the library, a symbolic gesture that underscores his decision to accept his dual responsibilities as both member and leader. This is far from an easy decision for Jeff, and the Russo brothers emphasize this point with one of the final shots of the episode. In this wide shot (see Figure 1), we see Jeff sitting alone on the library steps. All of the other study group members return to the study room as Jeff remains, contemplating his decision. Because of sitcom conventions, we know Jeff will join his study group, but by including this shot, the Russo brothers emphasize the consistent challenge of this decision (i.e., the decision to return and not to run).



Figure 1. Jeff outside the library from "Pilot".

While Jeff functions as the show's overarching protagonist, he has competition. Troy has a compelling five-season arc that renders him an unlikely but ultimately preferable protagonist.⁶ There are several reasons why Troy's evolution is surprising. In early Season 1 episodes, Troy functions as the "dumb, jock archetype." Harmon is far from subtle with Troy's characterization. Troy was the captain of the football team in high school, and in the pilot episode, he wears his letterman's jacket. Troy also lacks conventional forms of academic intelligence.⁷ Unlike Annie, Troy is a poor student who often misunderstands suggestive comments and jokes. In Season 3, Abed succinctly describes Troy's character by saying

Troy will hold on until he is broken emotionally, fortunately, this will not be hard. He gets distracted by loud noises, the color red, smooth jazz, shiny things, food smells, music boxes, bell-bottoms, boobs, barking dogs, and anyone saying "Look, over there!" He's insecure about his level of intelligence. His greatest vulnerability of all is his emotional frailty. It's incredibly easy to make him cry, and he's incredibly ashamed of that fact" (Bobrow and Shapeero 2012, 00:13:30–00:13:51).

Troy lacks academic acumen, but he compensates with emotional intelligence. Unlike Jeff, Troy is a far more emotionally intelligent character who grows into his emotional

intelligence as he sheds his jock persona. It is also important to emphasize that Troy is young and Black. The history of Black representation in television is complicated. As Stephanie Troutman Robbins suggests

Early television really reflected a very narrow representation of non-white characters. And a lot of the earlier characters were caricatures and racist depictions in many ways . . . In the '80s, *The Cosby Show* depicted a Black affluent family who were different from the way that Blacks were mostly portrayed in mainstream TV at the time. But in the show, issues were not dealt with in a very racially specific way . . . As you get more representation, the representation gets more varied, more complex. (Harwood 2022)

Despite almost two decades of separation, *Community* feels more like *The Cosby Show* in its unwillingness to tackle racial narratives meaningfully. Of course, *Community* references race, but those references never evolve into something more substantial. So, when the show elects to mention or reference race, it does so superficially with jokes. Pierce and Chang (Ken Jong) are the worst offenders, constantly making provocative jokes about a myriad of taboo topics, most notably race. Therefore, *Community* would rather ignore race entirely or make it fodder for the show's two edge lords than meaningfully engage with it.

While *Community* avoids explicit, protracted narratives about race, it at least seems aware of racial tropes within certain established genres. This is one of the reasons why "Epidemiology" is such an important episode. "Epidemiology" is one of the first extended instances where *Community* frames Troy as the show's protagonist, and it does so with an homage to a genre (horror) that has systemically excluded, exploited, and marginalized Black characters (Burgin 2019). This episode is also one of the first times Troy actively rejects his jock archetype. As Amanda Riter suggests, "Though the plot of the episode appears to be traversing the unconscious world of zombies, it is actually about Troy venturing into his own unconscious to deal with his self-confidence" (Riter 2014, Location 635). But before exploring the episode's treatment of race and horror, I want to unpack the episode's rejection of Jeff as the show's protagonist. This is important because the episode foregrounds Troy's ascension as an explicit rejection of Jeff's ideologies, values, and assumptions.

Troy's introduction in "Epidemiology" seems unassuming, yet it suggests the symbolic journey he travels throughout the episode. Troy's best friend and constant companion, Abed, pretends to attack several girls while costumed as the Xenomorph from the sci-fi franchise *Alien*. Troy wears a low-budget version of the yellow power loader suit Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) uses to defeat the Xenomorph (Figure 2). After Troy successfully defeats his enemy, he says to the two girls, "You're safe now, but if that thing comes back, I'm gonna need one or both of your phone numbers" (Dornetto and Hemmingway 2010, 00:03:04–00:03:09). Clearly, he and Abed staged this scene to impress the girls, but they are not impressed.

By having Troy costumed as Ellen Ripley from *Aliens* (1986), the episode frames him as an unconventional protagonist. Robert Kelley claims that "Ripley is inherently reflective of changing times" because she "plays a pivotal role in representation and moving away from male dominated science fiction and female oversexualization" (Kelley 2019, p. 17). Echoing Kelley's sentiments, Michaela Barton calls Ripley "ahead of their time, never succumbing to the ditsy, screeching, clumsy model that haunted the screen for decades" (Barton 2020). Barton continues, stating that "The main conflicts driving Ripley's story revolves around their refusal to fit neatly into the boxes of motherhood and seductress" (Barton 2020). All of this is to say that Ripley was a refreshing aberration for the time. Therefore, the episode offers a connection between the pioneering work we see with Weaver in *Aliens* (1986) and what this episode hopes to do with Troy. Ripley's "refusal" mirrors Troy's, but Troy's refusal comes with a predictable Harmon-esque narrative arc that begins with a rejection.



