

In the Flesh and the Administration of Posthuman Anguish

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Abstract

This chapter will examine the ways in which the BBC series *In the Flesh* uses the ‘zombie’ as an apt trope to both emphasize humanity’s relentless urge to dehumanize the other while highlighting the fragility of other more positive human pursuits under the dual pressures of late capitalism at a time of crisis: to create, to be accepted and to love. Through the triple inscription of difference in the main character, troubled teen Kieran, ‘a partially deceased syndrome sufferer’—that of being gay, a zombie, and an artist—the series systematically charts Kieran’s journey through a series of re-humanizations and dehumanizations; from the moment he is picked up at the treatment center by his parents after he has been provisionally rehumanized, he is no longer welcome in his former community despite the official view that the best place for him is *home*; his status as human remains contingent on his adherence to a strict regimen of medication and oversight, making him an irrevocable outsider, an incomplete identity barred from the transition he most requires, the conversion from enemy to friend. By considering several texts from a variety of sources—queer studies, disability studies and posthuman studies—in relation to key moments from the series this chapter will discuss how *In the Flesh* reveals the mechanics of discrimination and objectification in a fictional sci-fi narrative that deconstructs the methods related to each discourse (medical, social, religious and legislative) combining to effectively dehumanize the other; the recently treated zombies returning home. *In the Flesh* is meant to be a cautionary tale as series creator Dominic Mitchell has stated: ‘I always thought that at its core it’s about otherness and the fear of otherness.’¹

Key Words: zombie, *In the Flesh*, queer, posthuman, dehumanization, Foucault, anguish.

Introduction

This chapter will examine the ways in which the BBC series *In the Flesh* uses the ‘zombie’ as an apt trope to both emphasize humanity’s relentless urge to dehumanize the other while highlighting the fragility of other more positive human pursuits under the dual pressures of late capitalism at a time of crisis: to create, to be accepted and to love. Through the triple inscription of difference in the main character, troubled teen Kieran, ‘a Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer’—that of being gay, a zombie, and an artist—the series systematically charts Kieran’s journey through a series of re-humanizations and dehumanizations; from the moment he is picked up at the treatment center by his parents after he has been provisionally rehumanized, he is no longer welcome in his former community despite the official view that the best place for him is *home*; his status as human remains contingent on his adherence to a strict

regimen of medication and oversight, making him an irrevocable outsider, an incomplete identity barred from the transition he most requires, the conversion from enemy to friend.

By considering several critical approaches drawn from queer studies, disability studies and posthuman studies, this paper will attempt to answer cultural theorist Mel Y. Chen's question: 'If dehumanization often involves a positive (that is, active) force, then what acts work to do so?'²

In the Flesh can be viewed, effectively, as a compilation of such 'acts' which, on the one hand remove 'qualities especially cherished as human'³ while also actively objectifying its protagonist its protagonist Kieran, since 'objectification is often understood to deprive people of their proper humanist freedoms and rights'⁴. *In the Flesh* is indeed a cautionary tale and is meant to be so as series creator Dominic Mitchell has stated: 'I always thought that at its core it's about otherness and the fear of otherness.'⁵

Although set in an indeterminate present the series exerts what cultural critic Elizabeth Freeman calls 'temporal drag—the interesting threat that the genuine pastness of the past makes to the political present'⁶ through its presentation of scenes and embodied storylines that serve to use the diegetic space of the series to performatively re-enact our collective human history of successively dehumanizing one another.

I will examine how the series catalogues the unfolding of these acts in succession, always pushing Kieran and his fellow PDS sufferers farther down what theorist Mel Y. Chin describes as a 'reference cline':

(a graded linear scale) resembling a 'great chain of being,' an ordered hierarchy from inanimate object to plant to non-human animal to human, by which subject properties are differentially distributed (with humans possessing maximal and optimal subjectivity at the top). When humans are blended with objects along this cline, they are effectively 'dehumanized,' and simultaneously de-subjectified and objectified.⁷

The term 'dispositif' or 'apparatus' used by Michel Foucault is useful in sorting out these acts and how they function together to define and control a newly minted 'other.' These new creatures—zombies who have regained human consciousness and intellect through medical intervention—must be re-integrated into society. Deposited then at the bottom of Chin's 'reference cline'—since they were formerly rabid brain eating zombies—they are subject to reassessment and control through what Foucault calls 'dispositifs':

