

Sawyer S.
Davis, CA

*Vase of Lilies; Tulocay Cemetery I; Because She's Gone; Tulocay Cemetery II;
An Evening With A Skeleton*
(Ordered top left, bottom left, center, top right, bottom right)
Oil paint on stretched canvas

My whole life I have been fascinated with the topic of the afterlife. I would not consider myself an existential person, but as a young kid, I did have my fair share of crises. After growing up and maturing, I am able to recognize death as something not to be feared, but rather studied and even celebrated. These interests, along with my interest in natural systems, is what guided my research and overall theme of death and loss.

An overarching motif I wanted to explore in my final piece was that of “dancing with death.” Specifically with the larger painting, *Because She's Gone*, the depiction of a woman dancing with the glowing skeleton is supposed to symbolize the balance between life and death; the dance all living things take part in as a part of living. The name of the painting comes from a song by The Front Lawn, in which the singer talks about losing a loved one. The prevalent theme of death in this song is where I drew some of my inspiration from, specifically from the lyrics “You don't leave flowers on her grave, her body is cold down in the clay, because she's in another arms today, and he will hold her forever.”

The composition for all of these paintings came from my own imagination. All except the two cemetery paintings, which I painted from life up the road at the Tulocay Cemetery. I started all the paintings with a charcoal sketch on the canvas before doing a wash of oils over the sketch to create a base for my color values. I built up color using thin layers of oil paint.

Systems and Cycles Within The Natural World and Society



Sawyer S.

The Oxbow School

OS47

Writer's Note: What are the interactions in a natural or societal system/cycle and what influences do they have on its inhabitants? How do humans affect natural systems? Why does the natural world function in terms of spheres and cycles? What would happen if your body stayed functioning after you literally or metaphorically died? Are we living through a capitalistic-fueled zombie apocalypse? What happens when you die? How is grief unconsciously manifested? What do you do with the mental/emotional remnants that someone leaves behind after they die?

I. Introduction

Everything exists in terms of spheres and systems. Spheres of influence, cycles allow the world to function. We live as a part of a multitude of systems; natural systems, societal systems, even the solar system. The sun rises everyday as it has for millions of years, following the pattern it has established as a part of its natural cycle. Patterns are imperative to life and understanding; the same goes for me as well. I exist as a creature of habit. The way I process things has to do with interactions within systems, specifically repetition and patterns. I struggle with sensory issues, and routine is a way to help me combat overstimulation. When those cycles are disturbed, I am thrown off and get overstimulated easily. With that, I apply my knowledge and understanding of systems to my own life. I see patterns and behaviors that some people might not. My understanding of the world has led to my interest in researching different systems. In this paper I will explore the intersection of economic, specifically capitalist, and natural systems and different analogies used to better understand their impacts on society.

II. Environmental Systems and Cycles

When most people think of natural systems, they think of what you're taught in biology class; the water cycle, food webs, Krebs cycle. Interactions, specifically those between humans and nature, go far deeper than that. The systems that humans have built with nature since the beginning of time have continued to define our interactions with it today. These systems include farming practices, industry, the consuming of resources, and so much more. These types of systems are called coupled human and natural systems, or CHANS. CHANS is the “reciprocal interactions and feedback... [of the effect] of humans on the environment and the effects of the environment on humans” (Pell). CHANS have existed for as long as humans have existed, but only ever at a local scale up until the Industrial Revolution. With the introduction of globalization and industry, interactions between nature and humans had rapidly increased in their range of effect. We are still seeing the consequences of this rapid expansion in the twenty-first century. The rate at which humans are consuming natural resources has been increasing, leading to the degradation of natural sources. For example, access to freshwater is becoming more limited as natural wells dry out due to effects of climate change or pollution. Overfishing is damaging marine ecosystems. Systems as large as the climate cycle are being affected by human influence (Pell). To offset some of these issues, some have attempted to engineer solutions such as levees, planting trees, etc. Natural systems are not the only thing being damaged by human activity. Over the past few decades, natural disasters have become more frequent, specifically climate related disasters. Hurricanes destroy communities and towns, earthquakes damage infrastructure and so on. These sort of “feedback loops in which humans both influence and are affected by are natural patterns and processes [are] typical of CHANS” (Pell). These can be good or bad, and can also lead to a change in how those systems interact. For example, natural systems have been negatively impacted

because of the increase of greenhouse gasses. With the increase of greenhouse gasses, the planet is better insulated, causing a rise in temperature. This can ruin entire ecosystems; ice caps melt, farmland becomes infertile, organisms susceptible to heat can die.