Figure 2. Troy, wearing the yellow power loader suit from “Epidemiology”.

Immediately after the two girls reject Troy, he and Jeff discuss how to successfully court a woman. Jeff’s advice is conventional enough.

Troy: I don’t get it. How do you do it?

Jeff: Well, I’m wearing a \$6000 suit, and you spent three days making cardboard robot armor.

Troy: Saying they feel sorry for you?

Jeff: I’m saying I remind girls less of taking their little brothers to Comic-Con ([Dornetto and Hemmingway 2010](#), 00:03:18–00:03:34).

By asking Jeff how he does it, Troy sees Jeff as this supreme authority or omnipotent other.⁸ Unlike the other members of the study group, Jeff attends the costume party as a celebrity, specifically David Beckham. While it is not uncommon for people to attend costume parties as sports stars, Jeff does so in a way that seems mature, especially compared to Abed and Troy’s juvenile costume choices. For example, he wears a “\$6000 suit,” and aside from an obligatory soccer ball, he carries no additional signifiers that one would associate with David Beckham. Without prior knowledge, one would think Jeff came dressed as “guy in suit.” This suggests an unwillingness to commit, which is indicative of Jeff as a character. More often than not, and especially at the beginning of this episode, Troy’s enthusiasm and commitment are troubling; Jeff’s hesitancy and ambivalence are laudable. But this is where the episode’s zombie metaphor becomes important. Instead of seeming cool, distant, and interesting, this episode shows Jeff’s conformist impulses. While unsuccessful in his attempts to woo the two nameless girls at the party, Troy initially seems wholly original⁹ and Jeff, despite his best efforts, does not. Troy spent three days making a unique costume while Jeff looks like a handsome face in a nice suit. Despite appearing composed, collected, and fashionable, this episode reinforces Jeff’s fragility, which complements Slavoj Žižek’s point in *How to Read Lacan* regarding a symbolic authority of this stripe as “insubstantial, properly virtual, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only in so far as subjects *act as if it exists*” (Žižek 2006, p. 10). That is to say, at least regarding my reading of this episode, Troy’s insistence on recognizing Jeff as the figure of authority is the very thing that substantiates him. Without Troy’s recognition of Jeff as this authority figure, Jeff would cease to have any real or imagined power, and this is a point *Community* emphasizes not only in this episode but throughout the show’s six seasons.

Troy’s disappointment after hearing Jeff infantilize him is a moment that activates something in Troy, what psychoanalysis calls desire. Jeff, therefore, teaches or guides Troy because of Troy’s insistence on elevating him to this position of supreme authority. To

liberate himself beyond this ineffectual, lacking subject who cannot successfully court girls at a party, Troy believes he must not only think like Jeff but desire as Jeff desires.¹⁰ If he can do this, then he can transcend his lack and become a non-lacking figure of authority, like Jeff. In this sense, Jeff becomes, at least momentarily, a fantasy figure. To quote Slavoj Žižek in *Looking Awry*, “Through fantasy, we learn how to desire” (Žižek 1991, p. 6). But Troy’s initial error occurs when he falsely assumes his fantasy image of Jeff might offer transcendence. To no one’s surprise, we next see Troy in a new costume. He is basically naked, with the exception of two toilet paper rolls as wristbands and a flushable toilet seat cover as a necklace. He tells Abed that he is “trying something new” and that he is “sexy Dracula” (“Epidemiology” 00:05:06–00:05:25). In his attempt to appear sexy and attractive, Troy tries to interpret Jeff’s desire. As Troy understands it, to become the object of a woman’s attraction, one must be, at the very least, “sexy Dracula.” However, it is clear to anyone watching the show that Troy’s attempt to present himself as Jeff fails.¹¹ Troy substitutes Jeff’s \$6000 suit with whatever he can find in the college’s bathroom. We should not, however, criticize Troy for misrecognizing Jeff’s desire; by definition, psychoanalysis understands the importance of misrecognition. Plus, any and all attempts to ascertain the other’s desire will fail because in elevating Jeff the way Troy does, he has, in effect, rendered him an elusive, fantastical, yet ultimately formless (i.e., “insubstantial”) figure. Just as language or any symbolic structure succeeds only in so far as it fails, so too do fantasy and desire. For psychoanalysis, concepts such as desire and fantasy operate as impossibilities.

