

## Review Essay

**David McNally's *Monsters of the Market:  
Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism.*  
Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012.**

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I have been eating a lot more garlic recently. You will too after reading David McNally's latest book, *Monsters of the Market*. In a 'call for papers' expressing optimism in light of recent social movements and uprisings I found it odd, at first, that the editors of *Problématique* would request a book review for *Monsters of the Market*. In a volume seeking contributions 'to the political act of affirmative inquiry' this book may seem out of place for its sobering display of the grotesque mutilation capitalist social relations conjure upon the bodies of those subsumed to it. In a world of zombie-labourers and vampire-capitalists there does not appear to be much room for hope and optimism. My own sober second thought, however, bore two means by which this book contributes to 'affirmative inquiry'. Not only does *Monsters of the Market* epistemologically demonstrate how a creative weaving together of social history, cultural studies, political economy, and literary theory can significantly contribute to our critical understanding of social obsessions with such furors as vampires and zombies (McNally exposes why these monsters in particular carry a particular resonance); it also explores the literary genre of *fantastic realism* that itself carries a defetishising charge, creatively exposing the monstrosity unleashed by capitalist social relations. In doing so, McNally again (serving as a sequel of sorts to his 2001 *Bodies of Meaning*) recaptures the body as the fundamental location of human social experience, and therefore, necessarily at the heart of critical materialist social theory.

Many have noticed monsters invading our social consciousness. I would have been perturbed a few years ago if an opposition MP in the House of Commons asked the government if Canada is prepared for a zombie invasion; but when NDP MP Pat Martin asked this very question in February 2013 I did not even bother listening to the answer (albeit, mostly likely because it was John Baird responding). I have been desensitised to monsters, conditioned by an overexposure from the culture industry seeking to profit from the latest fad and pundits substituting actual analyses with hip catchphrases like 'zombie-economics', 'vampire-capitalism', and 'zombie-politics'. But there is something about this phenomenon that can shed light on the human condition in late capitalism. Consider the short documentary-style advertisement released by Obama's reelection campaign slamming Romney's career as a 'vampire capitalist' (available on YouTube under the search 'Romney Economics: Bankruptcy and Bailouts at GST Steel'). Commenting on his experience with Bain Capital, one worker remarked: "It was like a vampire. They came in and sucked all the life out of us." In other words, that worker is a zombie (lifeless) and Romney (the capitalist) is a vampire. A study in social semiotics, *Monsters of the*

*Market* explores what these products of social imagination actually signify: that capitalist social relations commit an assault on the working body. The fundamental human condition in capitalism is of a monstrous corporeal experience.

Monster-tales have been given a new salience with the latest capitalist crisis, but in tracing the genre's history McNally discovers it to be a refurbishment of earlier tropes that accompany the extension of commodification into new social spheres, illustrating the corporeal vulnerability experienced by targets of market colonization. Explicitly linking monster cultural invasions to market invasions, *Monsters of the Market* argues that “tales of body-snatching, vampirism, organ-theft, and zombie-economics all comprise multiple imaginings of the risks to bodily integrity in a society in which individual survival requires selling our life-energies to people on the market. Body-panics are thus ... a cultural phenomenon endemic to capitalism, part of the phenomenology of bourgeois life” (pp. 3-4). McNally treats these folktales not as an eccentricity but as a popular conception of the world, thus capturing the social disenchantment communicated by folktales of monsters as creative renditions of the systemic assaults on psychic and bodily integrity affected by invasive commodification.

Chapter one begins with public hangings in eighteenth century England as a site of social contestation, a struggle between surgeons and the mob for condemned bodies is more than a symbolic phenomenon that tells the tale of capitalism's rise: 'lurking in the guise of the disinterested scientist' of anatomy is a bourgeois ideologue seeking to disgrace and dishonour the labouring rabble. McNally insists that rescuing condemned bodies constituted solidaristic acts of (real and symbolic) resistance against the dehumanizing forces of commodification concomitant with 'rational' modernity. McNally interrogates the political in an effort of demythification of the seemingly mundane and non-contestable – such as anatomy. Here he finds the anatomization of the body to be part and parcel of the anatomization of land, politics, work processes, etc.; we can recognize this as part of a 'possessive individualism' upon which bourgeois ideology rests. The atomization of land and the destruction of the English commons provided a necessary precondition to systematic market-dependence, severing village- and kinship-networks and direct access to the means of production. Exposing the peasantry-cum-proletariat to a wholly unfamiliar corporeal vulnerability, the enforcement of capitalist property-relations rested on the criminalization of customary right and a criminal code that “refined punitive anatomy into an ominous weapon of class-discipline” (p.51). The rise of capitalism – far from releasing a natural propensity to 'truck, trade and barter' – is retold as a truly grotesque horror of monstrous mutilation not only of social customs but also of impoverished bodies. A tale replete with dissection theatres, for which the pursuit of cadavers itself was subsumed to market logic and political subsidies and quotas. It is in this context that *fantastic realism* produces *Frankenstein*, wherein McNally suggests “Shelley stamps a decidedly anti-working-class identity on Frankenstein. And, in the anatomist's assembly of the monster, she imaginatively reconstructs the process by which the working was created: first dissected (separated from the land and their communities), then reassembled as a frightening collective entity, that grotesque conglomeration known as the proletarian mob” (p.95). Shelley warns it is not science *per se* (as conservative commentators have suggested) that provides the axis of danger, but a split society of fractious and atomistic individualism that destroys essential features of humanity.

