UNDEAD AND ITS UNDECIDABLE SOUNDTRACK

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Abstract

Michael and Peter Spierig’s 2003 feature Undead is a curious production that is both a comic riff on zombie movies and a serious science-fiction story. This article shows that the film does not simply alternate between the two plot modes; rather, in many instances, it simultaneously features elements of comedy and drama, with one intruding into the territory of its opposite in such a way that the narrative often seems to be hovering – like the classic zombie that is neither dead nor alive – in the liminal space between the two modes. More significantly, the essay argues that, while Cliff Bradley’s (extra-diegetic) score enables the film to shift smoothly from one mode to the other, it is largely Peter Spierig’s subtle sound design that allows the film to be both comic and serious at the same time, to have the zombie-like quality of what Jacques Derrida, in his writings on literature and politics, calls ‘undecidability’.

Keywords

Spierig, Undead, zombie, undécidabilité, soundtrack.

Introduction

Many reviews in the popular media¹ have remarked that the Brisbane-based Spierig brothers’ 2003 Undead is, for better or worse, not one film but two: whereas the first film (the one that has garnered most of the publicity) is a comic riff on zombie movies, the second is a largely serious – albeit bafflingly cryptic – science-fiction story centered on a visitation by extraterrestrials.

Strands from the one occasionally entangle with the narrative thread of the other but, in general, Undead does not for textually interweave them. The zombie and science-fiction tales are for the most part kept quite separate, and the rather obvious spot at which the two plotlines are knotted together is located just before the 104-minute film’s midpoint. After having battled countless zombies in action sequences that look and sound increasingly cartoonish, the six central characters find that their vehicular escape from the fictitious small town of Berkeley is blocked

by a metallic wall of staggering height. “This can’t be real,” says the female protagonist, her voice starting to tremble with desperation. Yet the underscore at this point suggests that the situation is indeed real, or at least as real as things ever get in a horror film. A moment later her male counterpart, quietly echoing a theme that has resonated in Australian fiction at least since the 1870s (Turcotte 1998: 12–15; Gelder 2007: 118–22), mutters: “We’re all fenced in.”

In a film characterised by giddy and gory comedy, this highlighted moment of transition stands out as being unusually serious. But comparable tiny instants occur throughout Undead. They mark not bold shifts from one theatrical mode to the other but, rather, little tremors during which the solidly established ground of comedy or drama shakes just a bit. Disruptive only enough to remind audience members that whatever they think they might be absorbing is not quite what it seems, they are constant signs that in terms of film genre Undead is seldom completely this or that, that it seems almost always to be hovering – like the classic zombie that is neither dead nor alive – in the liminal space between one and the other.

Many of these intrusions – of the serious into the comic, of the comic into the serious – are purely visual, and often conveyed by means of actors’ facial expressions (as main protagonist René [Felicity Mason] wears an intense mask even in the most hilarious scenes; in contrast, Emma Randall in a supporting role as a deputy constable even in the most sober episodes tends to look bug-eyed in a way that calls to mind the trademark visage of Lou Costello in, for example, Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein). But just as many of Undead’s intrusions of one genre into the other are not visual but aural, the more overt of these sonic ‘signals’ are transmitted via the score by New Zealand composer Cliff Bradley; and the more subtle of them – and thus the more intriguing - are found in the ‘sound design’ credited to Peter Spierig.