Yet fantasy serves an important purpose if the subject orients themselves to it correctly. Todd McGowan closes his book-length study of David Lynch films by suggesting “Fantasy allows us to discover our freedom only when we cease regarding it as an escape from our reality and begin to see it as more real than our reality. The real becomes visible in the obvious fakery of the fantasy” (McGowan 2007, p. 223). For McGowan, fantasy must cease operating as a private, privileged psychic space. By acknowledging the power of one’s fantasy, one “privileges the gap in the structure of ideology” (McGowan 2007, p. 223). Near the end of the episode, Troy survives, at least momentarily, by escaping the zombie-infested library. However, he decides to return to save his friends and everyone in attendance from “[getting] brain damage” (Dornetto and Hemmingway 2010, 00:16:11–00:16:12). Troy returns adorned in the *Aliens* (1986) costume from the beginning of the episode, a gesture he characterizes as “being a nerd” (Dornetto and Hemmingway 2010, 00:16:24–00:16:26). This is not, however, the fantasmatic moment of acknowledgment in this scene. Troy’s attempt to save everyone by cloaking himself in Ripley’s yellow power loader suit fails spectacularly (Figure 3). The zombie horde immediately overwhelms him and to his surprise, a zombified Abed bites him. Troy immediately feels the effects of the virus and falls to the ground. As he crawls to the thermostat,¹² he sees a zombified Jeff, aloof and texting on his phone. As he claws helplessly on the ground, he says, “Jeff, still cool as a zombie” (Dornetto and Hemmingway 2010, 00:17:40–00:17:54). Troy inflects his reading of this line with sincerity. Unlike Jeff, Troy refuses to use this moment to offer a detached, ironic quip. However, the framing of both characters offers a thought-provoking juxtaposition. Troy crawls and fights to save his friends while Jeff remains stationary. The episode punctuates Jeff’s status as a stationary figure by having him assume the same posture after the zombie effects dissipate. While Troy may not articulate “the obvious fakery of the fantasy,” the episode does. The episode challenges Troy’s fantasmatic conception of Jeff. A zombified Jeff is practically indistinguishable from a non-zombified Jeff (Figure 4). The episode suggests Jeff’s transition to and then from zombification is, at best, a nominal distinction. Previous episodes made audiences aware of Jeff’s superficiality, but as the show’s nominal hero, *Community* primed audiences to see Jeff as a potential figure of reformation.¹³ The zombie aesthetic works to emphasize the ways in which Jeff is not the show’s protagonist or hero; he is the show’s zombie.



Figure 3. Troy saving the school in the yellow power loader suit from “Epidemiology”.



Figure 4. Jeff as a zombie from “Epidemiology”.

Understanding this episode for how it not only appropriates zombie narratives but challenges its own diegetic logic requires careful consideration of the horror genre’s treatment of race, specifically Black characters. Anyone familiar with the horror genre knows it is a genre replete with tropes. For example, Carol J. Clover, in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, theorizes “the final girl” as “the designated victim, the audience incorporate, the slashing, ripping, and tearing of whose body will cause us to flinch and scream in our seats” (Clover 2015, p. 59). Kevin Wynter in *Critical Race Theory and Jordan Peele’s Get Out* acknowledges “Clover’s concept of the final girl identifies an important trend that overturns fixed notion of survivability in the horror genre,” yet “there are some narrative elements that remain consistent despite this blurring of protagonist gender lines” (Wynter 2022, p. 70). For Wynter, those gendered “narrative elements that remain consistent” have an unmistakable racial valence. He writes that “The final girl is almost inevitably *the final white girl*” (Wynter 2022, p. 71). Abed understands the racial dimensions of the horror genre when, moments before he succumbs to the zombie horde, he says to Troy, “Make me proud. Be the first Black man to get to the end” (Dornetto and Hemmingway 2010, 00:15:33–00:15:35). Abed asks Troy to transcend the racial boundaries of the horror genre, the sense, as Wynter’s describes it, that “Blackness in the cultural imaginary is generically comprehensible only within inflexible and highly restricted narrative positions” (Wynter 2022, p. 83). Surveying one thousand horror films with more than fifteen hundred Black characters (ranging from minor roles to non-speaking, nameless characters), Robin

R. Means Coleman and Mark H. Harris conclude “their mortality rate to be about 45%” (Means Coleman and Harris 2023, p. 9). In short, to be Black and to find oneself in a horror film is a precarious proposition.

But unlike many horror films that insist someone survives, which is to say, someone (i.e., the final girl) lives, “Epidemiology” refuses to treat Troy as this figure of exception. As I mentioned earlier, Troy re-enters the school to save everyone from this novel zombie virus and by doing so, he succumbs to the infection after Abed bites him. Troy’s heroic decision, symbolically recognizable as Troy embracing Greendale, whereas Jeff, by contrast, impulsively rejects it, casts him in a fundamentally different cadence from many Black characters in the horror genre. In stark opposition to Wynter’s claim that “Black characters in horror films possess sharper faculties of common sense than their white counterparts,” Troy exercises a surprising lack of common sense (Wynter 2022, p. 129). Troy has witnessed what this virus does to people, yet any self-preservation instincts evaporate. Ironically enough, throughout the show, Jeff, the white, cis, heterosexual, and able-bodied character, is the one who seems the most self-possessed and commonsensical. But Jeff’s motivations are different. His reluctance to commit, to seem above and beyond it all, is an expression of deep anxiety and uncertainty disconnected from any historical, systemic oppression¹⁴.

