

The Chinese encyclopedia and the living dead

A queer approach to categorization and taxonomy in comparative literature

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a case study in queer hermeneutics dealing with the construction of a corpus in a comparative study. More specifically, I propose to queer the category ‘living dead’ by restructuring its internal taxonomy. This will be achieved through the intersection of two approaches to categorization, both developed in the field of cognitive sciences as elaborations of Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘family resemblance’: Eleanor Rosch’s prototype theory and George Lakoff’s discussion of classification strategies in the Dyirbal language. I will then analyze the epistemological implications that derive from restructuring the taxonomy of the living dead in the light of the notion of ‘nonce taxonomy’, described by Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*. My aim will be to show, firstly, that Rosch and Lakoff could provide nonce taxonomy with the theoretical support it needs; and secondly, how the field of comparative literature could be queered through the systematic use of prototype-based and nonce-taxonomic categorization.

KEYWORDS: comparative studies; nonce taxonomy; thematics; prototype theory; living dead.

When we open our eyes each morning, it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime *learning* to see. We are not given the world: we make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnection.

O. Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The construction of the binary opposition ‘living vs dead’ through the practice of burial rituals is unanimously considered a fundamental stage in the development of early human cultures. Together with the opposition ‘human vs animal’, its function is to transform the individual into a member of a social and cultural entity: the community of living humans. Such a community is defined by its crucial opposition, on the one hand, to the community of animals, and to that of the dead, on the other.¹ Social figures

¹ Of course, both the divide between the living and the dead and that between humans and

like the shaman establish and maintain the relationships between the world of the living and the world of the dead, while highly ritualized moments of passage are created in order to keep the two worlds apart: the dead must be prevented from haunting the living. Nevertheless, despite all efforts, violations to this binary opposition can occur. These events release some of our most primitive fears, thus representing an inexhaustible source of horror and uncanniness. The agents of these ontological and cultural violations are what we call ‘the living dead’.

In this cultural landscape, speculative fiction² has been for centuries – and continues to be – a practice of key importance for the construction and proliferation of the entities that violate the polarity ‘life vs death’. Nevertheless, the current notion of ‘living dead’, while pervading cultural (and academic) discourses, allows us to deal only with a relatively small number of these entities: ghosts, vampires, zombies, mummies, ghouls and a very few others.

This study starts from the observation that the cultural construction of the category ‘living dead’ does not account for a particularly interesting area of western literary and artistic productions from the mid-18th century to the present day. This area is inhabited by characters, worlds and narratives that not only destabilize a binary opposition crucial to human identity by blurring the border between life and death; they also do so outside the traditional taxonomy that frames living-dead identities themselves.

1.2. The presence of this double level of subversion seems to make queer theory the perfect hermeneutic tool for approaching these texts. For this reason, I will propose a case study in queer hermeneutics dealing with the construction of a corpus in a comparative study and, more precisely, with the strategies of categorization that make this construction possible. In order to do so, I will focus my attention on a corpus of residual texts thematizing ‘living-dead-like’ conditions and use them as the basis for the construction of an ad-hoc category called ‘non-traditional intermediate states between life and death’.³ This will allow me to queer the category ‘living dead’ by restructuring its internal taxonomy.

animals are considered here, from a constructionist perspective, as cultural artifacts that are not in any way ‘natural’.

² ‘Speculative fiction’ is intended here as an overall term indicating a wide range of genres like, among others, supernatural fiction, fantasy, science-fiction and horror. It can be considered the English equivalent of the French expression *littératures de l’imaginaire*.

³ From now on, I will refer to this category as ‘i.s.’.

The construction of i.s. will be first formalized through the intersection of two approaches to categorization, both developed in the field of cognitive sciences as elaborations of Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance: Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory and George Lakoff's discussion of classification strategies in the Dyirbal language.

I will then try to analyze the epistemological implications deriving from restructuring the taxonomy of the living dead in the light of the notion of 'nonce taxonomy', described by Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and recently reconsidered by Carmen Dell'Aversano. Sedgwick posits nonce-taxonomy as a strategy for the construction of identities mediating between the need to account for the uniqueness of every human being and the very small number of axes of categorization available in our culture. However, while recognizing the crucial role nonce-taxonomy has played in the deconstruction of the category of 'the individual', Sedgwick doesn't provide any theoretical framework for the description of this strategy. Dell'Aversano has recently contributed to the theoretical (re)definition of nonce taxonomy from a radical perspective, showing how it could work as a tool for the segmentation of one's reality according to absolutely idiosyncratic criteria.

