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The working dead: crossing the boundaries between life and death in organizations through the zombie myth

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ABSTRACT

Organization and management scholars have recently adopted the notion of the zombie as a lens through which to analyze workplace phenomena. Although previous studies have used the zombie primarily as a metaphor, in this essay we invoke the full force of the zombie myth underlying the metaphor to examine contemporary labor issues. We explore the origins of the zombie myth in the Haitian Vodou tradition and its roots in the island's history of colonial domination and labor enslavement. We then examine some of its subsequent cinematic portrayals, from classic zombie films to more recent films set in the workplace, to illustrate how the myth has evolved and adapted over time. Finally, we contrast the possibilities envisioned by the metaphor and the myth, suggesting that, rather than escaping it, the myth invites us to inhabit the threshold and experiment with the zombie condition, remaining with the persistent contradictions that labor entails.

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Introduction

A zombie infection is spreading across organization and management studies, its contagion coursing through the theoretical and empirical imaginations of many scholars. Consequently, scholars have started using the notion of the zombie as a lens through which to view many work-related phenomena that characterize organizations (see, e.g. Allal-Chérif et al. 2021; Buchanan and Hällgren 2019; Hällgren and Buchanan 2020; Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher 2024). Extending this reasoning, some authors have argued that there are good reasons to view the entire workplace through a zombie lens and to consider many working people as 'working dead' (Cederström and Fleming 2012; Harding 2013).

Most of these studies, however, are limited to using the zombie as a metaphor rather than a myth. While a metaphor is a trope – a figure of speech that uses one term to represent another and can extend its meaning and illuminate certain aspects, as illustrated by the rich scholarship on metaphors in organization studies (e.g. Biscaro et al. 2025; Cornelissen et al. 2008; Morgan 1986) – myths are something more. In anthropology, myths are described as sacred stories that articulate the norms, values, expectations, desires, and fears of a culture at a particular historical moment (Stein and Stein 2017; Vernant 1990). These sacred stories are elaborated both culturally and

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collectively, helping individuals and societies navigate moments of crisis (Cassirer 2009; De Martino 2019). Moreover, rather than illustrating and illuminating, as metaphors are supposed to do, myths transfigure and conceal. Thanks to their inherent ambiguity and multiplicity (Gabriel 1991), myths mask the more brutal and irrational aspects of the human condition that lie at their origin, thereby making these aspects tolerable (Desmond and Kavanagh 2003; Girard 1972, 1978).

In this sense, when considered in isolation, zombies are biologically and symbolically ‘threshold figures’ that violate a number of taboos in many cultures, most notably those concerning the neat separation between life and death and between the animate and the inanimate (Luckhurst 2015). Even when considering only their onscreen portrayals, their variety is vast, making it difficult to define exactly what a zombie is (Cronin and Cocker 2019; Hall 2011; Le Maître 2015). Nevertheless, a shared feature seems to be the absence of some element or quality – zombies are monsters defined by subtraction, experiencing the loss of something believed to be fundamental to human beings (Boon 2011). They have rotting brains and hearts, mutilated bodies, and flayed faces (Cronin and Cocker 2019; Le Maître 2015). Typically lacking cognitive and emotional capacities, they are portrayed as stupid and apathetic (Cronin and Cocker 2019). They are voiceless, except for occasional groans, and have no sense of satiety, which leads to their relentless pursuit of the living.

However, zombies should not be understood only as figurative symbols or as abstract heuristic devices; rather, they are embodiments of social and historical human experiences. Moreover, they are part of a broader narrative, the zombie myth, which has crossed several cultural and geographical boundaries, evolving over time and adapting to new contexts and meanings (Lauro 2015; Luckhurst 2015). As is typical of other boundary-crossing cultural formations, the zombie myth has provoked both shock and learning wherever it has spread (Duarte and Hodge 2007). Such adaptability further distinguishes myths from metaphors, which tend to remain comparatively static and limited in scope (Davies 1988). In essence, the myth contains the metaphors, allowing for multiple interpretations and resignifications.

The global popularity of the zombie myth has been so widely recognized that Deleuze and Guattari (2000, 335) argued that ‘the only modern myth is the myth of zombies – mortified schizos, good for work, brought back to reason,’ and that, above all, the myth of zombies ‘is a work myth’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 425), thereby emphasizing the fundamental connection between labor and the origins of the zombie myth.

