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Diseased Bodies and Notions of Time in Ian Edginton and Davide Fabri's Comic Book Series *Victorian Undead*

Natalie Veith (Frankfurt)

Conventional temporal conceptions of the human body tend to follow a continuous arc from birth, through childhood, maturation to a reproductive age, and eventually to old age and death. Over the course of the ageing process, the body first grows and develops until this development reaches a peak and turns into a steady decrease of bodily functions and physical capacities. Conceptions such as this one rely heavily on juxtaposed notions of being young, strong, and healthy versus being old, sick, and weak. Those are just some of the many dichotomies pertaining to the body in our culture, alongside, for instance, male and female, able-bodied and disabled, and black and white. Obviously, these dichotomies tend to be problematic, not only conceptually (for example in the context of feminist criticism, post-colonialism, or the post-structuralist rejection of binaries), but also culturally (being the foundation for exclusion, discrimination, and the ascription of stereotypes). Therefore, it is important to explore alternative temporalities that break with these dichotomous conceptions.

It is partly this angle from which I will approach Ian Edginton and Davide Fabri's comic book series *Victorian Undead* (2010–2011), focusing on the conjunction of bodies, disease, and time that it presents. The series deconstructs one of the most ›stable‹ of dichotomies, that of living and dead, as the renowned detective Sherlock Holmes[1] has to rid late-Victorian London of zombies and vampires that continually infect more people, thereby steadily increasing their ranks. As will become evident in my argument, these highly liminal figures that are not alive but also not quite dead, not human but also not entirely non-human or Other, enable the depiction of infected and impaired bodies as complex sites of temporality in this comic book series, a depiction that relies on the entanglement of aesthetic, poetic, and narrative elements.

Furthermore, I will show how this depiction also extends to a number of ›bodies‹ that belong to neither zombies nor vampires: the body of Sherlock Holmes, that of the city of London (which is conceptualised as and refered to in terms of a body), a statue of Britannia (the mythological personification of Britain) that is in the process of being erected, and the body of Queen Victoria. The latter three of these also deserve particular attention since these bodies are conflated with imperial ideology, national identity, and history, thus elevating the discourse on bodies, time, and disease to a metaphorical level. As I will show, in *Victorian Undead*, the infected body is turned into a vehicle for a neo-Victorian critique of historical master narratives and (ideological) utilisations of history.

Time for Diseased/Deceased Bodies

Zombies and vampires are both examples of the kinds of gothic monsters that have become popular since the nineteenth century, characterised by their »proximity to humans« and their »peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse« (Halberstam 1995, 23; see also Fischer-Hornung/Mueller, 12). As such, they make for very convenient figures to negotiate the boundaries of time and of the healthy (human) body. The boundaries threatened by the figure of the zombie were initially rather those of subjectivity and the individual mind. And even though time has long been a key element in much vampire fiction, its combination with a medical context is only a very recent phenomenon. The shift that turned these humanoid monsters' deceased bodies into diseased ones, in a manner of speaking, only took place in the final decades of the twentieth century and is worth taking a closer look at, since it marks a conceptual reorientation. When following a temporal conception of disease, death marks both the transition between and the separation of the diseased and the deceased body. While the diseased body is still part of the life course, the deceased body lies beyond the timespan of a human life and is characterised by its very absence. Where the diseased body ends, the deceased body begins. However, by ›transplanting‹ disease into the bodies of undead monsters, conventional notions of time, especially in relation to bodies, are undermined.

Originating in Haitian folklore, the zombie was initially portrayed as a victimised figure that had to submissively obey the *bokor*, the one controlling it. As Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller point out, it was mostly through the now classic zombie films by George A. Romero (that were, in turn, strongly influenced by Richard Matheson's seminal dystopian novel *I Am Legend* from 1954) that the general media image of the zombie became more aggressive through the conflation of the figure of the zombie with that of the ghoul (Fischer-Hornung/Mueller, 5–6). Its traditional context of voodoo and folklore was increasingly replaced by more ›scientific‹ origin stories that depict the zombie as a result of an exposure to

a virus, radiation, or toxins. Especially in recent years, the figure of the zombie is increasingly understood »through rubrics such as contagion, microbiology, and neuroscience« (Servitje, 1; see also Servitje/Vint). Today, the viral outbreak has become a standard element in zombie fiction such as the *Walking Dead* franchise (comic book series 2003-2019, TV series since 2010, ongoing) or *World War Z* (novel 2006, film 2013). That infection does not merely connote a static condition, but a dynamic concept evolving over time can easily be seen when considering the key problems addressed in these narratives: *How fast* do the infected transform into zombies and *at which pace* does the virus spread? Also the reactions of the living to the diseased/deceased are characterised by temporal aspects: Can the survivors barricade themselves in some place and gather enough resources *to survive long enough* until help arrives? And what kind of *long-term solution* (a cure, for example) can be envisioned? These generic plot elements show that contemporary zombie narratives are not only medicalised but also temporalized on several levels.

In vampire fiction, time has long been a key element. Vampires are commonly depicted as an ancient evil, whose power is directly connected to their immortality since it enables them to outlive humans and human problems as well as hone their abilities and acquire the experience and wisdom of generations. While human life is organised in the light of its finitude, as Susanne Scholz points out, one could say that the undead have defeated time (Scholz, 137), maybe even appropriated it and turned it into something monstrous in its own right. It is thus not enough for the protagonists of Bram Stoker's seminal novel *Dracula* (1897) that the count flees the country, since they fear his continuing influence as well as his future return, knowing that »he can live for centuries […]. Time is now to be dreaded« (Stoker, 273). Following Ahment Süner's reading, Stoker's novel can in fact be interpreted as a negotiation of two temporal regimes: »While modernity dictates that different times must be kept apart and that the modern time must always assert its superiority over the already superseded time of pre-modernity, time in *Dracula* does not abide bifurcation« (Süner, 58); it does not branch off into a neatly divided past and future that are only connected by the small moment of the present but do not otherwise mingle. In the form of the vampire, the present remains haunted by the past.[2]

The additional focus on time in relation to infection and endemic spread, however, has only emerged in vampire fiction over the past decades, around the same time that the figure of the vampire was also increasingly humanised (Fischer-Hornung/Mueller, 5; Mutch, 7–8). While the medical context is generally still much more common in zombie fiction, the topic has achieved a marked popularity in relation to vampires as well: In Kim Newman's novel *Anno Dracula* (1992), there are several old vampiric bloodlines of which some count as pure and others as contaminated and diseased; in the HBO series *True Blood (*2008–2014), vampires can catch the fatal Hepatitis V, which puts an abrupt and painful end to their longevity; and in Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's recent series *The Strain* (novel trilogy 2009–

2011, TV series 2014–2017), vampirism is transmitted by parasitic bloodworms and rapidly spreads across New York, transforming those affected by it within hours, to name but some examples.