Zombie theory

Peter and Michael Spierig’s Undead provokes laughs aplenty, and in its basically comic treatment of zombies it not only anticipates such recent films as Andrew Currie’s 2006 Fido, Edgar Wright’s 2004 Shaun of the Dead, and Matthew Leutwyler’s 2004 Dead & Breakfast but also embellishes on formulas established in 1992 by Sam Raimi’s Army of Darkness and Peter Jackson’s Braindead and in

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2 The 1948 Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (Charles Barton) was the first of a series of films produced by Universal in which the famous team (tall, lean ‘straight man’ Bud Abbott and short, fat comedian Lou Costello) was matched with horror film icons. Other films in the series are Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man (Charles Lamont, 1951), Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Charles Lamont, 1953), and Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy (Charles Lamont, 1955). As much as was possible, the comedy films employed scores by composers who had proven themselves with ‘serious’ horror films. Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein, for example, features a score by Frank Skinner, whose credits by this time included Son of Frankenstein (Rowland V. Lee, 1939), The Invisible Man Returns (Joe May, 1940), The Mummy’s Hand (Christy Cabanne, 1940), The Wolf Man (George Wagnner, 1941), and The Mummy’s Ghost (Reginald Le Borg, 1943); Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy featured music by Hans J. Salter, who earlier had provided Universal with music for such sequel thrillers as The Ghost of Frankenstein (Erle C. Kenton, 1942), Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man (Roy William Neill, 1942), Son of Dracula (Robert Siodmak, 1943), The Invisible Man’s Revenge (Ford Beebe, 1944), and House of Frankenstein (Erle C. Kenton, 1944).

3 Bradley was born in Dunedin in 1974 and studied composition with Nigel Westlake and Philip Bracanin at the University of Queensland. Before his work on Undead he had only two film credits. In 2000 he scored the Spierig brothers’ thirteen-minute The Big Picture; in 2002 he won an Australian Screen Music Award for his score for Beck Cole’s sixteen-minute documentary The Creepy Crawleys.
1985 by Dan O'Bannon's *Return of the Living Dead*. Indeed, the Spierigs' *Undead* sustains a tradition that began as long ago as 1941, when Monogram Pictures released *King of the Zombies*, hardly a parody of what likely counts as the first-ever zombie movie – American Securities Corporation's 1932 *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin and starring Bela Lugosi – but nevertheless a film that treats the zombie as a figure in whose presence laughing is at the very least permissible.

There are of course considerable differences between the zombies depicted, comically or otherwise, in the films from the 1930s and '40s and those depicted in films from the late 1960s and onwards. The first group is related to documented actual practice in Haitian culture that involves persons who are not in fact dead but who for one reason or another – pharmacological, but often attributed to the voodoo religion – seem to be dead and who, upon being roused from their comatose states, act as slaves for their awakeners (Courlander 1960; Davis 1983; Niehaus 2005). The purely fictional second group, on the other hand, involves not just certifiably dead persons who for some quasi-scientific reason come back to life but also living persons who turn into zombies because they are infected (usually via a bite or some other exchange of bodily fluids) with what seems to be a zombie 'virus'.

The traditional Haitian zombie is creepy for sure; it has no mind of its own, and its sole purpose is to do the bidding, malevolent or otherwise, of its master. But the modern zombie (as first depicted in George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*) is in many ways far more frightening. In large part this is because the modern zombie has no master and thus is utterly beyond control; its behaviour is governed only by an apparently insatiable need to feed on the flesh or, in some films, the brains of living humans. The modern zombie is especially frightening, too, because it is virtually immune to whatever slings and arrows (or bullets and firebombs) might be used against it: holding to a 'rule' set out in *Night of the Living Dead*, in almost all the zombie films of the last forty years, the creatures are stoppable only if their brains – such as they might be – are physically destroyed. But perhaps the scariest thing about the modern zombie is the dazzling speed with which it spreads its condition among an otherwise normal population.

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4 The international scope of these films, all made in their directors' native or adopted countries, is worth noting. *Fido* is Canadian and *Shaun of the Dead* is British; *Dead & Breakfast, Army of Darkness*, and *Return of the Living Dead* are American; *Braindead* (renamed *Dead Alive* for its North American release) hails from New Zealand; the Spierig brothers were born in Germany but grew up in Australia, and their 2003 *Undead* – like the three zombie 'shorts' they made in 1995 while students at the Queensland College of Art – clearly counts as an Australian film.