I will conclude by intersecting the approaches to categorization deriving from cognitive sciences with those deriving from queer theory. My aim will be to show, firstly, that Rosch and Lakoff could provide nonce taxonomy with the theoretical support it needs; and secondly, how the field of comparative studies could be queered through the systematic use of prototype-based and nonce-taxonomic categorization.

The analyses that follow will hopefully show how questioning the hermeneutics of comparative studies through queer theory – defined, in a broad sense, as a fluid set of tools possessing “the potential to subvert accepted ways of thinking on any issue” (DELL'AVERSANO 2010: 74)⁴ – may

⁴ “Subversion, as well as fluidity, is defintory of queer; indeed, its fluidity is not an end in itself, but simply the most effective and aesthetically fulfilling means to accomplish the political and metaphysical task of permanent and neverending subversion. [...] [Q]ueer does not simply maintain that it is OK to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (this is a given of progressive common sense, about the least queer position imaginable...) but states that any construction of identity (including LGBT ones) is a performance constituting a subject which does not “exist” prior to it, and encourages to bring into being (both as objects of desire, of fantasy and of theoretical reflection and as concrete existential and political possibilities) alternative modes of performance” (DELL'AVERSANO 2010: 74-75). Queer approaches to comparative studies from a LGBT* related perspective can be found, for example, in SPURLIN, HAYES and HIGONNET 2010.

open up new perspectives in the study of fiction by raising awareness of the categorization processes at work in the field of comparative literature, in general, and of thematics, in particular.

2. THE LIVING, THE DEAD, THE LIVING DEAD, AND ALL THE OTHERS

2.1. When asked “What comes to your mind when I say ‘the living dead’?”, people normally answer with a list of supernatural and horror figures: ghosts, vampires, zombies and mummies. In particular, the association of ‘living dead’ with zombies is almost instantaneous. Horror buffs and connoisseurs could add other minor figures, like the ghoul or the white lady. Some people mention Frankenstein. When asked to think of other examples outside fictional characters or supernatural beings, people sometimes point to permanent vegetative state and NDEs (Near Death Experiences) as possible examples of living-dead-like conditions.

This evident cognitive hierarchy in the cultural construction of the category ‘the living dead’ cannot be explained by the so-called ‘classical’ theories of categorization. According to these theories, categories have clear boundaries and are defined by common properties:

From the time of Aristotle to the later work of Wittgenstein, categories were thought to be well understood and unproblematic. They were assumed to be abstract containers, with things either inside or outside the category. Things were assumed to be in the same category if and only if they had certain properties in common. And the properties they had in common were taken as defining the category (LAKOFF 1987: 6).

The description of categorization processes according to classical theories entails at least two fundamental consequences:

First, if categories are defined only by properties that all members share, then no members should be better examples of the category than any other members. Second, if categories are defined only by properties inherent in the members, then categories should be independent of the peculiarities of any beings doing the categorizing (LAKOFF 1987: 6).

However, as we have just seen, both these statements do not apply to how people describe the category ‘living dead’. In order to be accounted for, this process has to be studied in the light of the prototype theory of

categorization, developed by Eleanor Rosch as an elaboration of Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance', that is, "[t]he idea that members of a category may be related to one another without all members having any properties in common that define the category" (LAKOFF 1987: 12). In particular, Rosch enriches Wittgenstein's view of categorization by introducing the key concept of 'centrality', defined as "[t]he idea that some members of a category may be 'better examples' of that category than others" (LAKOFF 1987: 12). According to Rosch

experiments indicate that people categorize objects, not in set-theoretical terms, but in terms of prototypes and family resemblances. For example, small flying singing birds, like sparrows, robins, etc., are prototypical birds. Chickens, ostriches, and penguins are birds but are not central members of the category—they are nonprototypical birds. But they are birds nonetheless, because they bear sufficient family resemblances to the prototype; that is, they share enough of the relevant properties of the prototype to be classified by people as birds (LAKOFF and JOHNSON 1980: 71).