In this essay, we aim to move beyond the use of the zombie as a mere metaphor and enter the mythological realm to invoke the full force of the zombie myth underlying the metaphor in analyzing the issues currently affecting organizations and workplaces. To this end, the essay adopts a nomadic style (Braidotti 1996), inspired by the wandering gait of the undead, traversing multiple disciplinary boundaries and debates. In the following section, we review the organizational literature that has, to date, deployed the zombie mainly as a figure of speech, highlighting how such metaphorical applications risk losing the depth and richness of the myth. We then conduct a historically and culturally grounded analysis of the working dead, tracing the Haitian labor-related origins and subsequent evolutions of the contemporary zombie myth. In the central part of this essay, we draw on films to illustrate our arguments, as cinema has long served as a powerful ‘mythological machine’ – that is, a myth-reproducing mechanism (Jesi 2023) – particularly in relation to zombies. In the final two sections, we illustrate the implications of the zombie myth for management and organizational scholars, reflecting on the future possibilities envisioned within the same cultural material that has shaped and sustained the myth to date.

The zombie metaphor in work, organization, and management studies

Scholarly accounts of contemporary organization and management have often invoked the figure of the zombie as a metaphor to describe work-related phenomena and issues. In this section, we provide a brief overview of how the figure of the zombie has been used to date, followed by a critical evaluation that highlights the limits of such metaphorical applications.

The imaginary of zombies has commonly been constructed through the removal – the subtraction – of qualities considered essential to humans (Boon 2011). In terms of cognitive capacities, for example, zombies are often portrayed as mindless. Consequently, an early strand of the literature traces this dazed state among those who perform dull, monotonous, and repetitive tasks. In addition to applying to classic instances of routine and intensive industrial labor (such as the rail track workers studied by Baldry and Ellison 2006), this argument extends to the many people who now work on platform-based digital assembly lines – individualized, subjugated, and thus effectively enslaved by algorithms designed to minimize their discretion and will (Fayard 2021). It is therefore no coincidence that the Amazon warehouse workers studied by Miszczyński and Zanoni (2025, 14) describe themselves as being ‘braindead’ at work, ‘like zombies.’ More generally, the condition of workers subjected to algorithmic management illustrates what has been described as the crippling and mortifying implications of technology for human labor (Beyes et al. 2022).

Precarity and employment instability are additional factors that exacerbate workers’ subordination and lack of control over their work performance, which is, again, a typical characteristic of platform work but extends well beyond it. For example, Harris and Ogbonna (2024) note that many precarious frontline workers in essential sectors, such as hospitality, retail, and transportation, were overworked during the COVID-19 pandemic and felt that they were being treated like tireless zombies, with little discretion, minimal engagement, and little regard for their health or families.

In the commercial sector, following a longstanding strand of cultural critique, scholarly attention has traditionally focused on the effects of consumerism, portraying consumers as unreflective and voracious zombies driven exclusively by a compulsion to buy (Loudermilk 2003; Warnaby and Medway 2018). However, a related strand of the literature argues that those engaged in sales and, more broadly, service work can also undergo a particular form of emotional mutilation involving the display of ‘dead emotions’ (Cronin and Cocker 2019), typically exemplified by the wearing of a fake smile resembling that of a corpse in a funeral home (Baudrillard 1990/1993, 45, cited in Ritzer 2003). Therefore, not only consumers but also front-line workers in the many contemporary ‘cathedrals of consumption’ (Ritzer 1999), both physical and digital, are said to have turned into emotionless zombies required to inject a semblance of life into their otherwise lifeless interactions with customers (e.g. Cederström and Fleming 2012; Cronin and Cocker 2019; Ritzer 2003).

In their critical analyses of work and organization, academics have not ignored the worrying signs spreading across their own work environments and have recently begun to speak of ‘zombie academics,’ albeit in different ways. Stigliani (2020), for example, draws on the insatiable appetite of zombies to depict academics’ constant hunger for publication, which pushes them to continually compare themselves with and compete against one another. Other researchers have highlighted academics’ increasing submission to new managerialist forms of control, which limit their capacity for critical thinking, particularly within neoliberal policy regimes (De Vita and Case 2016; Ryan 2012; Walker, Moore, and Whelan 2013), as well as their tendency to overwork, which makes them appear as exhausted zombies in front of students (Rakow et al. 2025) and threatens to undermine other aspects of their personal and social lives (Harding 2013).

In contrast, some authors have argued that considering only service and white-collar jobs risks losing sight of the material, embodied, and likely more harmful aspects of becoming a zombie. This is particularly important in the context of today’s racialized capitalism and necropolitical mastery, in which minority and migrant workers are assigned the dirtiest, most marginalized, and physically dangerous jobs (Prasad 2023; Shapiro 2023). In this regard, analyzing the conditions that contributed to the Ali Enterprises disaster in Pakistan in 2012, in which over 250 textile workers lost their lives and 55 were seriously injured in a factory fire,¹ Shahab (2021, 240) argues that the faulty occupational safety and health infrastructure in place in the textile industry supply chain, together with the mass contractualization of labor, ‘dehumanized and zombified workers,’ rendering them expendable. The same considerations can be extended, of course, to other well-documented tragedies of this kind (e.g. Chowdhury 2017).