The increasing topicality of time and disease (in monster narratives as well as beyond) needs to be understood in the context of the general popularity of outbreak narratives. Priscilla Wald relates the first larger wave of these narratives to the emergence of HIV in the 1980s, which lead to »accounts of newly surfacing diseases beg[inning] to appear with increasing frequency in scientific publications and in the mainstream media worldwide« (Wald, 2). Sorcha Ní Fhlainn points out that »vampirism quickly lost the dizzying promise of immortality and ab-human dominance, quickly reduced to a poisonous and mortal transformation in the wake of the discovery and fears surrounding the AIDS virus« (Ní Fhlainn, 87). Also Lorenzo Servitje notices a temporal coincidence between »the resurgence of the zombie's popularity« and its increasing medicalisation and discursive reorientation (Servitje, 5). These developments show how vampires and zombies are constantly culturally reinterpreted and resonate with contemporary anxieties. They have indeed turned out to be »highly variable signifiers« (Fischer-Hornung/Mueller, 4).

This introduction of a scientific setting or biological context for undead foes is also present in Edginton and Fabri's comic book series from the early pages onwards. After the discovery of a zombie in 1898, Holmes traces the phenomenon back to an earlier event. He deduces that what was claimed to be a pandemic of the Asiatic Cholera in 1854, was, in fact, also a zombie outbreak that was caused by the passing of an asteroid a few months previously. This asteroid assumedly bore the virus and brought it to Earth, like a »celestial seedbed«, as Holmes quotes from *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*, a supposed scientific publication by Professor Moriarty (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 70), who eventually turns out to be the undead leader of the zombie horde and intends to turn the British Empire into an »Empire of the Dead« with himself as »its Lord and Master« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 97).

Any supernatural explanations of the undead rising are thwarted and repeatedly denied: While Watson claims with reference to the zombies that »those infernal things out there […] should not exist. The dead do not walk. They chafe against logic and reason! They defy science!«, Holmes simply replies that this applies only to »science as we [they] know it« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 86). This exclamation of Holmes' can be taken in the most direct sense, since the setting of the Cholera outbreak in 1854 is actually historically significant, as is also shown by a three-page-sequence that works as a sort of prologue for the first story arc. It depicts a scene between Doctor John Snow and Reverend Henry Whitehead, who discuss the assumed cholera outbreak in London. Snow claims that he is

> more certain than ever that the Broad Street water pump is the heart of the infection. […] // Asiatic cholera is not some mystical miasma spread through the air, it festers and propagates in the kind of conditions not a yard from this or any door hereabouts! There are animal faeces, grease-boiling dens, slaughterhouses and a fetid sea of cess-pits. That such a pestilence should erupt in these environs was not a matter of ›if‹ but ›when.‹ (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 7–8)

He and Whitehead soon realise that it is not just the Asiatic cholera they are facing: Whitehead claims there have been reports of corpses attacking people unless they are beheaded and, only seconds later, this claim is confirmed by them witnessing how the corpse they had just declared dead stands up again (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 8–9).

Except for the reanimated corpse of course, this scene is based on historical circumstances, namely the investigation into the 1854 Broad Street cholera outbreak. By mapping and analysing the spatial pattern of the outbreak in London, the historical John Snow was able to pinpoint the Broad Street water pump as the source of the epidemic, making his findings one of the earliest examples of modern epidemiology. The discovery became a milestone in paving the way for the transition from miasma theory (commonly accepted until the latter decades of the 19th century) to germ theory. According to miasma theory, diseases were caused by bad air; »the earth itself was thought to emit fever-producing vapors, so that fissures, cracked foundations, and recently plowed fields became terrifying threats« (Otis, 9). Also malodorous urban slums were associated with unhealthy air. Germ theory, by contrast, shifted the origin of diseases from people's living environments to the people themselves and their interaction with each other, thus marking not only a turning point in the development of modern medicine, but also changing the general perception of health and disease in the late 19th century (Otis, 8–11; Servitje/Nixon, 7–13). Wald identifies this historical moment as the foundation for a crucial discursive shift:

> In different places and at different times, one or another of the theories [on the origin of diseases] would dominate, but they remained more or less in flux until bacteriology, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, demonstrated how specific microbes caused communicable diseases and documented routes of transmission that had hitherto only been suspected. (Wald, 13)

By the 1890s, the time when the main plotline of *Victorian Undead* is set, »Europeans […] continued to die of cholera and tuberculosis by the thousands,« since the discovery and association of microorganisms with disease did not immediately have an impact on medicine as it was then practised (Otis, 24). Nonetheless, the general acceptance of the germ theory of disease was on the rise and the first discoveries of viruses and bacteria were made.

By choosing this historical moment as their setting, Edginton and Fabri introduce diseased/deceased bodies into a time that just discovered the body as cause and carrier of diseases. They also project a zombie epidemic, a phantasmatic ›virus‹ from contemporary popular culture, into a time and place at which the concept of viral infection originated. The

comic thereby tells the story of a near-formulaic »outbreak narrative« (Wald, 2), situated at a point in history when the scientific knowledge that shaped the communicability of such an outbreak only just emerged. Historically, infection and disease were rendered communicable at this point in time, but in this comic, they also become the medium of communication for other concerns such as power and hegemony.

After the defeat of the zombies, also the following vampire story arc draws on this new paradigm of disease and broadens it on the medical level by also addressing hereditary diseases and on the metaphorical level by entwining it with larger concerns of imperial power: Count Dracula arrives in London and is introduced to Queen Victoria by posing as a foreign specialist on »conditions of the blood« (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 62), whom she intends to consult to find a possible cure for the hereditary haemophilia that runs in the royal family. But his real plan is to infect Queen Victoria with his vampire blood and to take over the Empire by threatening it with a mutated plague strain that only his vampiric minions are immune to. The story thereby creates a resonance between supernatural and scientific elements on several levels: it introduces science-defying monsters into a historical moment that was crucial for the increasing rationalisation and de-mystification of disease; but it also rationalises and biologises phantasmatic, supernatural horror creatures. It can be read as a parable on the rise of modern science in the 19th and early 20th century and on the historic embeddedness of scientific knowledge, while simultaneously fictionalising and distorting this historical moment.