There is a certain vulnerability to CHANS. Patterns can change and cycles can shift, which can prove to be beneficial or harmful to an environment. An example of this would be during the COVID-19 pandemic there were fewer emissions because there were fewer emissions coming from transportation. Environments have been able to demonstrate extreme forms of resilience. In this context, resilience is an ecosystem's ability to rebound after a major change. But with human influence, resiliency of natural systems is at an all time low. Ecosystems cannot bounce back after a disaster if they are given no time to recover. We are seeing the extinction of hundreds of endangered species because of low resilience. This time in history can either be a time of mourning or rapid change. As people we have the ability to accept our circumstances or fight for our environment, because if we don't nature has a way of fighting back and taking back its own resources.

III. Life, Death, Grief and Rebirth

Sometimes on older buildings, you will see vines and plants growing on or inside it. Nature always has ways of reclaiming things, as is the cycle of life. When you die, you are also eventually reincorporated back into nature in one way or another. Depending on the circumstances, there are various different ways one can reach the point of skeletonization. There are four main stages of decay; autolysis, bloating, advanced decay, and skeletonization. These states do not exist exclusively. One body can exhibit a combination of any one or more of these forms. Everything is dependent on the conditions the body is left in post mortem. Decomposition is the means by which

a cadaver turns into a skeleton due to the destruction of soft tissue (Schmitt). No two decomposition processes are the same. The first stage of decomposition, fresh, is the condition of the body post mortem. The first stage, autolysis, begins right after death. Blood circulation and breathing stops indefinitely, causing an amount of carbon dioxide to build up. This results in cell membranes rupturing and releasing enzymes that begin to break down soft tissue of the body. This is also when rigor mortis starts to take place, the tightening of the muscles. The top layer of skin will also begin to loosen. During the second stage, bloating, the enzymes released into the body will start producing gasses that cause the body to expand and bloat. It is at this stage that the skin potentially begins to change color because of bacteria, but can differ from cadaver to cadaver. At this point, because of microorganisms and bacteria, the corpse will begin to smell. This is called putrefaction. Extrinsic factors, such as larvae or maggots, can speed up this process by burrowing holes in the skin, exposing the inside of the body to more bacteria. Advanced decay is where fluids are excreted through bodily orifices and all of the body's skin, muscles, and organs liquify. The only thing that remains are bones, cartilage, and hair. The final stage of decay is skeletonization, where the body is all bones. From start to finish, this entire process can take around one to three months. The process of decomposition is one thing, our body is just our mortal vessel, but what about the soul? Where do we actually go when we die, if anywhere.

The idea of death can present an entire lifetime of existential crisis and worry, but is there really anything to worry about? What is left of you when your body decomposes? It was discovered that your brain can stay active up to several minutes after death. During this period, researchers saw an increase in activity, similar to that of someone who was dreaming or having flashbacks. This can be what people who have had near death experiences describe as seeing your life flash

before your eyes. What would happen if you saw your own life flash before you. Would your life be something pleasant to look back on, would you have regretted anything?

That's all good and well, but what happens next? Some people believe nothing. Once your body stops functioning, your consciousness as you know it just ceases to exist. Others believe in reincarnation, which implies the existence of a higher consciousness. Would this explain the possibility of ghosts? Some Jews and early Greeks believed that after someone dies they go to a purgatory-like state, also referred to as the "shade." This can be considered an "intermediate state" where there is no reunion of the soul and body, just endlessness. Catholics believe in judgment the moment after death where "perfect conformity will lead to eternal happiness and a lack of conformity will lead to an eternity of suffering" (Guevin). Heaven or damnation, good or bad. Things can't be this black and white? I don't know what I believe but I would hope it is nothing so linear.