It is worth noting that workplace ‘accidents’ are not confined to the margins of the global economy or the labor force. Elite professions, such as banking, consulting, medicine, and academia, are increasingly affected by workaholism, a dependency on work that can lead to burnout – another variant of the zombie condition (Douglas and Champion 2023) – or even suicide (Howard et al. 2022). In line with these arguments, in their overarching depiction of what they term the ‘petrified world of dead work,’ Cederström and Fleming (2012, 8) move from relatively innocuous examples of apathetic service workers and overburdened office clerks to more tragic cases of investment bankers overworked to death in London and the United States, situating these cases alongside the wave of suicides at France Télécom in the mid-2000s and at Foxconn City in China in the 2010s. In a similar vein, drawing on a range of work experiences, including her own, Harding (2013) argues that modern organized labor reduces workers to ‘zombie-machines,’ progressively divorcing them from the persons they might have been and aspired to become.

In sum, the figure of the zombie provides, via analogical reasoning, a powerful and hyperbolic representation of the contemporary world of work. While isolating specific aspects or missing features in the figure of the zombie, social actors on the ground have used it to reflect on their deprived working and living conditions (e.g. Baldry and Ellison 2006; Harris and Ogbonna 2024; Miszczyński and Zanoni 2025), while social scientists have recalled it to analyze the numerous issues currently affecting labor at various levels (e.g. Cederström and Fleming 2012; Harding 2013; Shahab 2021). The force of these applications derives from the fact that the zombie has become so popular and widely understood as a metaphor that it crosses ideological lines, appealing to a broad audience beyond specific positions and ideologies (Hall 2011).

On the other hand, most of these accounts lack cultural and historical depth, failing to engage with the mythical narrative underlying the metaphor. In other words, they deploy the myth metaphorically, treating it as a mere trope or figure of speech. In this way, the myth’s historical significance is lost, together with its potential as a psycho-cultural tool (May 2017), and the zombie risks becoming little more than a captivating image for grim social commentary. Detached from its mythical origins, the image of the zombie – or the working dead – portrays a bleak, all-encompassing social reality, at times entertaining and at times tragic, which nevertheless forecloses meaningful possibilities for hope and action (Cremin 2013; King 2012).

To address this limitation, the following pages develop a culturally grounded analysis of the idea of the working dead, distinguishing between the zombie as metaphor and the zombie as myth, and traces the origins and evolution of the contemporary zombie within its mythical narrative.

From metaphor to myth: the origins of the zombie

The contemporary global popularity of zombies is said to originate in boundary-crossing encounters between North American culture and Haitian Vodou during the US occupation of Haiti, which lasted from 1915 to 1934 (Accilien 2023). ‘Zombie’ is an Antillean Creole word meaning ‘ghoul’ or ‘revenant’ (Douglas and Champion 2023). The word was sometimes used to denote living persons who had been bewitched by a Vodou master (a *bòkò*) through a special ritual or the use of herbs and potions to slow down their metabolism and transform them into docile servants (Dunham 1969; Hurston 1938; Métraux 1977). In other cases, the witchdoctor would seek out the corpse of a recently deceased person and use magic powers to reanimate the dead body and enslave it (Hurston 1938; Métraux 1977; Seabrook 1929). The main way to counteract bewitchment was to make zombies eat salt. This could lead to violent reawakening in the case of a living person, who would turn against the master to take revenge by killing them and seizing their possessions (Métraux 1977). In the case of a reanimated corpse, this would lead to either disintegration or a return to the grave (Dunham 1969; Seabrook 1929). It was also thought that driving a long iron nail into the forehead of a dead person would impede the spell (Dunham 1969).

Although relatively marginal to the practice of Vodou (Accilien 2023), zombies captured the North American imagination around the 1930s following the publication of William Seabrook’s *The Magic*

Island (Seabrook 1929). Written by a journalist-traveler who was more ‘an artist’ than ‘an ethnologist’ (Redfield 1929, 316), the book presents a sensational and entertaining account of selected aspects of the Vodou religion in Haiti at the time. Among many remarkable stories and dramatized accounts, the second chapter of the book is devoted to ‘Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields,’ one of the first widely available descriptions of zombies written in English. In it, Zombies are portrayed as human beings suspended between life and death, but neither fully alive nor dead, who are forced to work in sugar cane plantations and rum distilleries under conditions of extreme fatigue and violence.