5 *King of the Zombies* (Jean Yarbrough) is ostensibly a serious wartime film about espionage; its humor is considerable, but is conveyed only through the broadly comic reactions of actor Mantan Moreland to the zombies and other odd manifestations in the island mansion that is the plot's main locale. A much more overtly funny zombie film is RKO's 1945 *Zombies on Broadway* (Gordon Douglas), which starred Lugosi and the comedy team of Wally Brown and Alan Carney. As with most of Universal's horror-film spoofs, *Zombies on Broadway* featured music by a composer who just a few years before had scored a quite serious film on the same theme. In this case the composer was Roy Webb, and the model for the parody was RKO's 1943 *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourner).

6 Although Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (Image Ten) is generally considered to be the first modern zombie film, it should be noted that the creatures that menace the lone protagonist of Sidney Salkow's 1965 *The Last Man on Earth* (American International) exhibit many similar behaviours. Identified as 'ghouls', the flesh-hungry titular characters in the Romero film apparently are resurrected because of an atmospheric disturbance caused by a falling satellite; described as having 'vampire-like' qualities, the nocturnal and blood-thirsty characters in the Salkow film are victims of a world-wide disease. It should be noted, too, that resurrected dead persons, although they seem to have no particular appetites, figure in two low-budget films from 1959, Edward L. Cahn's *Invisible Invaders* (United Artists) and Edward Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (William J. Reynolds); in both of these, the risen corpses are animated by means of deliberate actions taken by extraterrestrials.

7 Zombie films that feature brain eating include, but are hardly limited to, *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985), *Return of the Living Dead* (Dan O'Bannan, 1985), *Return of the Living Dead Part II* (Ken Wiederhorn, 1988), *Return of the Living Dead III* (Brian Yuzna, 1993), and *Dawn of the Dead* (Zak Snyder, 2004).
Although it has been stripped of personality, the traditional Haitian zombie nevertheless remains a human being who becomes what it is only through the deliberate act of a zombie master. In marked contrast, the no-longer-human modern zombie results not from willful action but simply from circumstances. It resembles its former self only in the most superficial of ways, and its role in the filmic narrative is actually insignificant. However horrific might be the individual modern zombie that hungrily sinks its teeth into the flesh of a still-human character, the real fright-producer here is not the individual zombie but the ever-growing collective to which it belongs. Unlike most other filmic monsters, the modern zombie is not a singular evil but a generic representative of an out-of-control situation; indeed, the modern filmic zombie seems to be, more than anything else, the embodiment of a nightmarish apocalyptic plague.

Likely it was the sudden rise of totalitarianism in the newly founded Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that at least in part inspired German director Fritz Lang’s 1926 Metropolis, a futuristic silent film (based on a 1924 novel by Lang’s wife, Thea von Harbou) whose plot centers around the revolt of a veritable army of zombie-like slaves against their taskmasters. Most definitely it was the perceived dangers of fascism in Germany that inspired H.G. Wells’s 1933 novel The Shape of Things to Come and its 1936 film adaptation8, both of which portrayed in their post-war segments a population devastated by a “wandering sickness” whose most prominent symptom was a cessation of thinking. As for political motivations that might have fueled Romero’s Night of the Living Dead – released a few years after the potentially lethal ‘arms race’ between East and West had subsided but when boiling points were fast approaching not just for the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam conflict but also for America’s response to its entirely domestic Civil Rights movement – who can say?

Romero’s film anticipates by fifteen years the official recognition of the now widespread and still incurable ailment known as AIDS, and it anticipates by more than a quarter century the publication of Laurie Garret’s 1995 The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance. Hardly a scare-mongering hypothesis, Garret’s book was a well-researched account not just of the problems that immunologists were encountering with newly mutated vaccine-resistant viruses but also of the potentially deadly mix of such viruses and modern transportation/immigration patterns. One cannot help but notice that The Coming Plague, the scientific essence of which had circulated in the popular press for several years before the book’s actual publication, coincided neatly with Jackson’s Braindead and other representatives of the first substantial wave of comic films featuring the modern zombie. Likewise, one cannot help but notice that the second wave of comic zombie films, of which the Spierig brothers’ Undead is surely a part, coincides with almost daily media warnings about newly identified pandemic diseases and as yet undiscovered health threats related to global warming.