...a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws,

administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.⁸

With *In the Flesh*, Dominic Mitchell has meticulously crafted a fictional narrative in which the mechanics of discrimination and objectification move at an accelerated rate. Like a medical dye injected into the body to detect abnormalities, introducing zombies into a variety of familiar institutional frameworks highlights the intersecting pathways of power and its operation. Episode by episode, Mitchell adds further complexity to the overlapping and mangled discourses of power to which the PDS sufferers are subject. The mysterious zombie outbreak is the obvious crisis, the ‘historical moment’ or ‘urgent need’ in Foucault’s notion of ‘dispositif’ that demands a strategic response. The government’s program of returning PDS sufferers to their communities can be compared to Foucault’s example of ‘the assimilation of a floating population’ that requires a targeted strategy in order to protect mainstream interests.⁹

1. Language

Theorist Giorgio Agamben offers this proposition: ‘Perhaps the first dispositif is language itself in which one day at the beginning of humanity a living being let itself be captured.’¹⁰ Kieran is introduced in this series as the representative post-human, non-living being caught in language. The imperative to define and capture Kieran’s state through language is emphatically established in the first few minutes of the first episode through an exchange between Kieran and his attending clinician at the treatment center before Kieran’s release:

DOCTOR SHEPHERD: Your parents. They’re looking forward to seeing you again.

KIERAN: gives him a look - I highly doubt that...

DOCTOR SHEPHERD: Why wouldn’t they?

Kieren takes a deep breath.

KIEREN: Because...I’m a zombie. And I killed people.

DOCTOR SHEPHERD: No. What are you?

Kieren doesn’t meet his eye.

DOCTOR SHEPHERD: What are you, Kieren? (Prompting him)... You are a...

KIEREN: (flat, as if reciting) I am a Partially Deceased Syndrome sufferer.

DOCTOR SHEPHERD: And?

KIEREN: (same tone as before) And what I did in my Untreated State wasn't my fault.

DOCTOR SHEPHERD: Good.¹¹

This exchange situates medical discourse in language as the pre-emptive public mechanism used to contain and control this new species at the national and local level of *named* identity. Much later we learn that the term PDSS was coined by a government minister, Giles Weir, in consultation with the doctors who discovered the treatment:

'They're partially deceased. I like the sound of that don't you? Sounds manageable.'¹²

But alongside the medico-legal term of PDS Sufferer—there also exist the persistent slurs 'rotter' and 'rabid' used in defiance of state discourse by humans still traumatized by the zombie attacks they suffered and who lack the empathy to accept that medical intervention has restored human subjectivity to the previously rabid zombies. For these humans: 'Rotter's a rotter—drugs or no drugs.'¹³ The hatred embodied in these terms mirrors the discourse of contemporary extremist hate groups and ultra-conservative anti-government militias in the U.S. In the series, a quasi-military citizen brigade called the Human Volunteer Force founded in Roarton during the 'rising'—when zombies first rose from the dead—is a persistent, organized, and violent resistance that cannot move forward in history or let go of its enemy. Roarton's charismatic religious leader Vicar Oddie variously refers to PDS Sufferers as 'vicious killers,' 'dangerous fiends,' and 'beasts'—his language escalating in venom and degree as the enemy becomes more human and closer to home. He is the chief rabble-rouser when the newly appointed Minister for Partially Deceased Affairs holds a meeting between the community and the national government regarding the assimilation of treated PDS Sufferers back into the community. This exchange both intensifies the confusion surrounding the definition in language of the assimilated zombie, revealing identity to be open and obscure, and locks in opposition, leaving both sides trapped and clinging to insufficient and extreme words. Finally, the PDS Sufferers have their say as well. The word 'Undead' is coined by the ULF-Undead Liberation Front, a quasi-religious/political group led by 'the Undead Prophet' with

disturbing echoes of religious right fanatics in the United States while using a logo, a fist coming out of a grave, that suggests the opposite by referring to left wing movements with a utopian bent such as The Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the US and more recently the Occupy movement. The ULF is linked to terrorist attacks involving a drug called 'blue oblivion' that returns zombies to their untreated state resulting in planned atrocities. 'Undead', however, is the only term conceived and adopted by zombies to refer to themselves. And the ULF is the only entity to emerge that positions itself in opposition to decisions made by 'the living' by revolting against the measures imposed upon zombies to make the living accept them. Re-appropriating their natural look ultimately turns out to be a pacifist political gesture by the zombies, Kieran included, but is predictably linked in the media and general consensus to the ULF and its terrorist acts.

All of the definitions discussed above, PDS Sufferer, rotter, rabid, vicious killer, dangerous fiend, beast and undead, are reinforced or challenged throughout the remainder of the series and prompt corresponding reactions in the main character Kieran as well as members of the community as they all shift uncomfortably in language.