The popular image of the zombie as a dead-like person wandering around with eyes wide open and mechanical gestures is derived from Seabrook’s description of these completely enslaved and lethargic creatures. After its publication, the book was criticized for both its content and its approach to discussing traditional Haitian beliefs. Seabrook’s work was not a systematic scientific study but rather a glamorizing narrative intended to make the myth palatable to the tastes of Western bourgeois readers (Doni and Tomelleri 2021). It was, in a sense, a ‘whitewashing’ of the zombie and ‘a cultural appropriation of a myth that, ironically or aptly, was itself about appropriation’ (Lauro 2015, X). Indeed, the root narrative underlying the Haitian zombie myth was that of enslavement and forced labor, to which Black people originally from the African continent were subjected after being forcibly deported and put to work in the sugar cane fields on land previously seized from the Indigenous Taino populations (Douglas and Champion 2023). Nevertheless, despite – or perhaps because of – Seabrook’s translation and sanitization, zombies immediately entered the popular imagination in the United States and began to spawn a thriving cultural industry with a global reach.

The first Hollywood zombie film was released in 1932, directed by Victor Halperin and tellingly titled *White Zombie*.² Although its plot departs significantly from the myth’s origins, as the title suggests, the film features, among its merits, a notable scene in which zombies grind sugar cane in a mill under the spell of the villain of the story, an evil witch doctor, thereby explicitly invoking the history of past colonial domination and labor exploitation that underpins the myth.

There are many reasons for the subsequent worldwide popularity and success of the zombie figure. Among them is a skillful concentration of elements from folklore, fiction, and exotism, capable of generating that mixture of wonder, horror, disgust, and scandal with which we are so familiar today (Doni and Tomelleri 2019). Most of all, it is the anchoring of these elements into an overall mythical narrative that holds together multiple, at times contradictory, meanings and variants. As several scholars have noted, myths are not stable narratives but dynamic constellations of images and associations that evolve, lending themselves to continuous reinterpretation (Blumenberg 1985; Detienne 1986; Jesi 2023). This openness of the myth is precisely what makes the zombie so adaptable and ‘viral.’ Their characterization as brutal, voiceless, empty, and mechanical has often transformed zombies into an eloquent symbol of modernity and modern labor (Le Maitre 2015). At the same time, the zombie as metaphor should not be taken for the myth itself but rather as just one of its modes of expression. When deployed to describe alienated workers, insatiable consumers, or passive subjects, the zombie functions as a partial actualization of the myth, emphasizing certain mythical aspects (e.g. subjugation, depletion, and automatism) while leaving others in the background. However, conflating the myth into a standalone metaphor for any form of fatigue, alienation, or diminished agency reduces the myth to a simplified and easily consumable figure.

At this juncture, cinema assumes a central role. If the zombie metaphor represents a selective use of the myth, cinema is the cultural apparatus through which the myth itself has been continuously revived, translated, and transformed. Indeed, cinema serves today as a powerful mythmaking and myth-reproducing machine (Morin 2005; Singer 2008), thus satisfying the current need for myths (Jesi 2023). However, cinema does not merely reproduce the zombie but reshapes it by combining narrative, visual, and affective elements, rendering the myth commercially viable and accessible. Cinema thus becomes a privileged site where the zombie myth is circulated on a global scale, enabling its ongoing deformation and reinvention, which in turn inform its metaphorical uses

(Bishop 2009; Lauro and Embry 2008; Le Maître 2015). In the following sections, we turn to film analysis, which does not mark a shift away from myth but rather an entry into one of its most productive and influential contemporary domains of expression.

From myth to film genre through Romero's *Dawn of the dead*

After Halperin's *White Zombie*, several other Hollywood zombie films were released in the 1930s and 1940s. However, it was not until 30 years later, with the arrival on the scene of director George A. Romero, that the genre gained widespread prominence. His debut film, *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero 1968), is a low-budget black-and-white movie in which the ghouls are merely pasty-faced actors and the zombie infection appears to be confined to a single remote county (Bishop 2009). However, it is in the sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*³ (Romero 1978), that most of the genre conventions are fully realized (Bishop 2009; Loudermilk 2003), as illustrated below.

From the opening scenes of *Dawn*, it becomes clear that the entire world has been overrun by zombies. The protagonists include two TV employees, Stephen, a traffic reporter, and Francine, a TV producer, who are a couple, and two SWAT troopers, Roger and Peter. The group flees from a plague-stricken Philadelphia by helicopter in search of a safe place and lands on the roof of a shopping mall near Cleveland. They soon discover that the upper level is not infested, although the lower floors are, and more zombies keep arriving. Thus begins a relatively quiet period consisting of dinner parties, frequent forays into the lower levels and outside, and zombie massacres, all in a sort of surreal, festive atmosphere. At one point, the protagonists even manage to clear the entire mall of zombies. But the idyll does not last. During an incursion, Roger is bitten and eventually shot in the head by his comrade, Peter. In addition, a gang of biker vigilantes attacks the mall, reigniting the threat of the zombies barricaded outside. In the end, only Peter and Francine survive and escape by helicopter, while a zombified Stephen is shot by Peter before leaving.