With all of that said, how can we account for Troy’s decision to expose himself to a virus that might zombify him? Again, I return to Wynter and his reading of *Get Out*. He writes that “What the final brother¹⁵ comes to discover is that there was no ‘normality’ to begin with and thus there is no ‘normality’ to restore; there is no possibility of a return to equilibrium” (Wynter 2022, p. 147). While characters in the show often characterize Greendale as an odd, incoherent, and non-normative space, Troy seems to feel this the most¹⁶. Yet, acknowledging Greendale’s lack of normality propels Troy instead of immobilizing him. Troy can act once all hope is lost. As counter-intuitive as it sounds, Troy acts once he embraces the impossibility of any action working. Like Wynter’s final brother, Troy rejects any restorative appeals because, as Wynter suggests, “there was no ‘normality’ to begin with,” yet this knowledge liberates Troy in ways that restorative appeals cannot. Greendale operates as the perfect location for emancipation because, throughout the show’s six seasons, the study group (the main cast of characters) realizes that any attempts or calls to restore Greendale are impossible because they cannot return to or restore what never existed. Greendale, therefore, is the perpetual location of the impossible act. Todd McGowan argues that “The genuine political act must occupy the place of the impossible” (McGowan 2022, p. 17). This means radical, emancipatory acts occur in relation to what seems possible. To accomplish “the impossible” for McGowan means “to break from the field of given possibility with a society and change the social coordinates” (McGowan 2022, p. 17). For McGowan, the genuine political act shifts the very terrain of a political structure. To think in an impossible way means one always searches for what a particular political structure refuses. Therefore, Troy’s privileged position as the one character to see the horrors of this zombie virus, escape, and then return punctuates his status as not only an emancipatory figure of impossibility but also the show’s understanding of what it wants its protagonist to ultimately be. Troy’s awareness that a return to normalcy is impossible animates him, and this perspective places him in stark contrast to a character like Jeff, the consummate cynic. Zombification, therefore, becomes a signifier of impossibility because of what it *renders* possible.

In “Epidemiology,” *Community* shifts our understanding of the zombie and the horror most narratives associate with it. While audiences are right to think that “Epidemiology” cannot end with the show’s cast remaining zombies forever, *Community* exercises Wynter’s point about the fallacy of normalcy to reconstruct its relationship to its presumed protagonist. Troy sees what Jeff cannot, the power of impossibility.¹⁷

4. The Zombie Film through *Community*

“Creativity is a function of self-limitation rather than of unbounded freedom” (p. 34).
-Mari Ruti, *Reinventing the Soul*.

In the previous section, I sketched a reading of the *Community* episode “Epidemiology” through the zombie film. In this final section, I want to explore what a reading of the zombie film through “Epidemiology” can teach us and how it can expand our understanding of the zombie aesthetic. In short, I will argue that affect theory’s valorizing of “in-between-ness” masterfully articulates the contradictory, even ill-defined ontology of not only “Epidemiology” but also the zombie.¹⁸

In the introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, editors Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg claim that affect “arises in the midst of in-between-ness” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, p. 1). They suggest affects themselves are, definitionally, imprecise, contradictory, and best understood in dialectical terms. Seigworth and Gregg close the opening paragraph of *The Affect Theory Reader* by writing that “Affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, p. 1). Here, Seigworth and Gregg identify an important dimension of affect theory, namely the body and the body’s complicated relationship to its embodied state. Writing specifically of contagions, both epidemiological and emotional, Anna Gibbs argues that “Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear—in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion” (Gibbs 2001). For Gibbs, we fail to acknowledge the complexities of how we exist in the world and how the world exists in us when we clearly differentiate between our bodies and the variety of stimuli, both good and bad, that exist outside our bodies. Therefore, a liberating but potentially unsettling aspect of affect theory is its insistence on disrupting what would otherwise seem like clear boundaries. But Gibbs also insists on affect theory’s ability to see connections or “continuities between things that were once held to be discrete, and discontinuity and difference where once there was sameness” (Gibbs 2010, p. 189). Elspeth Probyn succinctly characterizes this contradictory dynamic by suggesting “The unifying point seems to be that strong affect radically disrupts different relations of proximity” (Probyn 2010, p. 86). These “different relations of proximity” come in many forms, but affect theory emphasizes the discomfort of both hyper-proximity and distance. Since affect theory rejects neat, easily organizable designations for feelings, objects, and relations, there is something messy about affect theory.

Sara Ahmed’s object-oriented affect theory challenges readers to consider the subtle and at times, subliminal connection between objects and affects. In “Happy Objects,” she writes that “Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (Ahmed 2010, p. 29). In this essay, Ahmed theorizes about the family in relation to affect theory by exploring the troubling qualities of “affect aliens,” which is to say, those non-reproductive figures who, according to Ahmed, are “the cause of unhappiness” (Ahmed 2010, p. 30). She mentions as examples figures such as the feminist killjoy and the unhappy queer. These are all figures who exist along the margins of a society that values a narrowly defined set of qualities and characteristics while suggesting that any deviations from those normative categories operate as the source of frustration and discontent within said society. This “if-not-for” reasoning, this seemingly clear yet malleable set of normative assumptions, is precisely what affect theory attempts to disrupt. Ahmed’s solution is to understand how alienation has animating qualities. She writes that “Unhappiness is not our endpoint . . . the experience of being alienated from the affective promise of happy objects gets us somewhere. Affect aliens can do things, for sure, by refusing to put bad feelings to one side in the hope that we can ‘just get along’” (Ahmed 2010, p. 50). Todd McGowan, strictly speaking not as an affect theorist, makes the following similar point about alienation: “The advantage that alienation confers is that it gives us some purchase on our self-division. Rather than just suffering this self-division until it eventually spells our doom, we can relate to it, manipulate it, and even augment it” (McGowan 2024, p. 7). McGowan even suggests that “Revising the negative judgment regarding alienation is a crucial political task” (McGowan 2024, p. 7). Therefore, for both

affect theory and some expressions of psychoanalysis, we must recognize the disruptive and liberating potential of alienation.¹⁹