In other words, Rosch's experiments demonstrate that, contrary to what the classical theory of categorization holds, the relationship between an object and a category is not defined in rigid yes-or-no terms, but rather that there are degrees of membership, which are determined by differences involving degrees of typicality.

Even though prototype theory has been criticized by a number of logicians and philosophers of mind, as well as challenged by other categorization theories,⁵ these views mostly approach categorization from an abstract perspective, which tends to disregard what is most important to the analysis that I'm going to propose: the 'cultural life' of categories. On the contrary, Rosch provides us with an invaluable model for mapping how categorization concretely works in a culture and in our everyday lives.⁶

⁵ For an overview of the subject, see WEISKOPF 2013 and MARGOLIS and LAURENCE 2014. Criticisms to prototype theory have been raised notably by FODOR 1998. For advances in the study of categorization in cognitive science after Rosch, see the essays collected in COHEN and LEFEBVRE 2005.

⁶ "It should be noted that the issues in categorization with which we are primarily concerned have to do with explaining the categories found in a culture and coded by the language of that culture at a particular point in time. When we speak of the formation of categories, we mean their formation in the culture. This point is often misunderstood. The principles of categorization proposed are not as such intended to constitute a theory of the development of categories in children born into a culture nor to constitute a model of how categories are processed (how categorizations are made) in the mind of adult speakers of a language" (ROSCH 1999: 189).

2.2. By interpreting the difference between prototypical and nonprototypical members through a geographical metaphor – as Lakoff and Johnson do in the above quotation – a category can be viewed as a city area: it has a center, inhabited by the prototypical members, and a number of outskirts, inhabited by the nonprototypical members. The boundaries delimiting the two areas are neither clear-cut nor fixed, but rather blurred and unstable, subjected as they are to constant cultural re-negotiations.

If we look at the way Western culture has constructed the category ‘living dead’ through this prototype-based metaphor, it is clear that its center is inhabited by three prototypical members: the ghost, the vampire and the zombie. Each one of these figures possesses a detailed cultural identikit with precisely defined traits. They belong to a more or less recent tradition in literature, cinema, and the visual arts, which makes them immediately recognizable. Finally, they have become immensely successful in every form of fiction over the last decades. As a consequence, they have also become widely studied by academics in a wide range of fields.

A number of somewhat ‘minor’ figures can be considered to inhabit the center as well: the mummy, the ghoul, the white lady. They may not be as popular as the members of the first triad, but are, nonetheless, defined by a precise set of traits and can be traced back to well-known traditions, which are the criteria that define prototypical membership in our case.

2.3. If recognizing the center of the category ‘living dead’ is almost intuitive, any attempt to define its periphery proves to be far less immediate: the center is so intensely active that it seems to occupy the whole space of the category, thus making it difficult to even conceptualize a periphery.

I would argue that this periphery can be constructed by moving the focus of our attention towards a number of isolated and (seemingly) unrelated figures that stud the speculative fiction landscape of the last 150 years. For example, the protagonist of E.A. Poe’s famous horror tale *The Facts in the Case of Mr Valdemar* (1845) is mesmerized *in articulo mortis* and his existence lingers on for several months in a state of hypnotic suspension after the death of his body. In Franz Kafka’s 1916 journal fragments about *der Jäger Gracchus*, a hunter dies after falling into a ravine but, as a result of an incomprehensible mistake, he cannot reach the afterlife and is forced to eternally roam the earth.

Joe Chip, the protagonist of Philip K. Dick’s science-fiction novel *Ubik*

(1969), finds himself literally frozen in a state called ‘half-life’ after an explosion. His consciousness is separated from the world of the living and inhabits a new plane of existence, suspended between life and death. In J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), the wizard Voldemort manifests his presence among the living through the diary of Tom Riddle, a paradoxical living object infused with a piece of a dead man’s soul.

In regards to cinema, the mysterious *Jacobs’s Ladder* (LYNE 1990) plunges the viewer into the consciousness of an American soldier at the moment of his passage from life to death, while in Wally Pfister’s *Transcendence* (2014) the brain patterns of the dying protagonist are encoded in the software of an artificial intelligence: he thus loses his mortal body in order to literally inhabit the Internet, eventually becoming the Internet itself.

These narratives are a representative sample of a larger set of at least forty texts – novels, short stories, films and graphic novels. They undeniably have *something to do* with the living dead, but *do not quite fit* the current cultural mapping of this category, thus forcing us to reconsider, from a much wider perspective, how intermediate states between life and death can be represented in fiction.