The most obvious feature of the genre is the creatures themselves – zombies as walking corpses. They are monsters, and as manifestations of the monstrous, they can be seen as transgressions of natural laws and boundaries and as a threat of the irrational – of what lies beyond human control and is therefore suppressed, only to reappear on the scene (Eco 2002; also see Kristeva 1982). In line with the typical subhuman, deficient characterization of zombies, in an iconic scene in *Dawn*, a scientist interviewed on television says, 'These creatures are nothing more than pure motorized instinct.' Furthermore, it is with Romero's *Dawn* that the iconography of zombies departs from the somnambulistic, entranced individuals typical of the Vodou tradition and early Hollywood zombie films (Le Maître 2015) and moves toward the contemporary, gruesome representations of the heavily made-up 'Halloweenified' zombie (Douglas and Champion 2023).

In addition to the swarming presence of zombies, another common feature of the genre – one reproduced in *Dawn* – is that zombie films are set during or immediately after the apocalypse. This is an exceptional characteristic of the zombie genre compared to those of other classic monsters, such as ghosts, vampires, and Frankenstein's creature – all outcasts or fugitives forced into hiding.⁴ The monstrosity of the zombie, on the other hand, is overwhelming and totalizing. It can be argued that once the first zombie appears, the zombies have already won, as nothing can prevent their spread as humanity is doomed and forced into hiding (Doni and Tomelleri 2021). It is also significant that the zombie film genre has progressively incorporated among its conventions another enduring cultural tradition, namely eschatological myths, or myths about the end of the world (Carollo, Sferrazzo, and Shymko 2025), so that it has become common to speak of a 'zombie apocalypse' in popular culture and everyday language.

Another stylistic feature reproduced in *Dawn* is that despite the constant threat of death posed by zombies, the surviving humans end up fighting each other. Indeed, zombie films, set at a time when all societal and institutional infrastructures are collapsing (Bishop 2009), are riddled with both intra- and intergroup disputes, highlighting the fragility of human social institutions and the pervasiveness of conflict (Bishop 2009; Hällgren and Buchanan 2020). This is evident in the frequent clashes among

the four protagonists in *Dawn* about what to do and where to go next, and especially after the biker gang's invasion of the mall, which immediately sparks a war with the occupants. It is also worth noting that, in the face of zombies, the remnants of all control-oriented social institutions, such as the media, science, and the armed forces, are typically of no use and only exacerbate conflicts.

In sum, as exemplified by *Dawn*, zombie films are generally B-movies – artisanal productions created in the backroom of the film industry (Loudermilk 2003; Ritzer 2003). Director Romero explicitly claims in interviews and on public occasions that, for him, zombie films provide an opportunity for social commentary and critique (Buchanan and Hällgren 2019). Concealing the myth's labor-related origins, in *Dawn* zombies primarily represent mindless, insatiable consumers, a line of critique that has often subsequently reprised (Cronin and Cocker 2019; Cronin, Fitchett, and Coffin 2024; Warnaby and Medway 2018). However, the film, while drawing on the myth's narrative repertoire and adapting it to the present, also scrutinizes other social relations besides consumption, including race, gender, family divides, and class conflict (Loudermilk 2003). These themes recur in subsequent zombie films, echoed by other directors and genre sub-streams. If cinema has thus expanded the traditional repertoire offered by the zombie myth, it has also contributed to reinventing and integrating it with other cultural and mythical traditions.

Zombie workplace films as a return to the origins of the myth

Since the 1970s and the foundational works of Romero, zombie filmography has grown exponentially, exploring a variety of themes, contexts, and variations, thus further expanding and elaborating the repertoire of the myth.⁵ More recently, a sub-stream of zombie films including titles such as Lin Oeding's *Office Uprising* (2018), Joe Lynch's *Mayhem* (2017) and David Parker's *The Menkoff Method*⁶ (2016), has begun to revisit social relations at work, thus suggesting a return to the origins of the myth. In this section, we focus on the latter, which is considered as exemplificative of this broader trend. Clearly a B-movie, in line with most zombie filmography (Loudermilk 2003; Ritzer 2003), *The Menkoff Method* is an Australian satirical office comedy full of low-grade, politically incorrect humor that reveals common narrative patterns with other recent zombie films set in the workplace.