We first meet Kieran as a 'patient' seen in consultation with Doctor Shepherd in group therapy with other PDS sufferers. He and his fellow patients/inmates at the Halperin and Weston Partially Deceased Treatment Centre in Norfolk are distinguished as such through attire described as 'standard hospital uniforms'¹⁴ or 'the kind of clothes long term psychiatric patients wear.'¹⁵ Embodying a hybrid state—part sick person and part criminal—Kieran feels shame for what he is and 'crippling' guilt for what he did in his untreated state revealed through flashbacks that are a side effect of his treatment. It is not until he returns home to Roarton that Kieran comes to understand that whether treated or not he is perceived by many as less than human, a beast, an animal and like a rabid fox *must* be shot on sight, in fact—*can* be shot on sight without consequences. For many humans, remember, *rotter's a rotter-drugs or no drugs*.¹⁶ So fear is added to Kieran's complex of emotions after witnessing the HVF kill a fellow assimilated PDS Sufferer in cold blood.

Finally Kieran feels frustration with his home incarceration and the constant demand to make humans feel comfortable around him; in Kieran's case—in addition to wearing foundation and contact lenses provided by the government, Kieran appeases his parents through the comical gesture of pretending to eat food at family dinners and complementing his mom's cooking. This frustration leads to anger—first upon witnessing the barbaric treatment by the HVF of untreated zombies. He intercedes on the captured zombies' behalf by reminding the HVF that they will be paid more for bringing in live ones for treatment. And secondly, finding the body of his ex-lover Rick, also a PDS Sufferer, murdered by Rick's own father. But frustration and anger also lead Kieran to self-reflection and insight. While Kieran distrusts the Undead Prophet's teachings introduced by his friend Amy, the series' 'zombie manic pixie dream girl,' and Simon, Kieran's new love interest and a

disciple of the Undead Prophet, he realizes that the term Undead is more apt for unpacking than what the humans have to offer. What is at stake is whether Kieran and his fellow zombies will ever be accepted by humans; since neither human nor zombie is in a position to answer the questions that Kieran's sister asks him: 'What are you? Are you a demon? A monster sent from hell?'¹⁷

Kieran embodies what Chen terms a 'subject aware of its abjection; a clashing embodiment of dignity as well as of shame':

This paradox of the simultaneity of abjection and subjectivity is particularly emphasized in Julia Kristeva's articulation of the abjection of self: 'If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject.'¹⁸

2. Family

When an individual is rejected as abnormal from a disciplinary system, where is he sent? To his family. When a number of disciplinary systems successively reject him as inassimilable, incapable of being disciplined, or uneducable, he is sent back to the family, and the family's role at this point is to reject him in turn as incapable of being fixed to any disciplinary system, and to get rid of him either by consigning him to pathology, or abandoning him to delinquency etc.¹⁹

Upon completion of treatment, PDS Sufferers are released to their families. For the zombies of *In the Flesh*, the family is the mediating institution; a door that swings both ways, a filter personalizing the emerging institutional frameworks and institutionalizing personal experience. The situations that unfold in relation to the three main characters, Kieran, Rick and Simon, all zombies and all gay, as they make their return home, reveal the family's role in reflecting society's values and its complicity in the brutal treatment of those perceived as outsiders. Homophobia, racism, anti-immigration, and ableism are all hinted at in the series' evolving social management of the zombies.

These three families perform what Deborah Thom calls Foucault's 'mechanical metaphors for the family's place in society; family is 'the hinge, the interlocking point [...] absolutely indispensable to the very functioning of all the disciplinary systems' but it is also 'the switchpoint, the junction ensuring passage from one disciplinary system to another'.²⁰

Foucault places the family as an absolutely integral institution to judgements in modern societies regarding the normal and the abnormal, the acceptable and the unacceptable. On the one hand, Foucault discerns the way in which the family became a point of intervention and an object of knowledge—how social politics impact family structure and dynamics through legal judgements, medical interventions, social work, and many other mechanisms and institutions. On the other hand, Foucault analyses the way in which members within the family regularly call on discourses from society at large in order to manage or transform the operation of and the intimate relationships within the family.²¹

Kieran's family gives off a comfortable neo-liberal vibe, seemingly at ease with Kieran's gayness as well as his zombification while uncomfortable with their daughter Jem's fervent engagement with the HVF. But in Season 2, when the Parish Council wrongly accuses Kieran of a crime and Kieran refuses to sign a confession for something he did not do, his family, led by his father, shifts allegiance from Kieran to the community, locking Kieran in his bedroom until he signs the confession. If he remains non-compliant he will be returned to the treatment center. Since, as Stuart Hall explains, 'the normative ad hoc explanations of dominant groups tend to exert more power'²² this change in loyalty would seem to be inevitable.