2.4. If considered individually, each one of these texts could be viewed as a sort of quirky exception, a bizarre exercise in style, an isolated deviation from the ‘normal’ conceptualization of the undead. But, in doing so, we would simply define it from the point of view of the central figures of the category. This would implicitly deny any strong cultural relevance and significance to its unique peculiarities: they would be seen as fortuitous and forgettable traits, too isolated to be worthy of telling us something important about how the polarity ‘life vs death’ is structured in contemporary culture. On the contrary, I propose to gather these isolated texts together into *one single corpus* and to define them in a way that dispenses with the ghost-vampire-zombie paradigm altogether. By doing so, they stop being isolated exceptions to a dominant category and become fully-fledged members of *a new category*: the ‘non-traditional intermediate states between life and death’. This category can be used to identify liminal characters, worlds and contexts whose features are original and possibly unique and do not belong to any well-known cultural tradition.

But how can we theoretically deal with a category whose members are the scattered leftovers of another category?

We could answer this question by describing the category ‘i.s.’ in the light of the notion of ‘otherness’, as defined by George Lakoff in his 1987 essay *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, which represents the most successful attempt to date to systematically describe the mechanisms of human cognition according to Rosch’s prototype theory.

From the perspective outlined in the previous paragraph, the category ‘i.s.’ appears to be defined in exclusively negative terms: its members are those objects which do not fit any other category for the description of the living dead. It is interesting to note that the same kind of ‘negative definition’ of a category can be found in what is probably the most extraordinary literary text dealing with the speculative re-elaboration of taxonomy: the classification of the animal kingdom according to an ancient Chinese encyclopedia described by J.L. Borges in “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”:

On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, (l) *others*, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance (BORGES 1966: 108, emphasis mine).

With a move that clearly reminds Foucault’s premise to *The Order of Things*, the chapter that gives Lakoff’s book his curious title opens with an analysis of this quote. Like Foucault, Lakoff focuses on our inability to think Borges’ fantastic taxonomy,⁷ but he does so by relating such inability to the actual hermeneutic practices of linguists and anthropologists:

Part of what makes this passage art, rather than mere fantasy, is that it comes close to the impression a Western reader gets when reading descriptions of non-western languages and cultures. The fact is that people around the world categorize things in ways that both boggle the Western mind and stump Western linguists and anthropologists. More often than not, the linguist or anthropologist just throws up his hands and resorts to giving a list—a list that one would not be surprised to find in the writing of Borges (LAKOFF 1987: 92).

⁷ “Dans l’émerveillement de cette taxinomie, ce qu’on rejoint d’un bond, ce qui, à la faveur de l’apologue, nous est indiqué comme le charme exotique d’une autre pensée, c’est la limite de la notre: l’impossibilité nue de penser *cela*” (FOUCAULT 1990: 7).

This analysis, in fact, introduces Lakoff's discussion of the traditional classification of objects in Dyirbal – an aboriginal language of Australia – as described by linguist Robert M.W. Dixon. In Dyirbal, every noun must always be preceded by a variant of one of four words: 'bayi', 'balan', 'balam', 'bala'. Dixon uncovers the categorization system underlying this syntactic distribution by observing that

speakers do not learn category members one by one, but operate in terms of some general principles. [...] Dixon's proposed basic schema is this:

I. *Bayi*: (human) males; animals

II. *Balan*: (human) females; water; fire; fighting

III. *Balam*: nonflesh food

IV. *Bala*: everything not in the other classes (LAKOFF 1987: 93).

After a detailed and compelling analysis of Dixon's schema, Lakoff finally shows how this "superb example of how human cognition works" (95) allows us to identify and recapitulate the general principles at work in human categorization – the key principle being, as said before, centrality. Among these principles, Lakoff includes "*The Other*: Borges was right about this. Conceptual systems can have an 'everything else' category. It, of course, does not have central members, chaining etc."(96).⁸

Given this account of human categorization, the category 'i.s.' can be described precisely as an 'everything else' category that follows the conceptual logic of otherness. Thus, Lakoff's analysis allows us to formalize the construction of a residual category according to the general principles governing the functioning of conceptual systems. Even more importantly, it allows us to make a key feature of residual categories explicit: by their very nature, they cannot possess an internal structure based on typicality differences. In this sense, residual categories are exceptional and fundamentally different from any other category.