Perhaps that explains not just why filmic zombies are so prevalent today but also why so many of them are, like those in Undead, played for laughs: there is something to be said, after all, for gallows humor. But perhaps there are other reasons why zombies nowadays are, in fact, all around us.

‘Undecidability’

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8 The adaptation was William Cameron Menzies’s Things to Come (1936, London Film Productions), notable in part for its score by Arthur Bliss.
Quite aside from the zombie presence in films both comic and serious, and in the film-inspired ‘zombie walks’ that since 2001 have become increasingly popular in cities around the world\(^9\), the concept of ‘zombie’ has lately appeared often in serious writings in such diverse fields as psychoanalysis, gender studies, sociology, medicine, computer science, international finance, philosophy, and literary theory (Bauman 1990; Moody 1994; Marcus 2004; Tanney 2004; England 2006; Connolly 2008; Staten 2008). Speculation as to why the zombie has in recent years not only displaced classic ‘Gothic’ monster types in popular entertainment but also figured so prominently in “discussions ranging from the philosophy of mind to computer discourse to the business press” (McIntosh and Leverette 2008: viii) is the subject of the largely film-oriented essays collected in Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead; the use of the zombie image in “a staggering variety of contexts” (ibid) and the important question of “why it operates as a kind of master signifier or trope for our time” (ibid) has prompted the solicitation of proposals for contributions to yet another anthology, tentatively titled Discourses of the Living Dead: The Proliferation of Zombie as Metaphor\(^10\).

Probably the resonance of ‘zombie as metaphor’ does not come immediately to mind as audience members burst into laughter at the spectacularly bloody sight, in Undead, of a zombie whose legs and spinal cord dance awkwardly after its torso has been blown off by repeated shotgun blasts, or of another zombie that divests itself of its face after the handle of a shovel whose blade has been driven though its skull gets caught on an overhead obstacle. Yet this resonance is worth considering. “The ubiquity of the metaphor suggests [not just] the zombie’s continued cultural currency” but also something deeper, write Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, something that might profitably be studied in order to discover “its usefulness as an ontic/hauntic object that speaks to some of the most puzzling elements of our sociohistorical moment, wherein many are trying to ascertain what lies in store for humanity after global capitalism – if anything” (Lauro and Embry 2008: 86).

Lauro and Embry probe the zombie metaphor in almost every imaginable way, but their focus is on the “materially real zombie” (ibid), by which they mean not actual flesh-hungry risen corpses but, rather, examples in the world around us of entities that seem to be one thing but it fact are another. They acknowledge (ibid) that their collaborative thinking owes a debt to zombie-related ideas expressed by Jacques Derrida in his 1994 Spectres de Marx; other writers on the zombie phenomenon find inspiration in earlier examples of Derrida’s work, especially his 1972 La Dissémination, in which the French literary theorist explored such concepts as the ‘stranger’ (the character in a drama who is obviously noticed but whose motivations are unknown), the ‘pharmakon’ (a chemical concoction that, depending on how it is used, might be either a cure for an ailment or a deadly poison), the ‘hymen’ (the interior part of the female anatomy that, depending upon its condition, represents either intimacy or a barrier to intimacy), and the ‘supplement’ (something that, depending on circumstances, either adds significantly to an existing situation or completely replaces it) (Bauman,1990: 143-6). Derrida’s influence on contemporary...

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\(^9\) The first ‘zombie walk,’ an informal parade involving persons costumed as modern zombies, took place in Sacramento, California (USA), in August 2001. Since then similar events have transpired — sometimes on an annual basis, and often related to a food drive for the homeless — in Toronto, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Vancouver, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Nottingham (UK), Seattle, and Warsaw (Poland). With more than 1,500 marchers, a zombie event in Brisbane (Australia) in May 2008 allegedly set a record (since broken) for number of participants.