The affect theorist I find most revealing and illuminating, especially as it relates to my reading of “Epidemiology,” is Mari Ruti. In her first book, *Reinventing the Soul*, Ruti attempts to reinvigorate critical discussions of an aspect of our lived experience that traditional humanistic theory has either abandoned or ignored.²⁰ For Ruti, the soul is “a dynamic entity that connects the individual to the world at the same time as it provides a space for self-reflexivity” (Ruti 2006, p. 20). The soul also expresses an “imaginative energy that enables the individual to discern how a painful experience . . . might function as a valuable rite of passage that ultimately, over time, empowers rather than debilitates” (Ruti 2006, pp. 20–21). Much like Ahmed and her discussion of affect aliens, Ruti conceptualizes the soul as a site of affirmation and rejection, acceptance and alienation, and clarity and contradiction. Ruti’s soul possesses an in-between-ness that illuminates Troy’s arch in “Epidemiology.” For example, I want to return to Troy’s decision to re-enter the school despite knowing and understanding the risk involved. Using this affective lens also provides useful insight into Jeff and his consistent reluctance to accept, despite the show’s title, the community in question, and his role as the show’s de facto protagonist.

An affective reading of Troy’s decision to save Greendale hinges on the tension between integration and evasion. Jeff is best understood as an evasive figure; he labors under the misconception that evasion is his only path to self-actualization. Troy is different. Through both his dialogue and actions, Troy is a figure of integration. Recall Troy’s exchange with the Dean once he decides to re-enter Greendale.

Dean: Are you crazy? How are you going to survive those zombies?

Troy: I’m gonna be a nerd. (Dornetto and Hemmingway 2010, 00:16:20–00:16:26).

The signifier “nerd” illustrates Troy’s willingness to embrace what he refused to embrace earlier in the episode. Ruti, for example, argues the signifier operates as a site of unmistakable lack, yet this lack produces creative possibilities. Ruti writes that “the signifier carries the only form of agency that it [the subject] will ever possess even as it causes the loss of stable existential foundations” (Ruti 2006, p. 135). For Ruti, the signifier possesses a troubling but emancipatory in-between-ness. The signifier strips the subject of stability and certainty, but in doing so, the subject finds the capacity to act. By accepting the precariousness this episode associates with the signifier “nerd,” Troy finds the courage to act²¹ Jeff, by contrast, is unable to accept what Ruti suggests. Ruti argues the subject must “work with its lack” (Ruti 2006, p. 136)²², but Jeff unmoors himself from the creative capacities of both lack and in-between-ness. In short, Jeff is a rigid figure, which contrasts, quite tragically, with Ruti’s overarching claim about lack and creativity, which she claims provides the subject with “a more elastic foundation for its self-constitution” (Ruti 2006, p. 132). This adds yet another dimension to my point earlier in this essay regarding Jeff as a zombie figure, even before becoming infected. By contrasting himself against affect aliens like Troy, Jeff reveals himself as more antagonist than protagonist. In this sense, Jeff is the zombie horde personified, constantly chasing or calling affect aliens like Troy, but as this episode suggests, ultimately failing in these pursuits. As an affective figure, Troy understands Ben Anderson’s argument about affect and its effects on the social as that which is “in the midst of being undone” (Anderson 2010, p. 166).

This affective reading of Troy’s decision to save Greendale also has ramifications for how we can think about the zombie in popular media. Briefly, I return to James McFarland and his suggestion that zombies are best understood as “an open-ended metaphor” (McFarland 2015, p. 26). The zombie, in effect, is whatever we want it to be, but in most fictional renderings, the zombie represents an individual and collective fear regarding the loss of choice, agency, and control. What we become if and when we become a zombie or an undead being is monstrous, perhaps in ways that other canonical monsters cannot compare. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in “Undead (A Zombie Oriented Ontology)”, suggests that “Un-dead names the zone of restless and perplexing activity from which monsters arrive, a gap in the fabric of the known world that opens a space neither real nor chimerical, a breach in

which everything familiar loses its certainty” (Cohen 2012, p. 398). But in “Epidemiology,” *Community* does something different with the fear we often associate with the zombie and with the prospect of becoming an undead figure. After Abed bites Troy and he becomes another member of the zombie horde, the camera shows us each member of the main cast as zombies before the episode resolves this contagion problem. As I mentioned before, Jeff pantomimes texting with his phone while situated at a safe distance from everyone else. However, we also see characters such as Annie and Abed behaving in ways that mimic established behavior patterns and characteristics.²³ At least for the show’s main cast, zombification fails to take their essence; they retain, even if it appears stilted and clumsy, significant parts of who they are. Therefore, the main cast embodies a greater depth of in-between-ness in their zombified states. Even as Greendale becomes flush with zombies, a horrifying idea in any other situation, the show’s core conceit remains, which is to say, through the hindrance that is Greendale, the show’s cast discovers emancipatory possibility. Ruti beautifully captures this idea by writing, “But the idea that agency is best attained by evading collective systems of meaning-making only keeps us from being able to think about the possibilities for agency that exist all around us. The same way that the artist’s work is enriched by the artistic traditions, techniques, and conventions within which she operates, our capacity for meaning and self-definition can be enhanced by the larger structures of meaning-production that surround us” (Ruti 2006, p. 67). As counter-intuitive as it sounds, and in stark contrast to how we see the zombie rendered in other media, for *Community*, zombification is yet another expression of the possibilities that surround us through communal structures. For understandable diegetic reasons, the show resolves this episode’s zombie crisis by restoring everyone infected, but instead of the zombification operating as a horrifying potentiality, *Community* asks us to consider the zombie’s affirmative, creative possibilities. And as I suggest throughout this essay, by traversing this zombie encounter, the episode allows Troy and *Community* to, as Ruti might claim, eradicate and reclaim through “imaginative agency” (Ruti 2006, p. 85). Ruti writes that