I will now briefly explore the main implications for the study of 'i.s.' deriving from this structural absence of prototypes.

2.5. As I have pointed out, the figures at the center of the category 'living dead' are immensely famous and defined by recurrent sets of traits.

⁸ Lakoff defines 'chaining' as the idea that "central members are linked to other members, which are linked to other members, and so on" (95).

Whenever we encounter, for example, a character with long canines that feeds on human blood, we immediately identify this character as a vampire. On the contrary, i.s. completely lack both structural coherence and cultural renown. While every individual occurrence of the semiotic object ‘Dracula’ can be automatically subsumed under the prototype ‘vampire’, the same does not apply to the individual occurrence of the object ‘Mr Valdemar’. It has no ‘figure’ to which it can be referred, because there seem to be no prototypes framing our cultural construction of Mr Valdemar.⁹

More importantly, recognizing a central member of the category generates precise expectations in readers and audiences: we all know quite well what kind of aesthetic experience we can expect from a zombie movie or a ghost story. In fact, we know it so well that our expectations can be intentionally transgressed in order to create new kinds of texts, like a zombie love story or a novel about a vegan vampire, whose aesthetic effect relies precisely on the contrast between our expectations and the actual traits given to the ‘transgressive’ character. Because of these figures’ constant, pervasive and highly structured presence in contemporary fiction, the horror and fear they inspire have crystallized into recurrent and predictable patterns. We have learnt to associate zombies with *a precise quality of fear*, and know exactly how the fear of zombies is different from the fear of ghosts or vampires. In this sense, by providing us with well-defined patterns of experience, the living dead have become paradoxically reassuring and ultimately harmless. On the other hand, there are no rigid sets of expectations that guide our textual experience of i.s. This allows them to inspire fears, anxieties and speculative challenges we may not be culturally trained to face.

⁹ This observation may be relevant not only to the study of categories but also, on a broader perspective, to Lotman’s culturology, which is axed on an analogous ‘center vs. periphery’ opposition. In particular, it may help to elaborate on Lotman’s well-known idea that the periphery of a culture lacks order and structure: “the entire system for preserving and communicating human experience is constructed as a concentric system in the center of which are located the most obvious and logical structures, that is, the most structural ones. Nearer to the periphery are found formations whose structuredness is not evident or has not been proved, but which, being included in general sign-communicational situations, *function as structures*” (LOTMAN and USPENSKY 1978: 213). The lack of structuredness consists precisely in the impossibility to intuitively ‘extract’ traits from a category member: while one can easily do so for a vampire (‘pale’, ‘with long canines’, ‘haematophagous’ etc.), the same thing cannot be done for an i.s.

3. FROM THE CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIA TO NONCE TAXONOMY

3.1. The creation of the category ‘i.s.’ as emancipated from the ghost-vampire-zombie paradigm represents an attempt to reshape our understanding of a set of fictional objects through the restructuring of the categorization processes by which these objects become part of a taxonomy.

Up to this point, I have analyzed these processes mainly from a broad, socio-cultural perspective: Wittgenstein, Rosch and Lakoff provide us with invaluable hermeneutic tools for describing how categories shape every aspect of our thinking and how we act *through* categories. In the second part of this study, I would like to focus on categorization processes by adopting the opposite perspective: how can we actively and consciously contribute to the construction of conceptual systems? Through which strategies can we act *on* categories? This is where queer theory comes in, opening up a fundamental space of mediation, created by the tension between what categories do to us and what we do to categories.

The hermeneutic strategy that led to the construction of ‘i.s.’ as a category was pursued in order to account for the wide variety of texts that are ‘somehow related’ to the notion of ‘living dead’ but are rendered invisible by the current configuration of this same notion. In the very first pages of *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick seems to express a structurally analogous desire – with a broader perspective and with different aims – to account for the almost inexhaustible variety of identity traits that make each person unique:

Axiom 1: People are different from each other.

It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact. A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions. They, with the associated demonstrations of the mechanisms by which they are constructed and reproduced, are indispensable, and they may indeed override all or some other forms of difference and similarity. But the sister or brother, the best friend, the classmate, the parent, the child, the lover, the ex-: our families, loves, and enmities alike, not to mention the strange relations of our work, play, and activism, prove that even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species (SEDGWICK 1990: 22).