In contrast to Kieran's family, Rick's home is steeped in traditional signifiers of straight masculinity in the form of Rick's sports trophies, his military uniform, and pinup posters on his bedroom wall. Kieran's house, on the other hand, tells a very different story—one of artistic ambition and interest in culture and the world outside of Roarton, signified by the family's collection of African masks and Kieran's own paintings, which include a portrait of Rick. Nowhere in the series, however, is shame more manifest than in the character of Rick, Kieran's former teen lover who returns home as a PDS Sufferer after having died serving in Afghanistan. Rick's shame is twofold and is revealed through his inability to stand up to his father either as a gay man or PDS Sufferer. Rick's father is Bill Macy, founder of the HVF, and he believes all zombies must die whether treated or rabid and he is also an unapologetic homophobe. His reaction to his son's current state is absolute denial. We learn that Rick joined the armed forces and served in Afghanistan not only to please his father but because he was afraid of holding Kieran back, of not being a proper partner for a successful artist. Both reasons demonstrate Rick's entrenched self-hatred. When Rick's father orders him to kill Kieran, the crisis prompts a brilliant, if tragic, double 'coming out scene' as a zombie and as a gay man and takes all of Rick's courage.

The script notes the following:

‘...standing up to his father is the most frightening thing Rick has ever considered doing. Forget all the patrol missions in Afghanistan. That was a cakewalk compared to going against his father’s wishes. But it must be done.’²³

Rick says this to himself while looking in the mirror and removing his human colored foundation and contact lenses:

‘Just do it, soldier, be brave. Like Kieran was last night. Be brave.’²⁴

So he confronts his father:

‘I don’t want to hurt ‘Ren. He’s ...he’s me best mate. More than me best mate. If he’s evil...if he’s evil then so am I.’²⁵

Convinced then that Rick is not actually Rick because we can assume Bill Macy refuses to believe that any son of his could be either gay or a zombie; and operating under Vicar Oddie’s twisted take on ‘the rising’ that entails killing all of the evil zombies to make way for the second rising when all the good, dead people will return; he stabs Rick at the base of the neck and drops his body outside of Kieran’s home.

Simon’s fate follows closely upon the familial outcast described by Foucault: ‘The family’s role at this point is to reject him in turn as incapable of being fixed to any disciplinary system, and to get rid of him either by consigning him to pathology, or abandoning him to delinquency.’²⁶ Simon is picked up by his father at the end of his treatment and brought home to a modest, albeit bookish apartment. After dinner, although Simon can’t eat, father and son sit quietly and read. However, in the middle of the night Simon’s father wakes up and looks at a photograph of his deceased wife and rages against his son. Simon is irredeemable in his father’s eyes having killed his own mother in his untreated state. In his rage Simon’s father throws him out of the house. The only option left to Simon, now thoroughly alone and dehumanized, is to contact the Undead Prophet for support and community. Returning to the treatment center is not an option since viewers witnessed in the 2nd Season that Simon was tortured there; as one of the first zombies to respond to medical treatment, he was used as a test patient for the development of ‘neurotriptyline,’ the medication injected into the back of the necks of PDS sufferers to reactivate parts of the brain destroyed by the mysterious zombie virus.

Fathers in this series, in all cases, clearly pose a threat as they negotiate this crisis, turning against their PDS and gay sons at key points in deference to prevailing institutions and beliefs. It falls then to the mothers to reconcile their son’s condition in relation to the demands of family and community. To this end we are introduced to ‘Roarton Women’s Coffee Morning (Ladies Only)’—a coffee klatch that is actually a carefully disguised support group for women with children or family members with

PDS, where ‘what is said here, does not leave this room.’²⁷ What appears to be a hetero-normative women’s gathering can also be interpreted as a crucial space constructed to dismantle the loud and raucous patriarchal forces massing around them (Vicar Oddie, the doctors at Halperin Weston, Bill Macy and the HVF, and even the Undead Prophet). Hiding in plain sight, even the meekest among the women are given a voice. Janet Macy, Rick’s mother and wife of overbearing and outspoken HVF founder Bill Macy, finally has a forum to defy Vicar Oddie, and by association, her husband:

How Vicar Oddie puts it they’re all supposed to be possessed by the devil himself. Demons in disguise. But I haven’t found that at all. Me handsome man’s back. Different. Bit different looking. But he’s still the same. Deep Down. I know that. Me Ricky’s a good boy.²⁸

This is one instance but not the only one where family exceeds the limitations of Foucault’s insistence that it is a reflection of the institutions that impinge it on all sides. The family is still a site where the bonds of affection and love offer a respite from the ravages of a zombie apocalypse.