Liminal Bodies and Temporal Disruptions

To adress the relation of diseased/deceased bodies to extraordinary concepts of time in the narrative, it is important to take a closer look at how the undead bodies are configured. In visual terms, the undead appear juxtaposed to living and mortal human beings. The zombies' faces are gaunt and grey, sometimes green, with bulging eyes. Their clothes are reduced to torn, stained rags. The vampires have a less rotten appearance, since drinking blood enhances their regenerative capacities, but they are deathly pale and their eyes have a red glow and, once they become plague carriers, they develop red pustules on their skin. Moreover, with the exception of the main adversaries – the zombified Moriarty and the vampiric Dracula – most undead creatures appear as part of de-individualised masses. Their state of disease and physical decay has erased the traces of individuality from their faces (fig. 1), thereby making them pure embodiments of disease and thus abject rather than beings in their own right. This mirrors the fact that they also lack any individual consciousness and are dependent on their respective (individualised) leaders, Moriarty and Dracula.[3] The living, by contrast, are all strongly individualised, which is enforced through their similarity to previous medialisations of their characters across a range of films (such as the series of *Sherlock Holmes* films

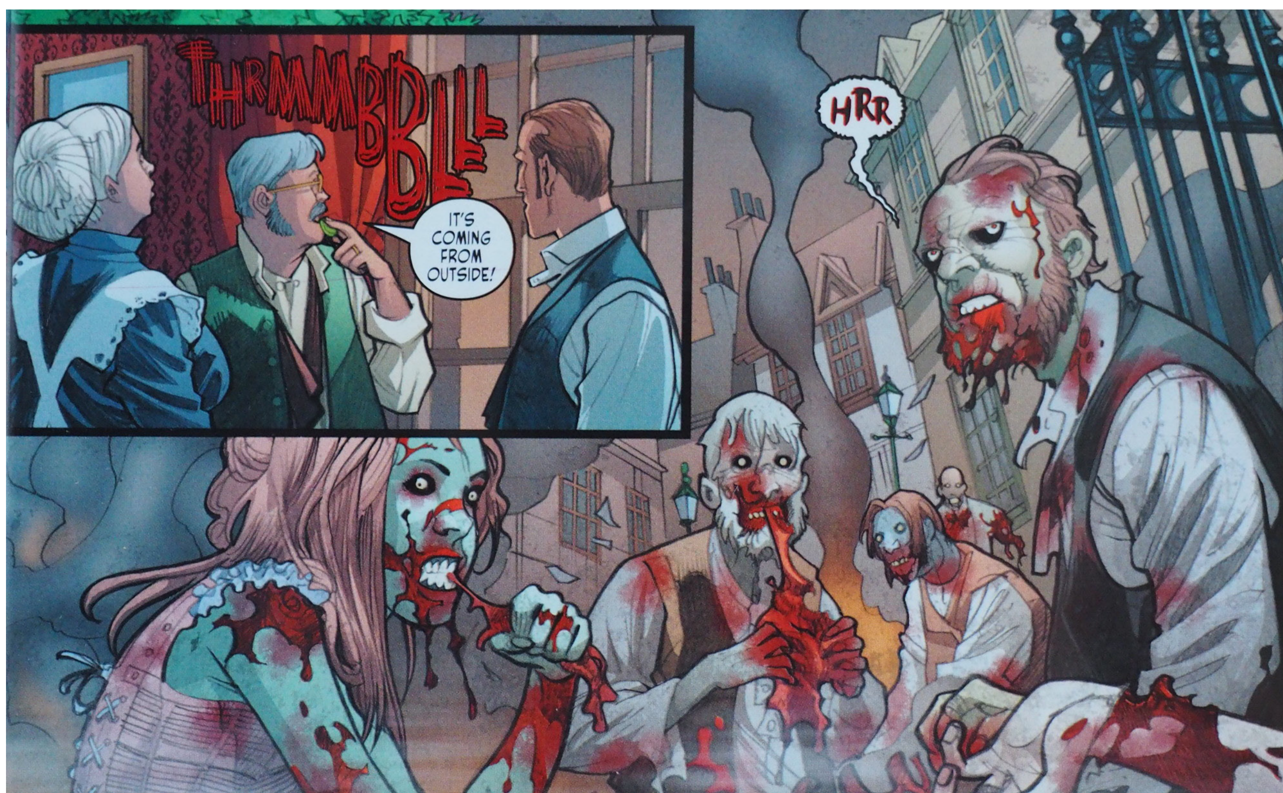

Fig. 1: Mrs Hudson, Watson, and Holmes observing zombies down in the street. (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 87).

from the 1930s and 40s, staring Basil Rathbone as Holmes and Nigel Bruce as Watson) or distinctive illustrations (notably those by Sidney Paget that were used for the serial publication of the *Sherlock Holmes* stories in *The Strand Magazine*), which entrusts them with a certain familiarity and recognisability.

However, death and disease are not simply defined *ex negativo* as the Other of life and health in the comic series but become more fluent concepts, emphasising the liminal nature of the undead. The undead monsters are »difference made flesh« (Cohen, 7), but not the kind of tangible difference that consists between two juxtaposed elements. They »resis[t] any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition« (Cohen, 7) and are of a complex, hybrid nature. As I will argue, their existence destabilises established narratives on the development of the body and the life course. Many elaborate academic analyses and critiques of temporal body narratives and scripted life cycles have been made in the field of queer studies, which help explaining nonlinear temporalities that break with these conventions. Judith Halberstam's influential monograph *In* a *Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), for example, challenges the naturalisation of a progression through the stages of birth, childhood, maturation, reproduction, old age, and death. According to Halberstam, these trajectories are overshadowed by heteronormative and capitalist economic values and held up by those people who comply with and benefit from them, but they turn out to be

incompatible with nonnormative identities, behaviours, and life cycles (Halberstam 2005, 2–7). Queer studies scholar Elizabeth Freeman has introduced the term »chrononormativity« to refer to these socially sanctioned scripts (Freeman, 3–4), a term I will henceforth borrow to refer to the temporal constructs defied by the undead body, since it adequately captures the linearity and productivity that hegemonic thinking imposes on temporal experience. Freeman's term emphasises the performative nature and embeddedness of liminal bodies into a larger socio-political power structure and helps to grasp their subversive potential.

The nonchrononormative body of undead creatures like the ones in *Victorian Undead* develops in a manner that cannot be described with recourse to established patterns. It is neither linear nor cyclical and not dependent on particular events. The undead are capable to reproduce without a partner and not only regardless of their sex, but also of their age and state of maturity, through the surrogate act of biting (which has, especially in the case of vampires, often been read as the acting out of a queer desire, since the vampiric mouth is both an orifice and capable of penetration, see Craft, 109–110). The temporal logic of disease normally dictates that the body weakens and ultimately dies (i.e. transforms into the deceased body), but the undead embody a sequel to this narrative: they remain animate or reanimate after death, some of them conscious and rational, and their bodily functions and capabilities are strangely altered yet intact. The readers can witness this development in the early pages of the story told in the comic series when a construction worker is attacked and bitten by a zombie. Even though not too badly wounded, he develops a fever and dies after having a seizure within a few hours, only to reanimate shortly thereafter (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 18–19, 22–23). The zombies have »[n]o body heat at all and... no pulse either« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 23), as Doctor Watson, in his role as trained medical professional, assures us after examining him, only to be followed up and countered by Holmes: »And yet here he is« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 23). Despite their increasing decay, their physical capacities are by no means impaired. They are strong, do not tire, and pose an increasing physical threat to London's human inhabitants – those with chrononormative bodies – threatening to subvert their bodies as well while sustaining their own liminal bodies by preying on the living.