The film's protagonist, a Clark Kent lookalike complete with large-rimmed glasses, is introduced by the narrator in the opening scene: 'This is David Cork. He works for Endobank, a once-successful bank, now in decline. David Cork is a data processing assistant, level 2. But actually, he's an artist – a comic book artist.' 'It's a manga,' the character immediately corrects, referring to the personal passion that keeps him alive outside work.

The two main villains of the story are Mr. Curry, the careerist head of Endobank's business banking division, and Max Menkoff, a sinister HR consultant with Russian origins who approaches Mr. Curry at an industry meeting in Dubai and offers his services, saying, 'Menkoff Management Systems' revolutionary system can deliver increased productivity and efficiency gains for your bank. Total commitment. Total engagement. All staff.' He further elaborates, 'Performance-enhancing regime with minimal adverse side effects.' Despite Mr. Curry's initial doubts, Menkoff's promises of success and results convince him, and they begin applying the Menkoff method experimentally to data center employees, who are considered too inefficient.

The central aspect of the method is the administration of 'supplements,' either orally or by injection, which make the recipients 'very good workers,' but also cause 'some – very few – to have negative reactions. Not many. Supplements make them like zombies.' However, as Menkoff explains, this should not be a concern because he has an antidote that can reverse the process. As the compulsory vaccinations begin, aided by Menkoff's two gangster-like assistants, this initiative is coupled with a series of other initiatives that increasingly make the Endobank data center look like both a totalitarian regime and a concentration camp. Menkoff shouts orders over the office loudspeakers, accompanied by strange jingles that enhance the effects of the vaccinations. During the workday, employees are gathered in the company car park for 'compulsory calisthenics.' Employees are also required to sing weird Russian-sounding motivational company anthems.

As employees become increasingly enslaved, moving around with mechanical gestures and blank stares and repeating slogans such as ‘KPIs will be met,’ Menkoff’s influence over the company grows. When Mr. Curry notices the loss of cognitive function in the data center workers and refuses to proceed with the full rollout of the program throughout the bank, the consultant forcibly transforms him into a mindless zombie who will eventually accidentally kill himself. Meanwhile, David manages to avoid the vaccinations and begins to uncover Menkoff’s evil plan. With the help of Ruby Jackson, Mr. Curry’s former secretary, who bears a strong resemblance to Foxy Chaos, David’s favorite manga heroine, David saves the company. In the tumultuous ending, Menkoff and his assistants are violently killed. Imitating Menkoff’s voice over the loudspeakers, David gathers his colleagues in the company courtyard, where they are administered the antidote. Despite his success, David eventually quits his job and, after winning a manga drawing contest, fulfills his dream of traveling to Japan to meet his favorite manga artist, obviously accompanied by his new fiancée, Ruby.

In sum, *The Menkoff Method* is a sharp satire of contemporary organizational culture and office work. It depicts a corporate world on the verge of being overrun by zombies, in line with the wider zombie film genre’s apocalyptic tone. In addition, the movie brings back significant elements of the original myth. Indeed, although references to the original historical and geographical context in which the myth originated are obscured, the workplace setting and its references to enslaved intensive labor directly connect with the Haitian zombie myth. The role of an evil consultant (or manager) echoes that of the Vodou witchdoctor, who zombifies workers in order to enslave them. An interesting aspect of recent workplace zombie films, well exemplified in *The Menkoff Method* and reconnecting with the origins of the myth, is that the zombie condition in this subgenre is often not definitive. Unlike Roman zombies, which are putrefying walking corpses, many recent workplace-set films portray zombies as living workers who have been transformed in some way, whether by a chemical, a virus, or a biomedical intervention. This condition is eventually reversed for some characters, revealing a common narrative pattern that can be observed in other workplace zombie films such as *Office Uprising* (Lin Oeding 2018) and *Mayhem* (Joe Lynch 2017), as well as in the currently popular TV series *Severance* (Dan Erickson 2022–present), although in the latter case the reference to the zombie myth and its associated imagery is less explicit.

Overall, recent workplace zombie films contribute to a rethinking of contemporary work by reactivating and updating the original Haitian zombie myth for present-day audiences.

Escaping the zombie as metaphor

We began this essay by noting the widespread metaphorical use of the zombie in the extant literature on work, organization, and management. Subsequently, we proposed understanding the zombie not as a metaphor but as a myth – that is, as a sacred story that societies mobilize to rework a cultural crisis into a new symbolic order (Cassirer 2009; De Martino 2019; Vernant 1990). We then traced the subsequent evolution and globalization of the zombie myth from its Haitian origins to more recent workplace zombie films. In sum, approaching the present-day working dead through the zombie myth means reading the contemporary world of work as the site of a deep symbolic crisis, and the myth as the cultural form through which that crisis is being mediated.