According to Sedgwick, the response to the rigidity of our axes of categorization is to be found in what she calls ‘nonce taxonomy’:

probably everybody who survives at all has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human social landscape. [...] The writing of a Proust or a James would be exemplary here: projects precisely of nonce taxonomy, of making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world (SEDGWICK 1990: 23).

Sedgwick posits nonce taxonomy as a means to remedy both the scarcity and the coarseness of social categories which can be used to describe the individual in our culture (“A *tiny* number of *inconceivably coarse* axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought”). From this perspective, nonce taxonomy seems to pursue a twofold aim: one the one hand, the creation of new axes of categorization; on the other hand, the multiplication of the number of possible positionings along a given axis of categorization.

When Sedgwick provides an example of nonce taxonomy, however, she does so with reference to “the particular area of sexuality” (24), which results in a long enumeration of specifications of people’s sexual preferences. This strategy seems to pursue the second aim much more than the first one: in fact, if sexuality “has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge” (26) in which sense could it be considered a *new* axis of categorization?¹⁰ Or rather: even if we consider it as such, what matters most here is that Sedgwick’s nonce taxonomy proposes new categorizations while firmly remaining within the parameters that our culture already considers important – even fundamental – for the construction of personal identity.

3.2. In order to try to escape from these cultural parameters, Carmen Dell’Aversano¹¹ proposes to rethink nonce taxonomy from a radical

¹⁰ Of course, to ask this question does not in any way imply undervaluing the fundamental relevance of Sedgwick’s claim that “to alienate [...] from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire [...] may represent the most intimate violence possible” (26).

¹¹ Dell’Aversano studied Sedgwick’s treatment of nonce taxonomy and reconsidered the defini-

perspective by shifting the focus of our attention from what the culture considers important to what *the individual* considers important for the definition of her/his identity. From this perspective, a nonce taxonomy can be defined as an original arrangement of objects or categories, created by a single person on the basis of absolutely idiosyncratic criteria that are indicative of this person's unique, eccentric and quaint way of making sense of the world. In this sense, the "rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy" about which Sedgwick (23) speaks are those resources that allow us to conceive of and express idiosyncratic identity parameters that cannot be subsumed into any pre-established axis of categorization. In other words, this definition of nonce taxonomy promotes the re-segmentation of reality according to parameters that become particularly meaningful – from a philosophical point of view in general and for queer theory in particular – when they are considered highly relevant for the individual but not for the culture. Nonce taxonomy thus becomes a queer hermeneutic tool catalyzing the never-ending proliferation of novel categories and categorization strategies. The tool through which one becomes able to assert and exercise the right to compile one's own Chinese encyclopedia.

Dell'Aversano, however, observes that the application of this radical definition inevitably collides with the fact that nonce taxonomies cannot, by their very nature, become part of social interactions. If the cultural construction of normal social intercourse¹² is based on *shared* categorizations, then there is no place in it for the expression of absolutely idiosyncratic parameters. From this point of view, Dell'Aversano concludes, the process of education can be thought of as the process of systematic suppression of one's nonce taxonomies and, sometimes, of one's very ability to conceptualize a nonce taxonomy.

4. FROM NONCE TAXONOMY TO QUEER COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

4.1. The discussion of the notion of nonce taxonomy has shown how queer theory can open up a hermeneutic space for mediating between what categories do to us and what we do to categories. More specifically, the analysis of the definitions of nonce taxonomy, provided by Sedgwick and Dell'Aversano, has outlined two models suggesting how one should position oneself

tion of this concept in a series of lectures on queer theory given at the University of Pisa during the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017.

¹² On this subject, see the illuminating SACKS 1984.

and how one should act inside this space. At the same time, my argument has moved from the study of categorization processes to that of taxonomic processes, that is, from examining how objects can be gathered together in order to become members of a category, to examining how one can construct relationships between categories in order to create a taxonomy. Thus, we can now look at ‘prototypical living dead’ and ‘i.s.’ as the two sub-categories whose links and relationships structure the internal taxonomy of the category ‘living dead’.