3. Politics and Society

In problematic situations, old normative structures are often ‘mapped’ onto new situations, or new situations are ‘mapped’ in terms of older meanings. While not limited to ‘social interest’ in a narrow sense, such structures arise in and are maintained by the reciprocity of social life: they therefore have embedded in them the life-situations, outlooks, interests, and informal models of the social world of those who actively project them. They are structured by power and domination: inevitably, the normative ad hoc explanations of dominant groups tend to exert more power, to ‘cover’ a wider range of topics, to provide more inclusive and comprehensive formulations, than those of subordinate groups. The conflicts between social groups are thus always and inevitably mediated by conflicts between normative definitions—indeed, the conflicts are understood only in so far as such outlooks exist. These structures thus ‘betray themselves’ at different levels of social life, with respect to wider or narrower areas, with greater or lesser degrees of structuralism. At the level of everyday comprehension, the commonsense world is ‘classified out’ in stereotypical ways which simplify and crystallize complex social processes in distinctive ways. At this level, then, they surface in the form of informal ‘models,’ ad hoc explanations, proverbs, maxims, routines,

recipes, truncated social myths, images and scenarios. At the level of social life as a whole they ‘surface’ as full-blown ideologies, symbolic universes, secular versions of the sacred canopy.²⁹

As the first season of *In the Flesh* ends and the second begins, community conflict escalates, as does the alienation of PDS Sufferers themselves, setting wheels in motion on a local, regional and national level to fully bureaucratize this evolving situation. The status of the PDS Sufferer continues to shift—moving uncomfortably through different degrees of the following: sick or disabled status (undergoing treatment), protected national minority, criminal or monster, and revolutionary or dissident or terrorist.

The viewer immediately notes that some time has passed since the first season. Kieran has a job in the legion hall bussing tables—demonstrating that the status of PDS Sufferers has changed dramatically and they are now protected by anti-discrimination laws at least as far as their employment.

However, at the same time, followers of the Undead Prophet operating as the Undead Liberation Front have launched a series of organized attacks on humans using the drug Blue Oblivion that temporarily returns PDS Sufferers to their rabid state. Ken, a character introduced in Season 1, who lost his wife twice—the second time as a PDS Sufferer brutally executed by the HVF, is seen boarding a tram with his nephew. The scene with Ken and his nephew riding the tram is intercut with a group of followers of the Undead Prophet preparing for an attack. The viewer soon learns the reason for this editing as the group boards the same car as Ken and his nephew. Having already swallowed the drug, the attackers turn rabid, killing all the humans in the train car.

Also introduced in this episode is the character of Maxine Martin, a young and newly elected MP for Roarton Valley and also a member of Victus—a political party that is rabidly anti-PDS Sufferer especially in relation to the assimilation of PDS Sufferers back into their communities. The Victus rant is as follows: ‘The PDS sufferer in your home, in your shop, in your pub, is *one missed dose away from ripping your head apart*. How are we expected to feel safe when these ticking time bombs are among us, waiting to strike?’³⁰ Her arrival is evidence that Victus is gaining power on the national and local level and that another shift in the status of PDS Sufferers may be forthcoming.

The arrival of Maxine Martin and with it Victus’ hateful language and its power to incite violence prompts Kieran and his family to revisit the fear for his safety and dread of the future that they initially experienced when Kieran first returned home. This new state of affairs, coupled with Kieran’s artistic ambition, reaffirms Kieran’s desire to leave Roarton. Before ‘the rising’ Kieran was the recipient of a full scholarship to a prominent art school in London and his plan was to escape Roarton with his lover Rick. Kieran now has a second chance at an art career and considers moving to Berlin or Paris; as he explains to his sister: ‘Europe’s more tolerant

to...people like me.’³¹ Dr. Russo shows support for Kieran’s move abroad: ‘the way things are going, I think Kieran’s got the right idea moving away’ and arranges for a six month supply of ‘neurotriptyline.’³² Taking note of Kieran’s change in demeanor—a combination of fear, guilt and self-hatred—Dr. Russo and Shirley, a PDS Community Care Officer, prompt Kieran to recite an ‘affirmation’: ‘I am a Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer and that is not my fault.’³³ That evening an altercation at the Legion Hall proves a revelatory moment for both Kieran and the viewer. When Kieran’s employer Pearl points a gun at him and his friends, Kieran realizes that even Pearl, whose character up until now was cast as politically progressive and supportive of Kieran, will ultimately side with humans. He quits the job and the episode ends with Kieran packing a suitcase.