Such imaginative agency can obviously never replace the tangible benefits that would result from the eradication of inequalitarian social structures, but in circumstances where such an eradication does not yet appear on the subject’s immediate horizon, its capacity to own, reclaim, and rewrite its experiences remains crucial for its ability to retain a sense of inner possibility (Ruti 2006, p. 85).

In “Epidemiology,” both Troy and *Community* come alive; they simply needed a little (un)death to do so.

5. Conclusions

“Change is an impact lived on the body before anything is understood, and it is simultaneously meaningful and ineloquent” (p. 108). -Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism”.

By utilizing the zombie aesthetic as *Community* does in “Epidemiology,” the show manifests Berlant’s observation regarding the body and change—it feels in the zombified bodies of its characters the impact of questions about its relationship to its presumed protagonist long before it understands it. This is also part of what makes this brand of television storytelling so engaging. Sitcom narrative arcs develop slowly, and because of the sitcom’s episodic aesthetic, these arcs seem discordant. Yet, what Troy becomes across his five seasons is clearly not what Dan Harmon, his producers, and writers initially anticipated. While their intentions are ultimately meaningless, Troy’s self-discovery mirrors the show’s, which is to say, *Community* discovered who Troy was as its audience did.

I cannot overstate the impact of “Epidemiology” on the trajectory of this show. Just a few episodes later in Season 2, *Community* places Troy in an even more authoritative position than it does in “Epidemiology.” In “Mixology Certification,” Troy and the study group celebrate his 21st birthday. Like “Epidemiology,” Troy initially trusts Jeff as an authority figure (i.e., the big Other). As the episode progresses, Troy sees Jeff for what he is, lacking.²⁴ Jeff is so impressed by Troy’s maturation he pronounces him “a man now”

(Bobrow and Chandrasekhar 2010, 00:19:48–00:19:50). In Season 3, Troy has a sustained arc where he becomes the messiah for the air conditioning repair trade school within Greendale. Finally, in Season 5, when Troy decides to leave, Jeff confesses that he has never left Colorado, where *Community* is set. Throughout the show's six seasons, Jeff appears to be far less than what he attempts to be while Troy appears to be far more.

"Epidemiology" also offers a fresh perspective on the zombie. Zombies are horrifying figures that speak to a myriad of social anxieties, which is to say, "They are constantly changing to fit our needs" (Stokes 2010, p. 88). But what seems less visible are the zombie's affirmative dimensions. More often than not, zombie media dramatizes what one should avoid being or becoming (as I explore in Section 2), but as I hope my affect reading in Section III illustrates, we do a disservice to the zombie aesthetic when we consider them as prohibitive figures while simultaneously jettisoning what is affirmative about them. We cannot think of the zombified body as a thing to be dismissed. Even in the inelegance of the zombie, there is affirmative meaning too.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 In 2011, Salon interviewed Harmon. When asked about Season 2's "self-conscious, metafictional, at times almost abstract kind of direction," Harmon characterizes his work as an homage. According to Harmon, "Homage means you're actually worshiping something and obeying it" (Seitz 2011). By contrast, "spoof" or "satire," at least for Harmon, is far less affectionate, affectionate being the operative word here.
- 2 Of course, this is not always the case. For example, the horror-comedy *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) plays with this trope.
- 3 It is important to acknowledge the Eurocentrism of this position. For example, later in this section, I will describe the zombie's Haitian folk origins.
- 4 For example, vampires seamlessly pass as alive, which is what makes them dangerous in so much vampire fiction. By contrast, the zombie cannot pass, which heightens its contradictory ontology.
- 5 This narrative arc appears in other media and scholarship. For a classic example, consider Joseph Campbell's "Refusal of the Call" in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Incidentally, Harmon's "Story Circle," that is to say his narrative philosophy, looks unmistakably Campbell-esque.
- 6 Donald Glover leaves the show after six episodes in Season 5. While the show makes oblique references to Troy, his arc ends when he leaves.
- 7 The only time the show challenges this is in Troy's Season 3 arc when he discovers he has an aptitude for air conditioner repairs. However, unlike Annie, Troy seems to possess an unstudied gift for air conditioner repairs.
- 8 A significant influence on my reading of this dynamic between Troy and Jeff is what psychoanalytic thinker Jacques Lacan calls the big Other. In "On Freud's 'Trieb' and the Psychoanalyst's Desire," Lacan suggests, "Desire is desire for desire, the Other's desire...for desire comes from the Other" (Lacan 1999, pp. 723–24). Many psychoanalytic theorists have clarified what Lacan means when he theorizes this concept. Slavoj Žižek describes the big Other as "the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order," and he continues by suggesting, "the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn't speak, he 'is spoken' by the symbolic structure" (Žižek 1999). For Todd McGowan, this figure structures the subject's desire because "the subject's desire is a desire to figure out what the Other wants from it" (McGowan 2013, p. 87). Moses May-Hobbs simplifies the concept by calling it "the universal stand-in for authority in Lacan" (May-Hobbs 2023). In many ways, Jeff operates as this supreme authority for the other members of the study group, but Troy, both in this episode and across the show, seems to feel it the most.
- 9 As I discuss in the following paragraph, Troy momentarily conforms to Jeff's aesthetic only to abandon it in the episode's final act.
- 10 According to Bruce Fink's Lacanian psychoanalytic account, "Man learns to desire *as an other*, as if he were some other person" (Fink 1995, p. 54).
- 11 At least in this episode, the show ignores the vampire's parasitic associations. In addition to clumsily adorning himself in vampire signifiers, Troy is not parasitic like Jeff. Troy's failure to masquerade as a vampire is more of a success than anything else because it highlights yet another difference between him and Jeff.
- 12 The episode conveniently resolves the zombie plot by lowering the temperature in the building. Doing so breaks the rancid meat-induced zombie symptoms, and everyone returns to normal but with a collective amnesia regarding the zombie narrative we just witnessed.