What the contemporary version of the myth suggests, in line with the organization and management studies literature, is that the zombie apocalypse of the world of work is underway and that, regardless of how far we think the infection has spread or where it is spreading most intensely, we will soon be completely overrun. But what responses are available in the face of this scenario? This is where the distinction between metaphor and myth becomes particularly consequential. Metaphorical readings tend to collapse the zombie on one side of the figure, presenting workers as alienated, apathetic, mindless, and voiceless subjects. As a result, the range of imaginable responses often appears narrowly constrained, leaving only diagnostic lamentation, resignation, or, at best, exit and escape as viable options. Examining these strategies provides a useful entry point for

understanding both the limits of the metaphorical framing and the alternative possibilities that emerge when the zombie is approached as a myth rather than as a metaphorical figure.

The first available response strategy is, in fact, not so much a way out as the staging of its impossibility. For example, in their totalizing view of work in contemporary society, presented as absorbing every spark of life, free time, and individual autonomy, Cederström and Fleming (2012, 49) identify only forms of 'failed escape,' such as self-ironically dressing up as 'adult babies' in an illusory attempt to recover the carefreeness of childhood, or burying oneself in a 'flotation tank' to temporarily isolate oneself from the chaos of working life. They further argue that even the illusion of death or suicide functions nowadays as another puerile fantasy of escape, one that is ultimately incorporated by companies and made to reinforce loyalty to work. Clearly their analysis, although lucid and provocative, hardly offers any sense of hope or alternative to the darkness it portrays (King 2012).

A second set of strategies encourages de-zombification through ethical and relational forms of selfhood. Harding (2013, 5–6), for example, describes the type of ideal employee that organizations nowadays seek to produce through the double trope of the 'zombie-machine' – that is, one devoid of personal passions and objectives and devoted exclusively to work and organizational goals. The author thus argues that this alienated and dispossessed condition may be countered through the re-establishment of supportive and meaningful workplace relations with colleagues and, especially, through liberation from the fabricated obligations imposed by organizations and the cultivation of non-violent, non-exploitative relations with oneself and others at work. In practice, this entails a way out of the zombie condition through self-care and relations of mutuality with co-workers.

Other identified options include strategies of exit and mimesis. This set of strategies has been suggested by, for example, Ryan (2012) when discussing zombies in academia. On the one hand, she argues in favor of escaping a zombifying academic job in search of something better; on the other hand, she suggests a deeper withdrawal into zombiedom as a possible means of survival. However, the author specifies that this would not amount to an actual embrace of the zombie condition, but rather to 'passing as undead to survive,' thereby somehow decoupling individuals' inner feelings from their outward experiences. Another classic strategy discussed by Ryan (2012) – namely, collective action and voice – also entails a refusal of the muted-mutilated condition of zombies.

Some of the possibilities discussed above, derived from metaphorical reasoning, point to ways of overcoming the paralyzing despair evoked by the zombie figure, either by escaping it or by seeking to rehumanize it. A genuinely mythical reading, by contrast, invites us to question what is being concealed and left behind through the sacrifice of the zombie. Indeed, unlike the metaphor, the myth preserves the figure's constitutive in-betweenness (Girard 1972). The choice the myth ultimately poses, therefore, is not whether the apocalypse can be averted but whether the zombie condition should be removed – disavowed as an aberration and, preferably, externalized onto others – or recognized as an entanglement of life and death at work that runs through all of us, constitutive of labor and contemporary organizing, and therefore to be inhabited for the generative possibilities it carries.

In the concluding section, we elaborate on this more disturbing line of reasoning.

Embracing the zombie as myth

Metaphorical uses of the zombie tend to draw distinctions and establish clear boundaries, justifying the sacrifice of the working dead. In this final section, we instead seek to theorize one final radical boundary-crossing move, which, in accordance with the zombie myth, and drawing upon the recent posthuman philosophical turn (Ferrando 2019), entails embracing the fate of the zombie at work. To put it in Haraway's (2016) terms, we elaborate on what 'staying with the [zombie] trouble' entails.

Zombies have been described as 'threshold' (Luckhurst 2015) or 'boundary figures' (Lauro and Embry 2008), and it is their in-betweenness between life and death, the animate and the inanimate, that renders them monstrous (Ferrando 2019). However, as Braidotti (1996) suggests, we should

consider the *monstrous* in its double meaning of ‘shocking,’ ‘destabilizing,’ ‘precious,’ and ‘marvelous,’ based on the Greek etymology of the word *teràs* (τέρας). She further observes that the monstrous is the pole of the negative – of the *minus*, with respect to the human. At the same time, the monstrous body is cheerful and seductive, as it represents a deviation from the norms. This evidently applies to zombies, whose hybrid alterity appears deviant and unsettling, fomenting ambiguity and category transgression (Rottenburg 2000). That is why zombies have often found a home in counter-culture, becoming protagonists in horror films, punk rock music, and comic strips (Braidotti 1996; Le Maître 2015). Furthermore, ‘the beauty of the monstrous is that it always wins’ (Braidotti 1996, 13), as the overwhelming presence of the zombie demonstrates.