Apparently Marx had read and enjoyed *Frankenstein*, which is fitting because “[p]art of the genuine radicalism of Marx's critical theory resides in its insistence on tracking and naming the monsters of modernity” (p.114). The second chapter of *Monsters of the Market* gets to the heart of Marx's theory of capitalism, with a special emphasis on fetishism, alienation, and the corporeal experience of the working class. Here we find Marx throw dirt and flesh on Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', exposing the occult reality concealed by a surface of commodity exchange. That is the underlying social universe of exploitation and alienation engaged in

transactions between capital and human bodies: “the very life-activity is detached, or abstracted from them. In claiming that capitalism is organized on the basis of *abstract* labour, Marx would thus seem to have the literal sense of the word in mind” (p.123, emphasis in original) – that is, to literally separate, detach, or cut-off. As a disembodied phantasmal entity, capitalist wealth (value) survives only by leaching off the living bodies of its prey, the working class. Marx de-fetishizes this system of abstraction by re-embodiment its processes, and this is what McNally seeks to recover. Even the current era of financialization and fictitious capital, which has fooled many into accepting its supposed immateriality, rests upon exploiting a corporeal reality. Accumulation of contrived immaterial monies wreak havoc in the 'Global South' where debt collections dispossess peasants from their material means of social reproduction – water and land.

This sets up chapter three where McNally canvasses contemporary reinterpretations of African folklore, uncovering tales of enchanted currencies, magical coins, debt-free credit cards, and human ATMs, zombie-labourers, and blood harvesters. In short, stories that “situate human bodies in the vampire-like circuits of international capital” (p.177). He explores specifically Nigeria's burgeoning Nollywood film industry which produces up to 1,500 titles annually. Its most popular genre, horror-vooodoo (or 'juju') produces creative representations of social realities and fears; the 'Otokoto Riots' of 1996 in Owerri, Nigeria is taken as an example. A swell of purported body snatching executed on behalf of '419 men' (wealthy financial speculators associated with corruption and fraud) sparked a riot targeting these men and the businesses and 'new breed' churches catering to them. The rumours may have been exaggerated, but McNally suggests that it is 'anything but accidental' that the rumours focused on corpses and detached body parts in what may be considered a 'cadaverous economy'. Rather, such folktales can be considered “markers of and challenges to capitalist modernity” (p.184;), carrying “a powerful de-fetishizing charge, one that de-naturalizes commodified relations by presenting them as both bizarre and mysterious” (p.187). With its illustration of bewitched accumulation, famished roads and endless toilers, all operating around the new frenzied markets in the modern African city, Ben Okri's novels serve as the *pièce de résistance* for McNally. *Monsters of the Market* then concludes with the usual reiteration of central arguments and themes, but also a glance at early Bebop jazz-revolutionaries. In particular the 'zombie-music' of Thelonious Monk with its 'screwy chords' and 'frozen sounds' that “express the rhythms of a world out of joint, a space of reification in which people are reduced to things – and in which they violently awaken from their frozen state.” (pp.262-3).

McNally does not go so far as explicitly saying so, but it appears he is headed in the direction of identifying the body as a form of politically constituted property in capitalist society. But, much like its supposed mastery over nature, capitalism's dominance over the body is never quite total, and the specter of redemption haunts bourgeois society. McNally identifies de-fetishizing folktales of monstrosity as having a role to play in this challenge to capitalist modernity, but this role remains under theorized in *Monsters of the Market*. There is a potential here to make a more significant contribution to aesthetic theory and politics, but the challenge is not taken up, leaving the reader yearning for more. Furthermore, it is not readily apparent here how bourgeois intellectual contempt for the body is different from classical elite-class contempt for labouring bodies, as illustrated in the philosophy of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. A former student of Ellen Meiksins Wood, one would assume McNally is familiar of such a reading, but does not deliver in identifying the historical specificity of bourgeois ideology in this regard, which is surprising for someone well versed in 'political' Marxism, though not necessarily a strict adherent.

My only other criticism concerns the first part of his overall thesis that folktales of monsters are markers of- and challenges to- capitalist modernity. If folktales of monstrosity are a barometer of colonizing market relations, *Monsters of the Market* implies Sub-Saharan Africa

is presently undergoing a transition to capitalism. I have no reason to doubt this, but it remains insufficiently accounted for here. When McNally demonstrates *fantastic realism* provided a marker of encroaching market relations in England he refers primarily to 'political' Marxist understandings of the transition. This recourse is not available, however, for Sub-Saharan Africa's political-economy as 'political' Marxists have as yet seldom ventured beyond Europe and have had little contribution to contemporary development studies apart from criticizing the 'world systems theory' approach associated with Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein. Again, I have no reason to doubt the basis of this premise, but given its centrality to the overall argument of *Monsters of the Market* the processes of Sub-Saharan African political-economy warrant a closer and more detailed study. Considering the concentration of examined folktales in Nigeria, perhaps *Monsters of the Market* would have been better served if McNally focused his attention to the political-economic development of Nigeria instead of Sub-Saharan Africa generally, as this would have allowed a more detailed illustration of how capitalist social relations have been corporeally experienced, and then interpreted by the *fantastic realism* of this country.

These criticisms notwithstanding, I accept the overall argument, and McNally's most significant theoretical contribution remains of great import: the fundamental critique of the capitalist human condition still rests on the corporeal experience of the body. With its masterful blend of both research material and academic disciplines, *Monsters of the Market* provides an engaging, enjoyable, and scholastically fruitful read accessible to a wide range of readers without sacrificing its theoretical integrity and contribution. So yes, I am eating more garlic as a resistance strategy to ward off vampire-capitalists, and next time I see a zombie-hoard I will be raising a clenched fist in solidarity.