- 13 Jeff certainly changes and evolves throughout the show's six seasons, but as this episode suggests, he is far from the heroic protagonist the pilot episode predicts he will be.
- 14 As a white, cis-gendered, straight, and able-bodied man, his history is unmistakably different from the history many Black people know.
- 15 Wynter contrasts the final brother with the final girl, but as he sees it, the final girl's "birthright is 'normality' and it is this 'normality' she fights for, a fight her survival signifies" (Wynter 2022, p. 147). Since the final brother comes to realize normality is an illusion, he cannot then fight for something that cannot exist in the social order as currently constituted.
- 16 If *Community* is a bildungsroman, then it belongs to Troy. Other primary characters certainly change, grow, and evolve, but the lion's share of this change, growth, and evolution belongs to Troy.
- 17 Because *Community* is a sitcom, it adheres to sitcom conventions. Once they neutralize the zombie threat, everyone experiences collective amnesia. This allows for a reset, and while the characters may forget the particulars of this episode, the writers and showrunners do not.
- 18 Early affect theorists focus on categorizing and organizing what they understand as different affects and the intensities these affects carry for the subject. In this respect, affect theory began as a clinical preoccupation. While understanding the genesis of any theoretical framework is often interesting and necessary, I avoid doing so here. Instead, I focus on relatively recent affect theorists because their theoretical interventions work better with larger social phenomena and complement the critical frameworks I find more useful for this essay. See Silvan Tompkins's work *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* (1962).
- 19 For anyone familiar with Marx, this sounds counter-intuitive.
- 20 Ruti understands her analysis from a constructivist rather than a "traditionally humanistic perspective" (Ruti 2006, xiii2). Ruti rejects the idea that subjectivity has "an enduring kernel" and instead sees subjectivity as "socio-culturally and normatively constituted through complex processes of language acquisition and socialization" (Ruti 2006, xiii2).
- 21 Ruti even suggests that in psychoanalysis, the signifier humanizes us. She writes that "Lacan privileges the signifier as the humanizing principle that propels the subject into the realm of sociality and meaning-production" (Ruti 2006, p. 120). In short, the lack Lacan associates with the subject's relationship to the signifier is the very thing that animates the subject into action.
- 22 As opposed to the indeterminacy I describe at the beginning of this section.
- 23 Troy and Abed share a high five, which they do frequently, while Annie sits at the study table, apparently reading a book.
- 24 As I have argued, Troy is a far more suitable protagonist for this show, but he remains lacking, too. For example, "Mixology Certification" is about Troy's first legal alcoholic beverage, but this becomes a plot point because Troy's family misled him about his age for most of his life.