\(^10\) Proposals for contributions to the ‘Zombie Anthology’ were first solicited on 23 August 2009 via a website hosted by the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of English (http://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/33856). Accessed 24 September 2009.
zombie theory seems powerful, indeed. In a bold effort to condense the essence of virtually all of Derrida’s complex thinking into a single easily digestible capsule, Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblim early in their brief and richly illustrated 1997 *Introduction to Derrida* devote a full eight pages (17-24) to comic book-style zombie imagery.

It is of course only as an example of imagery – a symbol, an icon, a metaphor – that the zombie (in both its traditional Haitian and modern filmic incarnations) proves useful to Derrida and those who cite him. For Derrida, what the zombie image has in common with the other images he explored is a quality that he called, in French, *indécidabilité*. The word’s translation into English might at first glance seem simple, but complicating an easy translation is a host of subtle nuances. While the English ‘undecidability’ suggests an ambivalence that might be easily enough resolved if the attitude’s owner simply made up his or her mind, the French *indécidabilité* – as used by Derrida – suggests not a subjective point of view on the part of a phenomenon or its perceiver but, rather, an objective quality inherent in whatever it is that might be under consideration. The phenomenon possessed of *indécidabilité* blatantly defies the concept of bi-polar opposition that Derrida and others argued is the very foundation of modernist thought; in this respect, *indécidabilité* is an archetypal postmodern state of being, a characteristic of all in our culture that is neither this nor that.

Quite unlike animals and plants in the real world that are either dead or alive, the fictional zombie at the same time occupies both of these mutually exclusive categories. Far more so than its ‘undead’ horror-film mates as the vampire and the Frankenstein creature, the zombie, which is not an individual monstrosity but merely a generalised manifestation of a widespread condition, is an apt metaphor for much that troubles us in current times. It is likewise an apt metaphor for the Spierig brothers’ *Undead*, not because the film is about zombies but because so many of its components – including elements of its soundtrack – in terms of genre are, in the Derridian sense, ‘undecidable’.

**Over-the-top comedy, serious themes**

The title of *Undead* is not displayed until the film has rolled for a full eight minutes, a time long enough to provide audience members with audio messages aplenty that *Undead* will at least in some ways be a comedy but also long enough to suggest that whatever funny business ensues will be mixed with serious themes.

There is certainly nothing comic about the opening two sequences. The first depicts an outer-space explosion and is softly underscored by music whose minor-key melodic figure11 (Figure 1) suggests a situation that is at least potentially grim. The second sequence, featuring intense close-ups of René’s worried eyes and fidgeting fingers, depicts the emotionally burdened protagonist listening to a Savings & Loan official who informs her that, alas, she is responsible for the considerable debts incurred by the parents who bequeathed to their farm to her. The official’s gleefully sadistic monologue is not supported by underscore but is only punctuated, with unnerving effect, by erratic ‘zaps’ from faulty overhead lighting fixtures. If the brief third sequence suggests comedy, it is only because of the actor’s lecherous tone of

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11 Cast in the ‘dark’ key of C minor, the slow-moving figure comprises just four notes: b–c’ quavers rising to a lightly accented e-flat’ crotchet that falls off, sigh-like, to d’. In later iterations, this opening melodic figure is typically followed by crotchet pairs (eg c’-b, a-flat-g) that descend, sigh-like, by half steps.
voice and his ‘double take’ at the sight of a bull being led down the street past Berkeley’s butcher shop; like the preceding sequence unaccompanied by music, on the surface this twenty-second scene does nothing more than show a young man telling someone via mobile phone about “a doll” who seems to him, deliciously, like “untouched country”.