The vampires are in a similar situation, which is best expressed in the comic by Lucy Westenra after her transformation. She states, »In my warm life, all that was expected of pretty little Lucy was to marry well and become a brood mare, squatting out children. / […] Now I am so much more. I had to die to become fulfilled. I am stronger than all of you, faster – the things I can see and hear... I am extraordinary!« (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 116). It is significant that she refers to her pre-vampiric existence not just as her »life«, but as her »warm life«. By adding a further attribute, it becomes clear that, by implication, also her current state is a form of life (her ›cold life,‹ presumably), though succeeding her death. She also explicitly voices freedom from a life that is prescripted and restricted by her sexual maturity and reproductive capacities that she has now traded in for a wholly different set of physical

abilities that are »extraordinary.« By becoming a vampire, Lucy has transcended the chrononormative phases and body functions of human life.

The threat to chrononormative structures is not restricted to undead bodies. To oppose them, also the humans have to defy temporal order, though on a wholly different level. It becomes apparent that fighting techniques, weapons, and armour from centuries past or even from the future are needed to fight against them (fig. 2). Following the zombie outbreak in 1854, »the creatures were culled using halberds and pikestaffs as much as bullets and bayonets« and the corresponding picture shows policemen protecting themselves from being bitten by wearing knight's armour (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 56). In 1898, a special unit has also developed its own routine way of dealing with the undead by using chemical weapons consisting of »[p]hosphorous and magnesium«, which »[b]urns the flesh off the bone like paper« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 45), as Holmes remarks, and in a later scene, soldiers can be seen driving tanks through the streets of London based on the Mark I, predating this model's historical usage by Britain in WWI by two decades (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 88–89). The bodies are manifestations of disorderly biological time but, on a metalevel, they also present a threat to the order of historical time.

But not only the undead defy biological time. Sherlock Holmes seems to do so, too. At first glance, Holmes appears to be the epitome of physical fitness and health and seems to have nothing in common whatsoever with the rotting, festering zombies and the pale vampires with their glowing eyes. However, the relationship is more complex, since despite their difference in appearance, they all seem to be driven by inexhaustible energy beyond ordinary human reach. Holmes is indefatigable despite the chain of adventures he is going through.

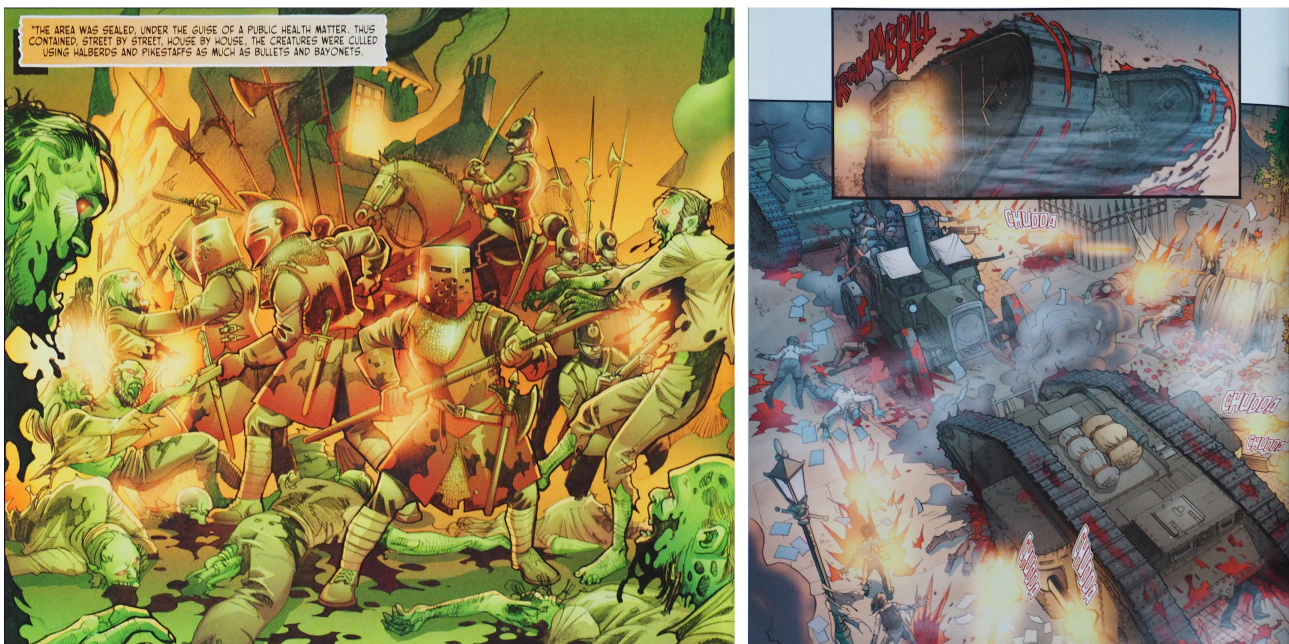

Fig. 2, left: Policemen fighting zombies in medieval attire (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 56); right: Tanks arriving in Baker Street (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 88).

His physical surface remains completely undisturbed, even in moments of exhaustion or haste. This becomes particularly obvious when contrasting Holmes with other humans. Watson, for example, shows signs of ageing and of physical weakness and exhaustion: his hair and moustache are grey, and he is in a far less athletic shape than Holmes. In one scene, he and Holmes have to walk a considerable distance through London in the blazing sun, since their carriage is stuck in a traffic jam (fig. 3). He admits to Holmes that, even though as a young man he was able to endure the warm climate of Afghanistan, his increased age as well as his stuffy, formal gentleman attire, has rendered him susceptible to the heat. He constantly sweats, wipes his forehead, takes off his jacket, and looks worn out, while Holmes remains completely unaffected (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 44–47).

Also on the rhetorical level, a connection between Holmes and the undead is made: Upon being informed of Holmes' suspicions that Professor Moriarty could be the one directing the undead, Watson claims that this could not be the case since Moriarty is dead. To this, Holmes merely replies by referring to how he faked his death at the Reichenbach Falls: »So was I, remember? For a time at least. / And so are they [the zombies down in the street]… / but that does not seem to bother them in the slightest« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 71). Instead of marking Holmes as the agent of living humanity to oppose the spreading zombie virus, this rhetoric posits him as a kind of revenant as well. In this regard, he and Moriarty appear as doubles rather than antitheses, putting them on a similar non-human level with the other bodies that do not fulfil chrononormative expectations. Notably, the cover illustrations of the collected volumes concretise exactly those doubled relations that are only subtly hinted at within the stories: the cover of volume I depicts a half-rotten and maggot-infested zombie version of Sherlock Holmes while the cover of volume two shows him baring vampire fangs, thereby creating tension between the titles of those volumes, which posit Holmes and the undead as opponents by means of the preposition ›versus,‹ and their visual amalgamation in the illustrations, providing the readers with ambiguous clues as to what they can expect.