References

- Ackermann, Hans-W., and Jeanine Gauthier. 1991. The Ways and Nature of the Zombi. *The Journal of American Folklore* 104: 466–94. [CrossRef]
- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. Happy Objects. In *The Affect Reader*. Edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Anderson, Ben. 2010. Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of "Total War". In *The Affect Reader*. Edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Barton, Michaela. 2020. How 'Alien' (1979) Queered the Binaries of Traditional Gender. FlipScreen. Available online: <https://flipscreened.com/2020/08/18/how-alien-queered-the-binaries-of-traditional-gender/> (accessed on 10 June 2024).
- Bishop, Kyle William. 2010. *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company.
- Bobrow, Andy, and Jay Chandrasekhar. 2010. Mixology Certification (Season 2, Episode 10) [TV series episode]. In *Community*. Culver City: Krasnoff/Foster Entertainment, Harmonius Claptrap, AGBO, Universal Media Studios, Sony Pictures Television.
- Bobrow, Andy, and Tristram Shapeero. 2012. Pillows and Blankets (Season 3, Episode 14) [TV series episode]. In *Community*. Culver City: Krasnoff/Foster Entertainment, Harmonius Claptrap, AGBO, Universal Media Studios, Sony Pictures Television.
- Burgin, Xavier. 2019. *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror [Film]*. Philadelphia: Stage 3 Productions.
- Christie, Deborah, and Sarah Juliet Lauro. 2011. *Better Off Dead The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-human*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Clover, Carol J. 2015. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 2012. Undead (A Zombie Oriented Ontology). *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23: 397–412.
- Detmering, Laura. 2014. "Just Tell Me the Rules, and I Will Follow": Active Viewership, Community Engagement, and Dan Harmon's "Community". *Studies in Popular Culture* 37: 39–56.
- Dillard, R. H. W. 1987. Night of the Living Dead: It's Not Like Just a Wind That's Passing Through. In *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*. Edited by Gregory A. Walker. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 14–29.
- Dornetto, Karey, and Anthony Hemmingway. 2010. Epidemiology (Season 2, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In *Community*. Culver City: Krasnoff/Foster Entertainment, Harmonius Claptrap, AGBO, Universal Media Studios, Sony Pictures Television.
- Fink, Bruce. 1995. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Gibbs, Anna. 2001. Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect. *Australian Humanities Review*. December 1. Available online: <https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2001/12/01/contagious-feelings-pauline-hanson-and-the-epidemiology-of-affect/> (accessed on 11 July 2024).
- Gibbs, Anna. 2010. Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication. In *The Affect Reader*. Edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. 2010. An Inventory of Shimmers. In *The Affect Reader*. Edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Harmon, Dan, Anthony Russo, and Joe Russo. 2009. Pilot (Season 1, Episode 1) [TV series episode]. In *Community*. Culver City: Krasnoff/Foster Entertainment, Harmonius Claptrap, AGBO, Universal Media Studios, Sony Pictures Television.
- Harwood, Lori. 2022. The evolution of Black representation on television. *The University of Arizona News*. February 21. Available online: <https://news.arizona.edu/news/evolution-black-representation-television> (accessed on 10 March 2024).
- Hoberman, J., and Jonathan Rosenbaum. 1990. *Midnight Movies*. Boston: Da Capo Press.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation*, 1st ed. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kelley, Robert. 2019. The Disruption of Hegemonic Discourses Through 70s Horror Films. Semantic Scholar. Available online: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Disruption-of-Hegemonic-Discourses-Through-70s-Kelly/adf7f69f3e2d73a81ffae1508f65d874e50c2238> (accessed on 8 July 2024).
- Lacan, Jacques. 1999. *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet. 2015. *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Macek, J. C., III. 2012. The Zombification Family Tree: Legacy of the Living Dead. *Pop Matters*. June 14. Available online: <https://www.popmatters.com/159439-legacy-of-the-living-dead-2495844721.html> (accessed on 10 March 2024).
- Mariani, Mike. 2015. The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies. *The Atlantic*. October 25. Available online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/> (accessed on 26 May 2024).
- May-Hobbs, Moses. 2023. What Is Jacques Lacan’s Mysterious Big Other? *The Collector*. April 11. Available online: <https://www.thecollector.com/jacques-lacan-big-other/> (accessed on 17 July 2024).
- McFarland, James. 2015. Philosophy of the Living Dead: At the Origin of the Zombie-Image. *Cultural Critique* 90: 22–63. [CrossRef]
- McGowan, Todd. 2007. *The Impossible David Lynch*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McGowan, Todd. 2013. *Enjoying What We Don’t Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- McGowan, Todd. 2022. *Enjoyment Right & Left*. New York: Sublation Press.
- McGowan, Todd. 2024. *Embracing Alienation: Why We Shouldn’t Try to Find Ourselves*. London: Repeater Books.
- Means Coleman, Robin R., and Mark H. Harris. 2023. *The Black Guy Dies First: Black Horror Cinema from Fodder to Oscar*. New York: Simon & Schuster/Saga Press.
- Mittell, Jason. 2015. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York and London: NYU Press.
- Probyn, Elspeth. 2010. Writing Shame. In *The Affect Reader*. Edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Riter, Amanda. 2014. Modern Heroism. In *A Sense of Community*. Edited by Ann-Gee Lee. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.
- Ruti, Mari. 2006. *Reinventing the Soul: Posthumanist Theory and Psychic Life*. New York: Other Press.
- Seitz, Matt Zoller. 2011. An interview with the dean of “Community”. *Salon*. September 28. Available online: https://www.salon.com/2011/09/28/community_season_three_dan_harmon_interview/ (accessed on 17 July 2024).
- Stokes, Jasie. 2010. Ghouls, Hell and Transcendence: The Zombie in Popular Culture from “Night of the Living Dead” to “Shaun of the Dead”. Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA. Available online: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/2103/> (accessed on 11 February 2024).
- Wilentz, Amy. (n.d.) Response to “I Walked with a Zombie”. Available online: <https://amywilentz.com/response-to-i-walked-with-a-zombie/> (accessed on 11 February 2024).
- Wood, Robin. 2020. An introduction to the american horror film. In *The Monster Theory Reader*. Edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 108–35. [CrossRef]
- Wynter, Kevin. 2022. *Critical Race Theory and Jordan Peele’s Get Out*. New York and London: Bloomsbury.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 1991. *Looking Awry*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 1999. The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion. Available online: <https://www.lacan.com/zizek-matrix> (accessed on 29 May 2024).
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2006. *How to Read Lacan*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.