Merely hinted at verbally and visually in the just-described short sequence, the comedy of Undead is made overt – primarily by means of Bradley’s music – in what comes next. Set in the office of a charter air service and accompanied by repeated fragments of a major-key melody\(^{12}\) (Figure 2) that will soon enough symbolise all that is ostensibly ‘pleasant’ about the town of Berkeley, the film’s fourth sequence (starting at 2:29) first shows an inconsequential character in inconsequential telephone conversation with a potential client. At the precise moment that the hitherto roving camera comes to rest on the cover of a book titled How to Survive Fatherhood, the underscore – thus far presented by solo flute and then by warm strings – shifts to solo bassoon, an instrument that has long been labeled “the clown of the orchestra”\(^{13}\). Who is reading the book and how his attitudes toward fatherhood might relate to the film’s plot still remain a mystery, but both the jocular nature of the new melodic fragment\(^{14}\) (Figure 3) and its assigned instrument unambiguously identify the character as comic.

The next sequence, like the one that depicted the young man on the mobile phone, suggests comedy only through its acting and similarly functions as a sort of buffer

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\(^{12}\) Set in the ‘bright’ key of E major and in the ‘simple’ meter of 4/4, the melody fragments start with crotchet iterations of the pitches e’, b, f'-sharp’, and a; the second measure begins with quavers on the pitches g-sharp’– a’– g-sharp’– e’ and closes, in a half cadence, with crotchet iterations of f-sharp’ and b’.

\(^{13}\) This exact phrase comes from Ebenezer Prout’s 1899 The Orchestra, but suggestions that the solo bassoon is especially well-suited for comical effects—perhaps because its low-register pitches to an extent sound flatulent—appear as early as 1843 in Hector Berlioz’s Grand traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration modernes. For more on the comical use of the bassoon and various other instruments, see Mera (2002).

\(^{14}\) This second fragment, like the first, is in E major. It starts with three staccato crotchets (E’– G-sharp’– B’) that outline the E-major triad. After a quaver rest, it continues with quavers on E, D-sharp, E, B’, G-sharp’, and C-sharp before settling, in another half cadence, on a dotted crotchet B’.
between the film’s two genres. It shows the female deputy constable, new to the job, receiving advice from a hard-edged woman who apparently has just vacated the position. The lighting is stark; the language, coming entirely from the advice-giver, is harsh and blunt; lightly accompanied by innocuous pop music emanating diegetically from some distant radio, the hostile monologue is punctuated – in a way that recalls the electrical noises of the scene in the Savings & Loan office – by loud slams that resonate ominously in the locker room’s cold acoustic environment. If there is anything here to provoke a laugh, it is only the new employee’s wide-open eyes.

Indeed, one might start to wonder if focus on characters’ eyes is a motif in Undead, a visual device (akin to the emphasis of such isolated sounds as those just described) by means of which the directors emphasise comedy or (more often) its opposite in scenes that fall easily into one pigeonhole or the other and also, intriguingly, remind audience members that most of the film’s scenes, genre-wise, are not what at first glance they might seem to be. In any case, whereas the female deputy’s brown eyes provide the sole hint of comedy in the locker-room sequence, René’s pale blue-grey eyes—as profoundly sad as any ‘windows of the soul’ can be15—express the consistent essence of the next sequence far more eloquently than does the barely audible underscore of bleak harmonies and occasional melodic hints16 (Figure 4) of what is to come.

Figure 4. Undead’s ‘zombie’ motif.