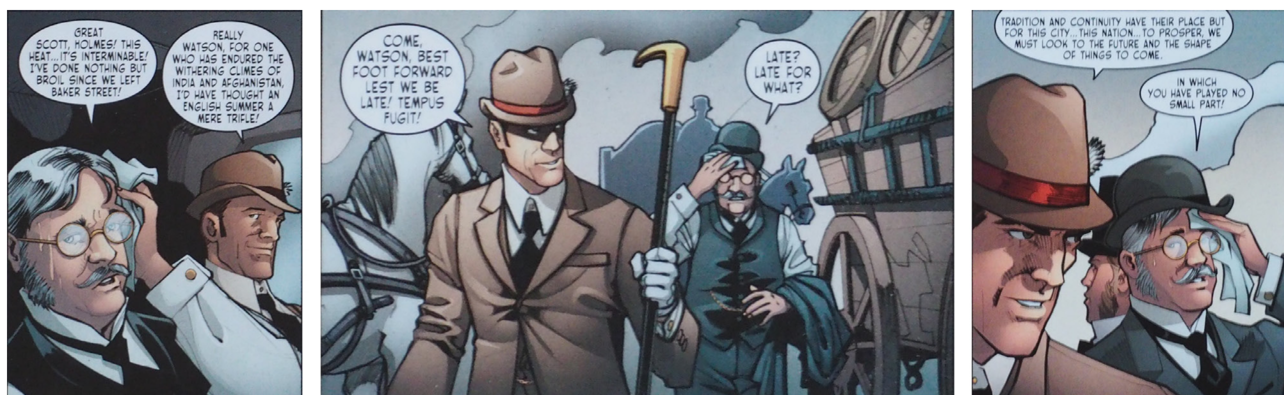

Fig. 3: Repeated depictions of Watson's exhaustion, contrasted with Holmes' indifference (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 44, 45, and 47).

Undead History

This questioning or subversion of body narratives is, however, not the only end to which the undead are used in the comic. *Victorian Undead* uses the diseased/deceased body as a vehicle for a critique of what could be understood as having larger chrononormative ambitions: the attempt to impose teleological narratives of imperial progress and greatness onto historical reality. This happens through the ›bodies‹ of the city of London, of John Flaxmann's Britannia statue, and of Queen Victoria, thereby revealing the comic's neo-Victorian agenda. In *Victorian Undead*, history is neither just a thing of the past, nor is it something that is readily available and can be used selectively at will. Instead, history is a continuum in which everything is connected and that always informs the present. Hence, any attempts to sweep its less desirable aspects under the rug can have severe consequences.

The City of London

To investigate the origin of the first zombie discovered in 1897, Holmes and Watson make their way to a construction site, where the creature was dug up by some workers. There they start digging further down until, to their surprise, they break through a roof and emerge in the attic of an old house that belongs to an entire street of late Elizabethan houses, buried deep underground (fig. 4). Watson is unsure what to make of this discovery when they first reach the abandoned street, but Holmes readily meets Watson's initial disbelief by explaining that »[t]he past has to go somewhere! London is layered with history, decade heaped upon decade, century upon century. / Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Normans, Tudors, Stewarts. Their homes, villas and palaces, roads and even rivers were buried and built upon to facilitate the future« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 35). The comic displays a progress-oriented society eager to break with its past and – quite literally – bury it, pave over it, and get it out of sight.

But the sediments of time are not as orderly layered as Holmes makes them out to be: in the Elizabethan street, they come upon a pile of corpses that are from a far more recent time than the street in which they lie, which they deduce from the clothes the corpses wear and the letters they find in what appears to be a postman's bag. The elements of the different historical layers have started to mingle. They are unruly and leave their ›allocated‹ space-times until they eventually resurface: the dead, those whose time has passed and who belong underground, have returned and resurfaced as undead. While Holmes would like time to adhere to modernity's values, to be »standard, linear and progressive« and capable to »assert its superiority over the already superseded time of pre-modernity,« to borrow Süner's words once more, »time […] does not abide bifurcation« (Süner, 58). The city bears a forgotten and concealed past within itself, buried deep underneath and lying dormant with no ›symptoms‹

visible on the surface yet. Pointedly, it is the construction site for the London Underground Central Line, a space that signifies Modernity and progress, where the forgotten past emerges, like a disease breaking out. The city can be read as a body that, though alive, is susceptible to disease, a metaphor that is explicitly taken up by Moriarty:

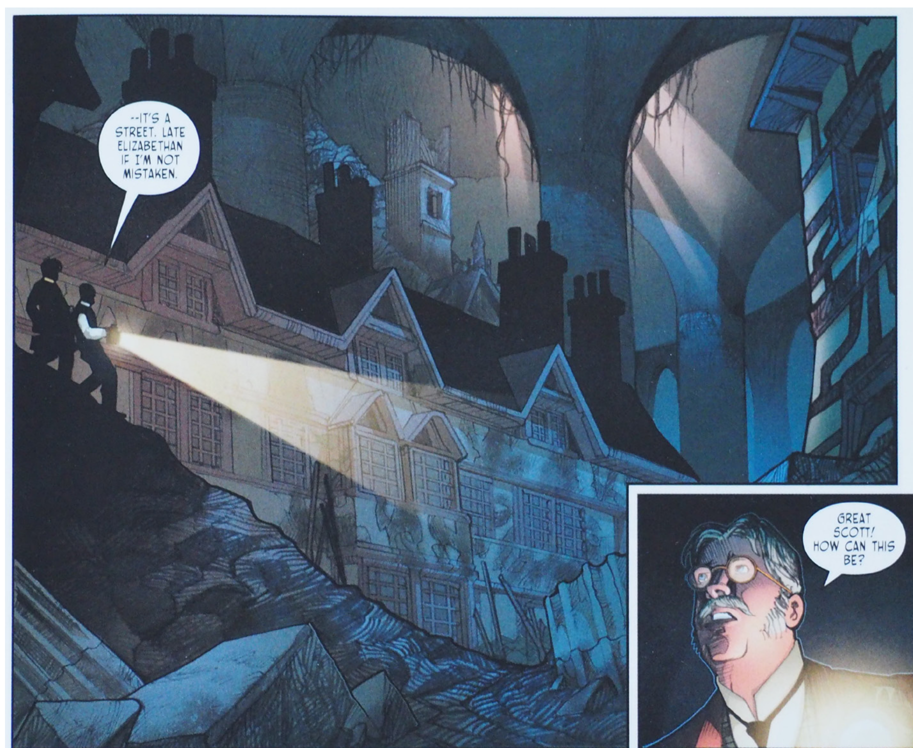

Fig. 4: Holmes and Watson exploring the buried Elizabethan street (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 35).

> The city stirs, its veins and arteries already pulsing, thick with life! A myriad mundane souls, the great swell of humanity here in this heart of empire, torpid with its own arrogance and vanity! / It thinks itself vast... untouchable... eternal... But I shall reacquaint this city... this nation with a sensation to which it had long thought itself immune... I shall teach it fear! (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 59)

Following Moriarty, the city's vulnerability consists in imperial hubris and in cutting ties with the less glorious elements of its past. Befitting his reference to London as the »heart of empire,« he and his zombie horde take over Buckingham Palace from where, standing on the balcony, Moriarty proclaims the empire of the dead. In this desperate situation, Holmes sets out to hunt down Moriarty, and advises the Prime Minister to »sacrifice the capital to save the country,« since, if they should »falter, Britain will fall and this island will become a fortress of the ravenous dead... hungrily eyeing Europe and the rest of the world« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 104). After losing the battle against the undead hordes street by street and seeing no other way out, the Prime Minister eventually follows Holmes' advice and arranges for London to be blazed down by government soldiers. Meanwhile, Holmes and Moriarty engage in a final battle, in which Moriarty initially seems to prevail. He tells Holmes »Warm flesh is weak, while dead endures all! […] I am not as easy to kill as I was before!«, to which Holmes replies, »Dead or alive, the human body is only a system of levers and pulleys... It is only a matter of throwing a spanner in the works« (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 134–135).