The next episode begins with a family farewell breakfast for Kieran celebrating his departure to France complete with French berets and French toast. Paris is a fitting destination since its past tugs at us, recalling its status as a cultural mecca for expatriate artists, writers and cultural figures in the 1920s who gathered there not only because of the artistic freedom it offered but also because it offered temporary respite from a variety of social inequities resulting from racism and homophobia.

But when he arrives at the train station and asks for a ‘ticket to the airport,’ the ticket agent asks whether he is partially deceased. Answering ‘yeah,’ Kieran is told to ‘hang on a minute’ and the ticket agent makes a phone call, returns to the window and tells him ‘I can’t sell you a ticket. Yer gonna have to wait here.’³⁴ He is summoned by Philip, a village councillor, and escorted to Village Hall where every PDS Sufferer currently residing in Roarton is assembled. At this point we learn the status of PDS Sufferers has shifted once more, pushed farther down Mel Y. Chin’s ‘reference cline’ and further ‘dehumanized, and simultaneously de-subjectified and objectified.’³⁵ They are presented with a promotional video issued by ‘The Department of Partially Deceased Affairs’ where actors portraying PDS Sufferers are seen working in menial jobs, from tending a woman’s garden to washing dishes, in order ‘to help the communities they once destroyed’ and ‘rebuild British businesses they once tore apart.’³⁶ Kieran and the others learn two things—first that they must participate in the ‘PDS Give Back Scheme’ and secondly that they have been rendered non-citizens. Only after completing the ‘Give Back Scheme’ will they have a chance to apply for citizenship. Orange bibs bearing the text ‘I’m PDS and I’m giving Back!’ are distributed. Kieran confronts Maxine:

KIEREN (handing back his bib): I can’t do this scheme.

MAXINE: Are you a child or severely disabled?

KIEREN: No.

MAXINE: If you're eighteen and able-bodied all PDS sufferers must complete the PDS Give Back Scheme.

KIEREN: I'm meant to be at the airport. I have a plane to catch.

MAXINE: Can I see your passport?

Kieren looks at her for a moment. Then he goes into his suitcase, produces his passport and hands it over for Maxine's inspection.

Maxine looks at the passport.

MAXINE: This is invalid.

KIEREN: No. No it's not. I had it renewed a month ago.

MAXINE: Did you put on your passport application you were Partially Deceased?

KIEREN: No. There wasn't a question like that on the form.

MAXINE: Then you were given an outdated form, I'm afraid.
Kieren looks stunned.

MAXINE: Did you get it from Roarton post office?

Kieren nods. Maxine laughs.

MAXINE: They're in the dark ages over there, aren't they? I can see you're confused. The new passport application form has a section for PDS Sufferers and asks whether you have your certificate.

KIEREN: What's that? How - how do I get a certificate?

Maxine smiles and hands Kieren back his orange bib.

MAXINE: By completing the PDS Give Back Scheme.

(Kieren looks at the bib in his hand. All his plans for the future are crumbling. He's shell-shocked.)³⁷

As is the viewer—since in the first episode both the viewer and Kieran were introduced to the government sanctioned classification of Partially Deceased

Syndrome as a treatable illness for which the government also scripted affirmations for the sufferers to repeat: ‘I am a Partially Deceased Syndrome sufferer—and what I did in my Untreated State wasn’t my fault’.³⁸ The PDS Give Back Scheme is in fact punishment cheerfully disguised and contrary to the spirit of the law which had considered the PDS Sufferer innocent of crimes that took place while untreated. Still, the scheme renders the PDS Sufferer a sort of part-time convict. Circling back to Foucault—the spectacle of punishment here serves as a ‘retribution that the guilty man makes to each of his fellow citizens, for the crime that has wronged them all—penalties that are constantly placed before citizens’ eyes’³⁹; the PDS Sufferer is then for a time ‘the property of society, the object of a collective and useful appropriation’⁴⁰ engaged in ‘a procedure for requalifying individuals as subjects, as juridical subjects’⁴¹ since at the end they will be rewarded by qualifying for full citizenship. The problem is that the ‘scheme’ reflects only one aspect of a penal/disciplinary system that dates from reforms enacted in the 18th century, as Foucault describes it, since the program lacks a crucial aspect—a definable duration. Its efficacy as a deterrent is also questionable since the condition, Partially Deceased Syndrome, was not a choice but the result of a mysterious outbreak. These differences are significant because they point to other forms of state control that confer a condition of precarity on whole groups of people such as immigrants and refugees. For series creator Dominic Mitchell this is a turning point in the series as he deposits a socio-political layer onto the zombie genre that resonates globally:

We’re getting a bit more political in season two, so you can take it as a comment on immigration at the moment and other people and minorities. I want to tackle that using the genre tropes. I think maybe there’s a debate about immigration in America as well.⁴²

Season two grows even darker when Simon’s experience of confinement in a medical facility is revealed in a series of flashbacks that date from ‘the Beginning of the War, January 2010’.⁴³ In the first flashback we meet Simon as he is being treated in a bunker:

A VERY DRUGGED UP RABID SIMON WHO IS STRAPPED HARD TO A VERTICAL GURNEY (type of gurney that is used in lethal injections, so Simon’s strapped down arms are out stretched into a Jesus Christ pose). INTRAVENOUS TUBES stick out of him which are connected to a medical machine.

RABID SIMON: Where... am I?⁴⁴

In the next flashback we find Simon chained to a chair—handed a mirror by Dr. John Weston:

‘Expression: Stunned horror. The shock subsides and is replaced by utter soul crushing despair. We watch this. It’s heart breaking and, ironically, very human.’

Dr. John Weston explains:

We have you on a drug. A new drug we’ve synthesized here. It’s making you more...(human). It’s making all of you more like you used to be.

SIMON: (slither of hope) There’s a cure?

JOHN WESTON: With your help there could be. You were the first to respond to the chemical compound. That’s very promising.

SIMON: What do I have to do?

JOHN WESTON: Allow us to continue experimenting on you.

Simon nods, okay.⁴⁵

The tableau in which we first meet Simon on a gurney like those ‘used in lethal injections,’⁴⁶ coupled with subsequent scenes of his treatment and the experimentation he agreed to, is illustrative of ‘dark alliances’ Foucault maintains were created in the seventeenth century, and continue to endure, ‘authorize(ing) this confusion between punishment and remedies, this quasi-identity between the act of punishment and the act that cures.’⁴⁷ Exploring this contradictory situation through a main character who is a recovering zombie crystallizes Foucault’s contention that from that historic moment in the seventeenth century ‘stems the immemorial linking of unreason and guilt.’ For as often as the PDS Sufferers are compelled to repeat: ‘I am a Partially Deceased Syndrome sufferer. And what I did in my Untreated State wasn’t my fault’ the viewer has been witness to the guilt and shame Simon and Kieran feel for what they did in their untreated state; Simon killed his mother, and Kieran attacked a teenage friend.

Through the characters of Simon and Kieran, Mitchell reminds the viewer of current and past events when people’s lives and well-being become suddenly and unexpectedly contingent upon bureaucratic decisions. Both Simon and Kieran become politicized through their experiences and perhaps, it is hoped, so does the viewer. For the purposes of Mitchell’s fictional world, the zombies represent the newest in a long line of ‘asocial’ communities comprising the criminal, the insane, and the diseased that must be defined, confined and controlled for the safety of the rest of the population. Like lepers, they can’t escape the physical marks of their difference even with the assistance of flesh-toned foundation and contact lenses.

Simon's incarceration summons up disremembered stories of abuses in asylums where not only the insane were confined and treated against their will but also the outspoken, the disabled, and those who identified as LGBT.

Kieran's predicament can be seen in the global context of decisions that impact people's flows through borders, trapping them on one side or the other at times of conflict when alterations are made to standard-issue documents such as passports and visas or the manner in which they are processed. The most recent example of the Syrian refugee crisis only intermittently makes it to the top of the news cycle. Moving from the present to the past, invoking Freeman's notion of 'temporal drag,'⁴⁸ I could not help recalling the events surrounding philosopher Walter Benjamin's death in 1940:

Port Bou had remained a quiet fishing village well into the 1920s, but its strategic position on the rail line between Spain and France led to heavy bombing during the Spanish Civil War. Benjamin and the Gurlands reported, together with Birman's party, to the small Spanish customs office in order to obtain the stamp on their papers necessary for transit into Spain. For reasons that will presumably never be discovered, the Spanish government had recently closed the border to illegal refugees from France; Benjamin and his companions were told they would be returned to French soil, where they would face almost certain internment and transfer to a concentration camp. The entire group was escorted to a small hotel, Fonda de Francia, where they were kept under loose guard.⁴⁹

Benjamin took his own life, based upon a bleak view of his future prospects, but on the day following his death, those prospects changed—the border was reopened.

Conclusion

Perhaps what is so intriguing and affecting about *In the Flesh* and its play on the horror genre is its unrelenting exploration of the feeling of anguish rather than what is usually expected of the genre—feelings of fear and shock.