After this almost tear-provokingly serious sequence, during which a shame-laden René speaks with her grandmother over a pay phone about her plan to drive to “the city” with “that agent guy,” the next sequence shows René meeting up with the lecherous figure depicted earlier. A few seconds later the camera pans from the automobile of the “agent guy” to a large sign that says “Welcome to Berkeley”, whereupon the extra-diegetic orchestra (at 5:47) strikes up a full-voiced and uninterrupted version of the cheery tune that in the air-service scene was only hinted at. Montage-like imagery depicts people shopping, playing cricket, and in other ways going about their normal business. Soon enough the sky is filled with what look to be meteorites, the sight of which is invariably marked with shimmery high-register vibraphone sonorities and darkly quivering low-register clarinet figures laid over the continuing up-beat ‘Berkeley’ melody. Accompanied by the minor-key music first alluded to in the ‘outer-space’ opening sequence,17 meteorites blow gaping holes in the midsections of several Berkeley residents. Only after an eviscerated ‘little old lady’ is shown rising to her feet and then ripping the head off an onlooker does the film’s garishly lettered title appear, and by this time (ca. 8:00) it seems clear that Undead – despite the perpetual gut-wrenching look in René’s eyes – has entered the realm of comic-book fantasy.

15 Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations attributes the phrase to a 1606 English translation of essays by the late 16th Century French writer Guillaume de Salluste; the idea of eyes being the ‘windows of the soul’ is likely better known through its use by Shakespeare in Act V of King Richard III.
16 Set in a triple meter (12/8), the bit of melody consists of a dotted crotchet B tied to a quaver on the same pitch followed by quavers on B-flat and G-flat; the triplet figure resolves to a dotted breve A. In the film this motif often accompanies scenes of zombies fleeing, and it is probably just coincidence that it bears a resemblance in both rhythm and pitch contour to the chorus of the song ‘Food, Glorious Food’ from Lionel Bart’s 1960 musical Oliver!
17 The music at this point involves both of the minor-key phrases shown in Figure 1 and described in footnote 11.
The film's comic-book quality by this time seems clear, yet again and again audience members are led to think – even if just for a moment – that what is transpiring might be not just a ‘serious’ zombie story but a serious story, period.

Mentioned above has been the narrative’s big moment of transition, midway through the film, when the six principal characters discover a giant wall that blocks their escape not just from marauding zombies but also, in effect, from one of one of those “rural towns and eccentric communities” that are “the breeding grounds of the Gothic” in Australian cinema (Rayner, 2000: 27). But the idea of hopeless entrapment, explicitly articulated in this scene, has already come up several times before. The theme is certainly hinted at early in the film in the two sequences that focus on René, the first showing her beset by electrical noise as she is reminded of her onerous and apparently inescapable debts, the second showing her telling her distant grandmother of her need to get away from Berkeley as soon as possible while an empty-sounding orchestral accompaniment quietly amplifies her sense of isolation. Quite overtly, the theme of entrapment is voiced (at 27:55) as the sextet takes shelter in an underground bunker.

By this time the six characters (actually, three pairs of characters) have been clearly delineated. Matched with sad but still sexy René is Marion, the taciturn and superlatively macho proprietor of a gun and fishing supply store; matched with deputy constable Molly is her officious and bumbling superior officer; matched with Wayne (the young man who early in the film was shown reading the book on fatherhood) is his very pregnant wife Sallyanne. Between Sallyanne and René there is unresolvable business that momentarily takes precedence over threats from zombies; for several years Sallyanne had been victorious in Berkeley’s annual beauty pageant, and only recently was she forced – because of her pregnancy – to yield her ‘Catch of the Day’ crown to the more shapely and perhaps more cosmopolitan-minded René. When the zombie attacks have momentarily lulled, and when the hitherto churning underscore appropriately takes a rest, Sallyanne lashes out at her rival. Fairly screaming in rage, she asks: “How does it feel, René? Huh? How does it feel? How does it feel to be trapped in this town with the rest of us?” More than twenty minutes later, after spectacular battling with flesh-hungry zombies, Marion offers his soft-spoken yet telling observation that in fact “we’re all fenced in”. And then the film lurches, at full throttle, into science-fiction mode.

Especially after this abrupt shift of gears, Undead's many allusions to ‘otherworldliness’ are musically limned most often by pairs of chords whose topmost voices descend by half steps; whereas the prominent half-step motifs heard early in the film (see Figure 1) occurred as parts of ongoing melodies and were harmonised in conventional fashion to suggest a firm rooting in a minor key, in the film’s second half these same motifs figure into sustained polytonal harmonies whose ‘progression’ seems quite deliberately aimless. The science-fiction portion of the film is marked as well by slowly rising harp arpeggios, by ostinato patterns sounded by shimmering glockenspiel-vibraphone combinations, and by dramatically revelatory ‘stinger’ chords.