While Moriarty's metaphor anthropomorphised the city, describing it terms of a living body, Holmes does the exact opposite and objectifies the human body by describing it in terms of a lifeless, externally controlled machine (which contributes to deepening the divide between Holmes and ›ordniary‹ human bodies). He breaks Moriarty's leg, thereby immobilising him and eventually gaining the upper hand in the battle. After beheading Moriarty (beheading being the only way to kill a zombie), Holmes and Watson flee from the palace, which at this point is already engulfed in flames.

The final panels of this first story arc contain captions that are implied to be an extract from the case narrative that Watson has habitually written:

> So began the second great fire of London, which, not unlike its predecessor two centuries before, served to purge the terrible plague that afflicted it. / Even the Thames itself was scoured of any lingering, lurking horrors. / The cost had been high. Thousands dead and millennia of rich history swept away. Yet London, like its people, endures. / Barely three months on, reconstruction has already begun. A new metropolis rising from the ashes of the old. (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 138)

While Watson's narrative emphasises the ultimate victory over the undead, curiously, his precise choice in words and metaphors suggests the opposite. By describing it as phoenix-like (»rising from the ashes«), the city itself is likened to a mythical creature that regenerates after its death. While Watson probably has the longevity and supposed eternity of the empire in mind when using this expression, the overall context suggests a similarity to the reanimation of the dead. Following this logic, London itself can be read as undead and monstrous. And, indeed, with »[t]housands dead and millennia of rich history swept away,« the question arises whether the zombies or the government's countermeasures caused more damage. The past and its »lurking horrors« as well as the people populating the city are sacrificed for a violent new beginning that may, however, continue to be haunted by and infected with an obliterated past.

Flaxmann's Britannia

The notion of bodies under and as a threat and their link to history is taken up again and intensified in the vampire story arc, which starts with the scene previously mentioned in which Holmes and Watson's carriage is stuck in a traffic jam, causing them to abandon it and continue their journey on foot in the sweltering summer heat. They soon come upon the cause of the traffic jam and hence the »source of [their] woes! Flaxmann's Britannia!« (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 46), or at least her head, which is strapped down with ropes and chains on a cargo train and being transported to its designated site of glory, causing the hold-up by blocking the street (fig. 5). Holmes immediately contextualises the statue in a narrative of imperial progress:

> Did you know it was almost a century ago when he [Flaxmann] proposed the construction of his 230-foot colossus? It sadly stalled with the rekindling of the Napoleonic Wars. / However, the rise of Moriarty's revenants and the razing of London have given the city much-needed shoulder room. // Along with better hospitals, public housing, sanitation, transport and so on, such grand designs as these have been dusted off and given their chance to shine… and quite right, too! / Tradition and continuity have their place but for this city… this nation… to prosper, we must look to the future and the shape of things to come. (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 46–47)

Holmes establishes a juxtaposition of past and tradition with progress, conceptualising them as irreconcilable. This is enforced by the metaphorical conjunction of history with the zombie virus in the story, since it is the »culling [of] Moriarty's revenant horde,« a violent separation from the resurging past, that enabled »this explosion of artistic, philanthropic and industrial endeavor« (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 47).

Watson reminds Holmes of the influential role he played in this, fashioning him as an agent of progress and claiming that these developments »can be laid squarely at your [Holmes'] door! Including this wretched traffic jam that is making me sweat like a damned dray-horse« (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 47). On the intradiegetic level, Watson's comment about the traffic jam appears merely as a little tongue-in-cheek comment with which he teases his otherwise perfect and heroic friend but which does not lessen his apparent approval of Holmes' vision of growth and futurity. However, the visual narration during this sequence does not join in this glorification of progress and the justification of the sacrifices made for it. Even though in the very first panel, the readers' gaze is directed towards the construction going on high above the rooftops of London, the perspective is here framed by an iron arch (fig. 6). This creates a frame-within-a-frame effect that narrows down the field of vision, locating the physical origin of the gaze in the shadowy, lower parts of the city at street level, creating a notable contrast between

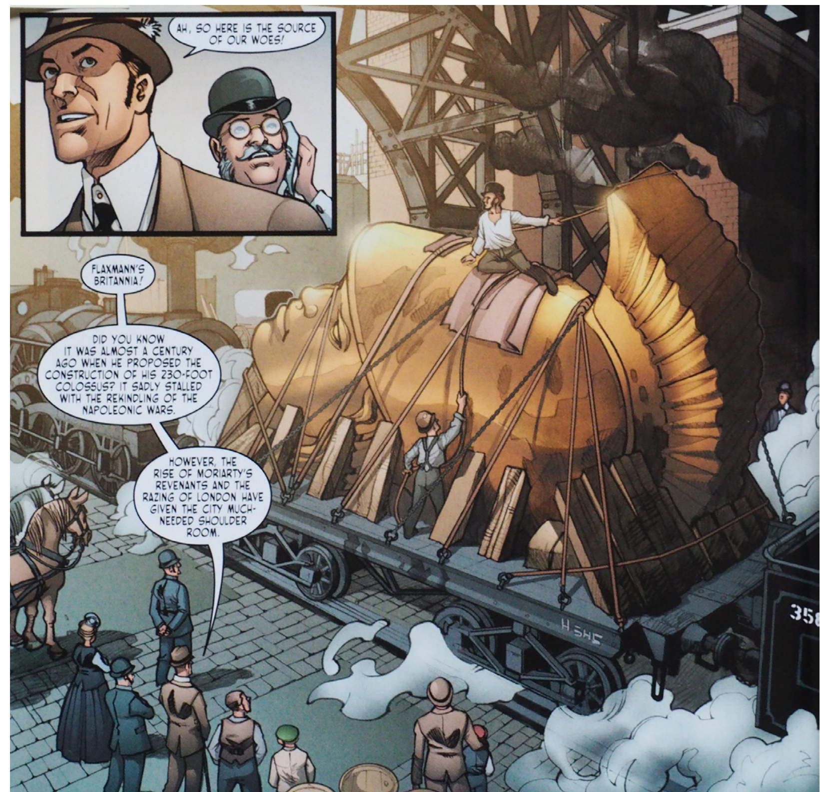

Fig. 5: The transportation of the head of Flaxmann's Britannia statue (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 46).