We moderns are beginning to understand that beneath the surface of madness, crime, neurosis and social inadequacy lurks something resembling a common experience of anguish.⁵⁰

Anguish is the common emotion that circulates through all of the main characters' experiences on both sides of the zombie/human divide. It is also the emotion that binds the situations and tableaux crafted by Dominic Mitchell to the world outside of the series. On the microcosmic level of the small fictional community of Roarton the

quantity of anguish swallows up all hope in ways that are too numerous to name. However, the bonds of friendship, family and lovers keep popping up as harbingers of hope even as they recede through the dystopian needs of the advancing narrative—destruction, loss and death. It is appropriate that the last episode of the second season (BBC 3 did not renew the series for a third season) ends with an abundance of these bonds proving stronger than those of society and its institutions: Steve professes his love and trust in his son Kieren, positioning himself against the town, Simon saves Kieren’s life and commits to being with Kieran wherever that may take them, Amy and Philip—the unlikely zombie/human couple—come together at the expense of Phillip’s budding career in politics. For the moment it seems that the combined powers of The Undead Prophet and Victus to inflict hatred and violence upon the undead and humans alike is temporarily stilled.

Notes

- ¹ Dominic Mitchell in Liane Bonin Starr ‘Interview: Creator Dominic Mitchell Talks Season 2’, Hitfix, viewed on 12 January 2015, <http://www.hitfix.com/starr-raving/interview-in-the-flesh-creator-dominic-mitchell-talks-season-2#FU5Kvbq0SFb64Rm4.99>.
- ² Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 43.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ <http://www.hitfix.com/starr-raving/interview-in-the-flesh-creator-dominic-mitchell-talks-season-2#FU5Kvbq0SFb64Rm4.99>, viewed on 12 January 2015.
- ⁶ Elizabeth Freeman, ‘Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,’ *New Literary History*, 31.4, Autumn (2000): 728.
- ⁷ Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, 40.
- ⁸ Michel Foucault, ‘The Confession of the Flesh’ (1977) interview, *Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194.
- ⁹ Foucault, ‘The Confession of the Flesh,’ 195.
- ¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus and Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.
- ¹¹ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* EP1-Final Shooting Script: 27.11.12 3.
- ¹² Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* Series 2 EP5-Final Shooting Script: 13.01.14 35.
- ¹³ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* EP1-Final Shooting Script: 27.11.12 14.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 27.11.12 2.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. 27.11.12 9.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. 27.11.12 14.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. 27.11.12 44.
- ¹⁸ Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, 40.
- ¹⁹ Michel Foucault as quoted in Robbie Duschinsky and Leon Antonio Rocha, Introduction: ‘The Problem of the Family in Foucault’s Work,’ *Foucault, the Family and Politics*, eds. Robbie Duschinsky and Leon Antonio Rocha (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 7.
- ²⁰ Deborah Thom, ‘Foucault, the Family and History: Imaginary Landscape and Real Social Structure’ *Foucault, the Family and Politics*, eds. Robbie Duschinsky and Leon Antonio Rocha (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 161.
- ²¹ Foucault, *Foucault, the Family and Politics*, 7.
- ²² Stuart Hall, ‘Deviance, Politics and the Media’ *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove (New York: Routledge, 1993), 87.
- ²³ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* EP3-Final Shooting Script: 27.11.12 46.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid. 47.
- ²⁶ Foucault, *Foucault, the Family and Politics*, 7.

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- ²⁷ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* EP3-Final Shooting Script: 27.11.12 41.
- ²⁸ Ibid. 44.
- ²⁹ Hall, 'Deviance, Politics and the Media,' 87.
- ³⁰ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh*, Series 2 EP1-Final Shooting Script: 12.12.13 26.
- ³¹ Ibid. 9.
- ³² Ibid. 15.
- ³³ Ibid. 15.
- ³⁴ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* Series 2 EP2-Final Shooting Script: 18.11.13 13-14.
- ³⁵ Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, 40.
- ³⁶ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* Series 2 EP2-Final Shooting Script: 18.11.13 17.
- ³⁷ Ibid. 18.
- ³⁸ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* EP1-Final Shooting Script: 27.11.12 3.
- ³⁹ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 109.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² <http://www.hitfix.com/starr-raving/interview-in-the-flesh-creator-dominic-mitchell-talks-season-2#FU5Kvbq0SFb64Rm4.99>, viewed on 12 January 2015.
- ⁴³ Dominic Mitchell, *In the Flesh* Series 2 EP5-Final Shooting Script: 13.01.14 4.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid. 5.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid. 17.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid. 4.
- ⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 86.
- ⁴⁸ Freeman, 'Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,' 728.
- ⁴⁹ Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 673.
- ⁵⁰ Foucault, *History of Madness*, 107.

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