Although the film’s plot after the turning point is difficult to follow, there is something almost reassuring about the accompanying music, the affective vocabulary of which had been established in the 1950s not just with a raft of American science-fiction films but also – significantly – with the television series
called *The Twilight Zone*. Just as Vivian Sobchack observed that “what is notable about most SF film music is its lack of notability” (1993: 208), what is most remarkable about the generally ‘creepy’ underscore for the second half of *Undead* is its loyalty to tradition. Indeed, one notices the underscore only when it boldly breaks with tradition for the sake of supporting the occasional moments when the film’s other narrative – the zombie story – intrudes upon the increasingly complex science-fiction tale.

Conclusions

To make a long and utterly preposterous story short, it turns out that Berkeley’s ‘zombie problem’ was simply an unfortunate side effect of examinations of Berkeley residents by extraterrestrials who, upon their departure from Earth, sincerely believe that whatever ‘problems’ they created have been solved. Alas, the antidote for zombification offered by the extraterrestrials proves to be only temporary.

The epilogue is grim, and made all the more so not just by extra-diegetic orchestral music that is anything but comic but also by ear-catching sound effects of the sort that French film theorist Raymond Bellour called “arbitrary noise” (1975: 23–24). Earlier, when Marion rescues a helpless and terrified René from the film’s first large-scale zombie attack, his heroic entrance is marked by such “arbitrary noise” as the exaggeratedly reverberant clicks of his pump shotgun and the loud tinkle of his spent cartridges falling, in slow motion, to the pavement; in the epilogue, the “arbitrary noise” comes mostly from the sharp spurs on René’s boots.

Peter Spierig’s use of “arbitrary noise” in the rescue sequence and in the epilogue is especially telling, for by the end of the film the roles of the two main characters have for all intents and purposes been reversed. Emphasising the film’s pervasive idea of entrapment and also playing up another quintessentially Australian theme, that of the “strong assertive woman verging... on the larrikin” in opposition to a male character who is “recessive... and doomed to failure” (Dermody and Jacka 1988: 33), the final scene shows a heavily armed René standing guard (on the farm of which she is now proudly the owner) over a fenced-in herd of hungry zombies that includes whatever remains of Marion. Faced with this disturbing image of internment, the audience member might need to struggle to recall that what led up to it was a peculiar mixture of straightforward science-fiction and over-the-top zombie-based comedy.

One hesitates to say that *Undead* is a ‘serious’ film. Yet this essentially comic film does have serious undertones, and many of these undertones are transmitted by means of aural signals. It is emblematic of the soundtrack’s cleverness that at least some of these dark-toned signals resonate subtly yet powerfully in sequences when the obvious elements of action, imagery, and dialogue are played for laughs. While Cliff Bradley’s score enables the film to alternate smoothly between modes of comedy and its opposite, Peter Spierig’s sound design often allows the film to be both comic and serious at the same time. And it is during these ‘in-between’

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18 Produced by and with most of its episodes written by Rod Serling, *The Twilight Zone* aired on the CBS network from 1959 until 1964. The music for the very first Twilight Zone episode was by Bernard Herrmann, who in 1951 helped establish science-fiction film’s musical conventions with his score for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise).

19 Bellour distinguishes between relatively artificial “arbitrary noise” and quasi-realistic “motivated noise”, the latter so called because it is motivated, or necessitated, by the scenic circumstances. His terminology is perhaps unfortunate, because “arbitrary noise” results not from chance but from deliberate decisions on the part of the filmmaker.
moments, destabilised largely by their sonic content, that *Undead* is most provocatively ‘undecidable’.

**Bibliography**