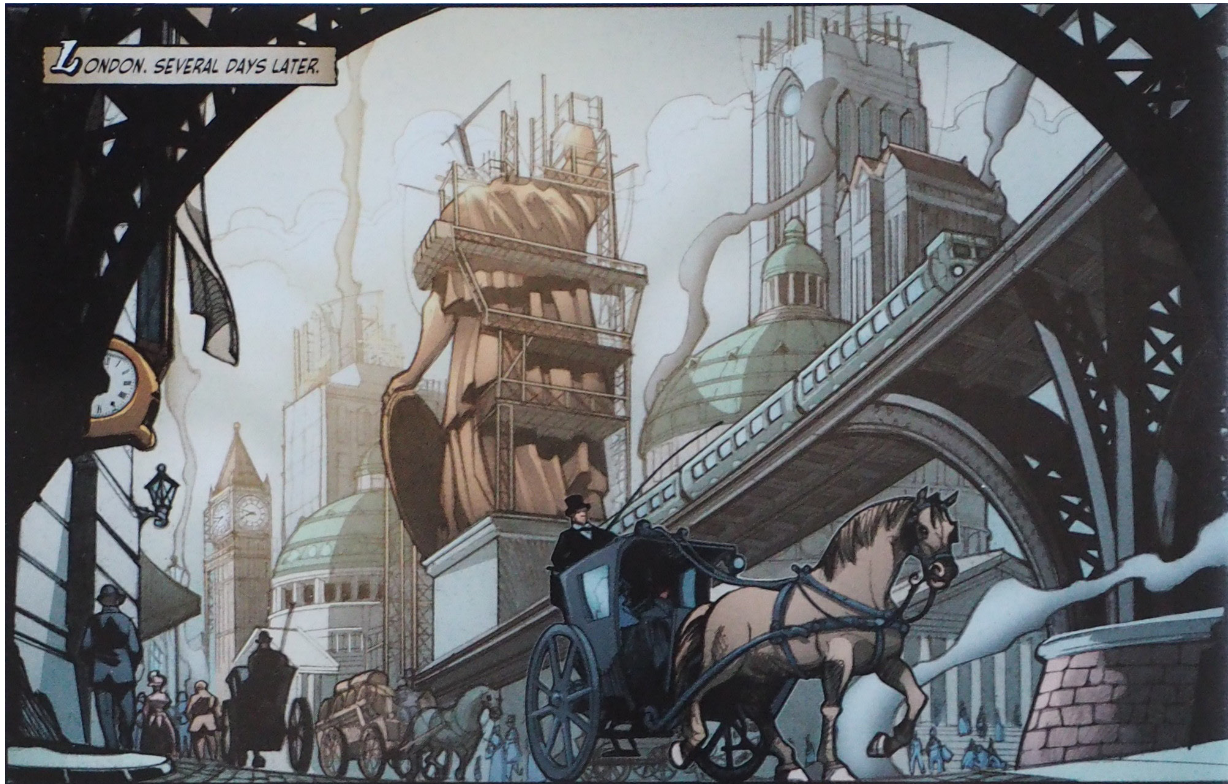

Fig. 6: The framed perspective on the incomplete statue and skyscrapers (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 44).

the brightly lit construction site in the background and the dark, confined foreground and framing (Edginton and Fabri 2011, 44). Despite this visually limited perspective from underneath the iron arch, the city's skyscrapers and the Britannia statue in the background are completely visible, but notably only due to their state of incompletion: If they were at their full height, the tops of the skyscrapers and Britannia's raised arm and her head/helmet would be decentred and partly cropped from view by the arch/frame. Holmes' intradiegetically figurative statement that »the rise of Moriarty's revenants and the razing of London have given the city much-needed *shoulder room*« (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 46, my emphasis) becomes a literal statement on the discourse level: as there is indeed room for shoulders, but for for nothing above them. It is the *headless* body of this allegorical personification of Empire that is emphasised by the perspective.

The transportation of the collosal head to the body and the attempt to make Britannia whole appears as the counter-image of the countless zombies that were beheaded in the first story arc (Moriarty among them). However, just like the undead, the headless Britannia actually also poses a ›threat‹ of sorts to the people of the city: Its »chance to shine« (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 47), as Holmes calls it, can in this scene be taken quite literally, since its golden finish is gleaming in the constant sunlight, enhancing the blazing heat cast over the city and making it all the more unbearable. It thereby stands in ironic contrast to Holmes' statement.

The visual rhetoric of the scene creates a direct correlation of the golden shine emanating from Britannia's body, the sweat and physical exhaustion of the human bodies, and the black smoke and fumes caused by the motorized vehicles caught in traffic and the machines of the construction site that fill the air. On a metaphorical level, the colossal body of Britannia also becomes a threatening, monstrous body: the construction of this icon of imperial progress has caused a traffic jam, a moment of stasis in everything surrounding it, and brought movement in London, the pulsing heart of the British Empire, to a standstill.

Moreover, in the scene in which the ›severed‹ head of the colossus is lying on the ground, the sight is rather reminiscent of the biblical story of the defeated heathen Goliath or other narratives of decapitation that evoke debasement and defeat. When Holmes and Watson walk on by, the face of Britannia looms strangely in the background, bound with chains and ropes like a dangerous monster or the enslaved Other, enshrouded by the billows of smoke produced by the train carrying it and the traffic jam its transportation has caused (Edginton/ Fabri 2011, 46). Britannia's monstrous appearance alludes to the dark underside of colonialism and to the eventual decline of the British Empire in the twentieth century.

Queen Victoria

This ambiguity surrounding the eager attempt to pave over and break with the unwanted past, expressed through a conjunction of diseased/deceased bodies, historical ignorance, and phantasies of progress and improvement, continues throughout the story arc. The events taking place between Dracula and Queen Victoria relate to this exact logic. It becomes clear that, just as Moriarty appears as Holmes' double in the zombie story arc, Dracula works as the double of Queen Victoria in the vampire arc of the narrative. They are both equally entangled in a plot determined by blood, disease, and power. Both characters share their desire for imperial power and are old nobility, whose respective (contaminated) bloodlines date back centuries. While Victoria is a monarch by the grace of God (or so the monarchy is justified), Dracula uses vocabulary reminiscent of the biblical description of the body of Christ as the bread of life (»Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day«, *King James Version*, John 6:54) when he reveals his ultimate plan:

> These wretches, diseased by their vices, are closer to death than life. Yet by my blood they shall be restored, enriched... and become mine own, slaved to my will. So shall it be with the heirs of the Empire. / When the plague is set loose, and the streets choked with corpses, only those who have taken of me shall endure and remain untouched. (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 72–73)

Similar to the covers of the comic's collected edition that visually merge Holmes with his adversaries, the mirrored existence of Victoria and Dracula is taken up on the cover of the single issue publication of the third chapter of the vampire arc (reproduced in the collected volume as a dividing image between chapters). It shows her in the manner of the *Portrait of Queen Victoria of England, Empress Victoria of India* by Alessandro Bassano (painted on the occasion of the 1887 Golden Jubilee), but the right half of her face is cast in shadow and the greenish contours of Dracula's face fade into it, cascading down her back, blending into her veil.