Very few people on this earth know what it is like to experience death firsthand, but everyone has dealt with it in one way or another. Everyone has lost someone important to them, as is life. Death is the one assured thing that will happen to someone. Some people fear death, others accept it as something that is their one guarantee and to make the most of life because of it. I am somewhere in the middle. I do not fear death, but at this point in my life I am unable to fully embrace life. Likewise, when faced with loss, people choose to deal with it in their own way. Grief and its stages are a difficult path, but it is a universal feeling everyone has to navigate at some point; "for the living, grief is the partner of death" (Fowlkes). Mourning is not just limited to the death of someone in particular. Grief can be caused by the loss of concepts, things, nature. The destruction of our natural world has become background noise to most people, nothing new. So many people live in the denial stage of grief, unable to accept what is happening to the world

around them. As we burn through resources and provoke the systems we have lived with for thousands of years, there seems to be a lack of care for what's happening. Much of the lack of action has come from large representatives, corporations, billionaires and governments. The narcissistic narratives that large corporations are putting forth “reflect an ongoing emotional negotiation with environmental crises that are experienced as upsetting,” (Shaw). We are witnessing what the greed of capitalism is doing to our planet first hand.

IV. Capitalism and the Zombie Apocalypse

Since the dawn of time, humans have used the supernatural to explain the world around them. Monsters become metaphors; the vampire was used to explain the fear of immigrants and disease and the wolfman is the manifestation of our primal urges.. Zombies are somewhat of a curiosity. The analogy of the undeath goes back hundreds of years. Early descriptions of the vampire are more akin to zombies than what we think of them now. Zombie outbreak scenarios play into the universal fear of the lack of control over nature, instability of global borders, and the soul-crushing system of capitalism.

Within most zombie apocalypse scenarios, comes an underlying critique of capitalist exploitation of both humans and nature. Both zombies and capitalism are used as metaphors for a “desire to infect others,” whether through actual infection, or the infection of greed. In Edgar Wright’s movie *Sean of the Dead*, the main character, Sean, does not realize at first that the city has become infested with zombies. The cannibalistic, mindless behavior of the people around him does not strike him as odd because that is commonplace. It demonstrates the “chiasmatic relationship, in which the dead are alive and the living are all but dead, illustrates the perils of a postindustrial consumer society” (Boluk). In the movie, Sean works a dead end retail job and cycles through a very dull life. It is only under society's destruction where he is able to find the

courage to take his life into his own hands. This ends up being a selfish guise, as his true intentions are to take his friends and family to their local pub and drink away the zombie infestation until help arrives. This does not go to plan. Zombies functionally destroy the system that capitalism can function under, but even in times of apocalypse, people still flood to old consumer habits. Capitalism is a comfort. There is a similar scene in the 2002 movie *28 Days Later* where a group of survivors are raiding a store for food and supplies. One of the group members, Frank, leaves his credit card at the pay station, in a way forgoing the confines of capitalism, but still reliving the security it might have provided. In *Sean of the Dead*, by the end of the movie, the infected are subdued and used as essentially free labor and entertainment, demonstrating how anything can be used as a tool of capitalism and greed. An example of how the working class is only seen as a mindless tool to generate a profit.

The theme of using monstrous nature to explain the human condition has been used since the beginning of society. Over time these definitions have evolved to fit our ever expanding modern landscape. Old monsters are being restored to modern audiences, and we see a shift in theme. Such as with *Sean of the Dead* and *28 Days Later* and their commentary on capitalism in an apocalyptic situation. Another example of this could be *WWZ*'s play on the fear of mass migration/refugee crisis, which could reference the conflict in the Middle East in the early 2000's. By playing off this, *WWZ* uses "a feeling of threat from both environmental disasters and global capitalism by envisioning the 'migrating' living dead as at once the retaliation of a human-made 'unnatural nature' and a stand-in for a foreign surplus of laboring population" (Boluk). Zombies are another example of how people deal with the unknowns in life.

V. Conclusion

Systems play an important role in how our world functions. Whether it be the interactions between humans and nature, or the interactions of economic systems and how it affects its workers. This project was very interesting for me to research because it has allowed me to explore connections between a variety of my different interests of nature, monsters, and capitalism with an overarching theme of loss and grief. This paper attempts to tackle a very wide range of encompassing topics, but that's what we are as humans, diverse. As with both decomposition and grief, no two processes are alike.

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