More precisely, I propose to interpret the construction of the residual category ‘i.s.’ and the subsequent restructuring of the taxonomy of the living dead, drawing on reflections by both Sedgwick and Dell’Aversano, as an attempt to create a nonce taxonomy that mediates between the attention to personal (and textual) idiosyncrasies and the necessity to share the results of one’s research with the members of the academic community.

This parallel allows me to conclude my argument by criss-crossing the results of the first part of the study and those of the second part. On the one hand, nonce taxonomy can be analyzed from the perspective of the hermeneutic strategy that led to the construction of the category ‘i.s.’; more importantly, on the other hand, the invisible processes of categorization that are normally at work in comparative studies can be queered in the light of nonce taxonomy. This intersection pinpoints new strategies and patterns we may follow while we move in the hermeneutic space that mediates the interactions between the researcher and a given set of categories.

4.2. With regard to the first point, prototype theory shows that: *a)* the ‘invaluably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy’ conceptualized by Sedgwick can be found at the peripheries of concepts;¹³ *b)* ‘everything else’ categories can represent potentially enormous reservoirs of nonce taxonomic energies whose importance is often downplayed in critical analysis; *c)* by avoiding the adoption of a ‘centralist’ model for the

¹³ Dell’Aversano (2017: 124) proposes a parallel modelization of this argument from the perspective of Lotman’s culturology. In order to do so, she draws on Freud’s account of psychoanalysis as a discipline that deals with the observation of residual phenomena: “It is true that psycho-analysis cannot boast that it has never concerned itself with trivialities. On the contrary, the material for its observations is usually provided by the inconsiderable events which have been put aside by the other sciences as being too unimportant - the dregs, one might say, of the world of phenomena. But are you not making a confusion in your criticism between the vastness of the problems and the conspicuousness of what points to them?” (FREUD 1974: 3137).

interpretation of non-prototypical phenomena and focusing on the relationships that non-prototypical members entertain the one with the other, a chaotic body of quirky textual objects can challenge common categorizations and possibly give birth to a nonce taxonomy.

Regarding the second point, the notion that the systematic use of nonce taxonomy could result in the proliferation of new categorizations can easily be applied to the practice of comparative studies. This field could be queered, for example, by adopting nonce taxonomy when dealing with thematic categorization, which would in turn result in an exciting proliferation of *new themes*. This possibility is all the more important if one considers that the research field of thematics is constructed in such a way as to leave nonce taxonomic energies normally inactive. When working on topics, themes and motives,¹⁴ the need to be aware of the possible ways in which idiosyncratic corpora could be created is rarely felt. This depends on the fact that, normally, themes are not considered as something that needs to be *constructed from scratch* by the researcher; rather, they are already available in the researcher's semiotic encyclopedia ('the forest', 'the mirror', 'the city', 'the zombie', 'magic', 'the teacher', 'war') and need only to be *recognized* in a text. On the contrary, there is no *a priori* agreement between the reader and me on what an 'i.s.' is and 'where' it can be found, while we unquestionably already agree, for example, on what a zombie or a mummy is.

4.3. These observations, in conclusion, link research practice in comparative studies to Dell'Aversano's idea of education as suppression of one's nonce taxonomies. I have the impression that they may intersect in the almost morbid fear of 'going off topic', inculcated in students during elementary school and often reasserted until the end of university education. Maybe, in order to exploit the hermeneutic potential of a nonce taxonomy, one must precisely take the risk of going off topic. In order to re-draw the geography of a thematic field, maybe one must re-learn how to go off topic and how to trust one's own quirky sense of family resemblances. Otherwise, if we devalue our

¹⁴ Owing to the lack of a strong common theoretical framework for the thematic study of literature, the definition of even its most fundamental concepts remains highly controversial. CESERANI 2008 and DOMÍNGUEZ, SAUSSY and VILLANUEVA 2014 (esp.: 68-77) offer a concise overview of the field, its current trends and an international bibliography of key readings. For an interdisciplinary approach to thematics, see the essays collected in LOUWERSE and VAN PEER 2002.

own ability to create new categories and taxonomies, we risk devaluing the most beautiful and extraordinary feature of the aesthetic experience, in general, and of speculative fiction in particular: its capacity to re-shape the construction of our world through the creation of objects, categories and ontologies that we will never be able to experience in our own reality. Its capacity to endlessly create and re-create Chinese encyclopedias of the world.

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