The representation of Victoria's blood and body is additionally informed by the dogmatic duality of the monarch's body rooted in the British/English tradition, as famously analysed by Ernst Kantorowicz. The monarch is conceptualised as having both a »Body natural,« consisting of the monarch's mortal body, and the »Body politic,« an immaterial condensation of the sovereign right to rule that immortally passes on from one »Body natural« to the next in line (Kantorowicz, 7–12). In *Victorian Undead*, the immortal Dracula desires the position of power attached to Queen Victoria's Body politic (which is as immortal as Dracula's vampire body), and to get to her, he addresses the weakness of the Body natural, notably a weakness that transcends Victoria's own body since it is hereditary and affects her entire family line.

Victoria's contact to Dracula is ultimately facilitated by the Queen's fear of the hereditary haemophilia. While, on the one hand, she wants to strengthen the Empire's network of power and stability through the intermarriage of her descendants with other royal families of Europe, the ›health‹ of the Empire on a larger scale is, on the other hand, connected to the disease of the people who hold that power. The very blood that authenticates Victoria as the monarch also carries the haemophilia that will be passed on to her descendants, reminiscent of the manner in which Dracula intends to infect her and the entire Royal family with his vampiric blood. The royal bloodline is thereby marked by a temporal continuity that weakens power and sovereignty rather than strengthening it since it is her striving for health and purity, her desire to cleanse her blood and break with her biological, bodily heritage, that makes her fall victim to Dracula's scheme. While Dracula claims to be a foreign blood specialist, capable of curing her, he actually plans to infect her with his own tainted blood and to »inoculate Victoria's ailing progeny«, who are »heirs to a dozen empires across Europe« (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 99).

In contrast with Stoker's novel, Dracula did not choose to come to Britain on his own accord in Edginton and Fabri's comic but hatched this plan in cahoots with Arthur Holmwood. The readers learn through a dialogue among the characters that »after the rise and fall of Moriarty's revenants, certain quarters in the government decided this country should equip itself with its own similarly ›alternative‹ arsenal. […] Agents were despatched worldwide to follow the slenderest of leads on how we might acquire such a force« (Edginton and Fabri 2011, 103). Arthur Holmwood was one of these agents and, recognising the Count's

abilities, proposed to Dracula to join forces and seize control over the Empire. While Stoker depicts Dracula as an external threat to the British Empire and the (sexual, racial, moral, etc.) purity associated with Englishness (Fischer-Hornung and Mueller, 4; Halberstam 1995, 13–14; Scholz 140), Edginton and Fabri depict the the British government and the Empire itself as the catalyst behind the events. The undead monsters not only defy notions of purity, but they also »revea[l] the suspect ideological stakes of quests for purity« (Halberstam 1995, 119).

Moreover, it is Holmwood who turns into a traitor of crown and country, the only aristocrat out of the group of vampire hunters adapted from Stoker's novel. Stoker paints a reconciliatory picture in which Holmwood »acts as an equal member of this society and whose relationship with the other characters is based on enlightened friendship beyond the bounds of class« (Süner, 61). *Victorian Undead*, by contrast, uses the figure of Holmwood to locate a hunger for power in a social class that – similar to the Queen – strives to ensure the continuity and purity of aristocratic bloodlines. But Holmwood has to pay for his treachery: Lucy, the woman he initially intended to marry and have children with to »ensure the continuity of the ancestral body of the aristocratic family« (Scholz, 143, my translation), turns on him in her vampiric form. She drains his aristocratic blood which now only ensures the continuity of her vampiric (i.e. impure) body.

Eventually it turns out that, unbeknown to Holmwood, Dracula also plans to threaten the empire with a mutated strain of the plague against which only vampires are immune. He claims that he has been cultivating this strain since the Middle Ages and has used it to conquer cities in the past (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 73). Dracula threatens the integrity of the late-Victorian society and its underlying values of purity by weaponising an unwanted past that is supposed to erupt like and indeed as an epidemic. Dracula as well as the Queen and the agents of her Empire seek to establish transtemporal hegemony – the former through contamination and the latter through purity – and both attempts are represented as a threat.

Conclusion

In her oft-quoted monograph *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach asserts that »every age embraces the vampire it needs« (145). So what are the vampires (and zombies, as I would add) that we need today? The ones that *Victorian Undead* offers to its readers encourage them to question chrononormative constructs: those of the life course as well as, on a larger scale, those of history and teleological narratives of progress, in the comic exemplified by imperial glory and rulership. As pointed out by Halberstam, traditional Gothic monsters are »narrative technologies that produce the perfect figure for negative identity« (Halberstam 1995, 22): by representing manifestations of deviant subjectivity in the monstrous body, they

simulateously normalise its opposite (Mutch, 8–9; Halberstam 1995, 2). Postmodern narratives, by contrast, rather caution their readers/viewers to »be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence« (Halberstam 1995, 27; see also Mutch, 9), which can also be observed in *Victorian Undead*. As it turns out, the undead monsters are not the only diseased and/or deceased bodies with extraordinary relationships to time and they are certainly not the only horrors lurking between the pages of this comic. If elements of the past that do not facilitate present ideologies are altered or hidden, if not destroyed, the discourse of history itself becomes monstrous, and the present devours the past like the undead feast on the living (see also Cohen 9). Attempts to cast off an unwanted past and to alter the sanctioned narrative of history to one's own advantage are depicted as acts of violence. But in *Victorian Undead*, the unwanted past bites back. The past itself appears as undead, it always returns, with a downright insolent tenacity. Ironically, the same holds true for a certain detective character, who, even though based on stories written over a century ago, continues to return.

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Table of Figures

Fig. 1: Mrs Hudson, Watson, and Holmes observing zombies down in the street. (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 87)

Fig. 2, left: Policemen fighting zombies in medieval attire (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 56); right: Tanks arriving in Baker Street (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 88).

Fig. 3: Repeated depictions of Watson's exhaustion, contrasted with Holmes' indifference (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 44, 45, and 47).

Fig. 4: Holmes and Watson exploring the buried Elizabethan street (Edginton/Fabri 2010, 35).

Fig. 5.: The transportation of the head of Flaxmann's Britannia statue (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 46).

Fig. 6: The framed perspective on the incomplete statue and skyscrapers (Edginton/Fabri 2011, 44).

1] As is common in neo-Victorian works, the comic series borrows characters and elements from works of Victorian literature (in this case the protagonist of Arthur Conan Doyle's famous Sherlock Holmes stories) and inserts them into new stories and contexts (Sherlock Holmes hunting undead monsters instead of criminals), thereby drawing on the original contexts and associations as well as, simultaneously, rewriting them.

2] This condition has resulted in many psychological and psychoanalytical approaches to the vampire as the return of the (personally, culturally, and historically) repressed. In fact, gothic monsters such as vampires can even be read as »participat[ing] in the production of something like a psychology of self« (Halberstam 1995, 8).

3] This also connects to the late-19th century anxieties related to irrational behaviour in deindividuated crowds as described most prominently by Gustave Le Bon in his seminal work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 1895.