The zombie can thus be seen as a genuinely ‘post-’ monster: postcolonial, postmodern, postmortem, and posthuman. As an incarnation of the latter, in particular, it enacts a fluidization of categories and classifications that can help transcend boundaries, fostering new ways of learning and being (Ferrando 2019; Lauro and Embry 2008; Rottenburg 2000). To do so, however, we must cease to see the zombie as an obstacle or an enemy to be removed and instead begin to see it as a sentinel of the ongoing crisis in the world of work.

As for the role of zombies, the question of what forms of agency can be expected from them has no obvious answer (Hall 2011). Indeed, one might be tempted to reply ‘none’ when considering the lethargic creatures of the Vodou tradition or the rotting bodies that populate screens. However, in films as well, various types of zombiedom are portrayed, and in some of them, zombie rebellions even emerge, with their own forms of leadership and organization (see, e.g. Romero’s later film *Land of the Dead*). It should not be forgotten that the zombie myth is a transfiguration of the Haitian Revolution (Lauro 2015; Lauro and Embry 2008) and that, among the many other dualities it unsettles, the zombie simultaneously represents the enslaved laborer and the agent of revolt who, once awakened, turn against the master to reclaim what was taken (Métraux 1977). The myth has never told the story of subjugation alone; it has also told the story of uprising. This is in line with Hedengren’s (2014) suggestion that the biopower of zombies resides in their multitude and existence as a horde: like a swarm of frenzied insects driven solely by instinct or a sudden viral outbreak, they can exacerbate tensions, overturn relations of power and control, and precipitate the collapse of the existing order.

Finally, we would like to emphasize that, in the Haitian tradition, salt represents, on the one hand, fair compensation for work, which has the power to awaken subjugated workers and make them reclaim what they were previously robbed of. On the other hand, it is the symbol of what Dupuy (2002) calls the ‘unforeseen unexpected’ that manifests during catastrophes and can be a first prod toward awakening. In Seabrook (1929), the awakening of zombies is made possible by an unexpected and unpredictable act of solidarity performed by the witchdoctor’s wife, who inadvertently feeds the zombies in the basement of their house with salted candies, as she wanted them to participate in household celebrations. However, awakening does not lead to a return to pre-mythical subjectivity. Rather, it opens up new possibilities for subjectivity and action, ranging from complete self-annihilation to rage-driven acts of revenge enacted by the horde.

We further caution that awakening should not be taken for granted, and it primarily depends on the way we decide to look at the zombie. To read the working dead through the metaphor is to choose removal: to project the zombie onto someone else – the precarious migrant, the warehouse worker, the burnt-out colleague – and to imagine that one’s own humanity can stand intact on the other side of the boundary. To understand it through the myth is to choose recognition: to acknowledge that the zombie condition traverses every contemporary workplace, including our own, and that what the myth offers is not a way to escape it but a way to inhabit it, to look within it for the generative possibilities it has always carried, from the Haitian slave’s revolt to contemporary forms of labor.

The zombie myth, in this sense, offers no salvation. It refuses both the consoling fantasy that we are not yet zombies and the resigned conviction that we definitively are. It calls for inhabiting the irreducible complexity and contradictions that constitute labor itself, posing the more difficult

question: ‘what are we willing to be?’ For, in the end, as a famous scene from *Dawn of the Dead* reminds us, the zombies ... ‘They’re us, that’s all.’

Notes

1. For more information, refer to <https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/past/ali-enterprises> (accessed 18 June 2026).
2. Fully available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NV3B2z0HkKA&t=143s> (accessed 9 July 2026).
3. Fully available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIUJDwOAGxl&t=4139s> (accessed 9 July 2026).
4. The provision of a complete teratology – that is, a general discourse on monsters (Braidotti 1996) – goes beyond the scope of this essay. For further information and comparative analyzes, we invite the reader to refer to the volume edited by Mittman and Dendle (2012) and to the already cited classic work by Kristeva (1982).
5. The filmography on zombies is vast and cannot be fully summarized in a journal article. For an overview, we recommend the comprehensive guides by Dendle (2001, 2012). A list of more recent titles can be found here: https://www.imdb.com/it/list/ls052445482/?sort=release_date%2Casc (accessed 9 July 2026).
6. Fully available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViO0uJJqWi0> (accessed 9 July 2026).

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