

Why we mustn't look away



Zombie Boy

PHOTO BY JOHANNA HERBST - CREATIVE COMMONS

Shocked by the news of the death of Rick Genest, known more widely as Zombie Boy, Mathieu Thériault writes about his fascination for those who tattoo their faces and about a more pressing issue that is staring us in the face

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At the beginning of August, we heard of the tragic death of Rick Genest, who was better known under the pseudonym of Zombie Boy. This young man had tattoos covering more than 90 percent of his skin, many of which depicted the human skeleton – including his rib cage, jawbone and eye sockets. His appearance could be scary to see.

In 2011, Zombie Boy reached worldwide fame when Lady Gaga hired him to appear in her music video for the track 'Born This Way'. It seems that we will never really know whether his death was suicide or an accident. All in all, his is a sad story – but it can also be seen as a sort of metaphor for our collective condition.

I have always had a fascination for street youths, often punks, who choose to be tattooed in a very ostentatious way, especially on their faces. In the case of Zombie Boy, his tattoos were the result of many years of work and some saw his tattoos as being a true work of art.

There is ample evidence of this being the case as, following his appearance in Lady Gaga's music video, he became a model and appeared in several fashion shows and prestigious magazines. Instead of limiting him, his unique tattoos made him a celebrity.

In addition to Zombie Boy, there are many others who choose to tattoo their faces, such as by having the word "destroy" tattooed on the middle of their forehead or having tribal patterns tattooed all over their faces. In these cases, I have never been able to stop myself from viewing these kinds of tattoos as being a sort of social suicide.

If you tattoo your neck or face, your job

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prospects fall drastically. My point is, apart from tattoo parlors, who will want to hire you if you have 'fuck the world' tattooed on your face? Another key question is whether, at the age of 70, you are still going to like your reflection when you see it in the mirror.

For me, street youths who have tattooed their faces, or who have undergone other irreversible modifications, are making a certain type of statement: a declaration of faith. These modifications are a symbol of these individuals' definitive rejection of society and the current system. They communicate that these youths have been excluded from – or have rejected – society without hope of return. Maybe it is a little bit of both.

Zombie Boy was the exception that proved the rule. He also served as confirmation of the incredible capacity for misrepresentation in the capitalist system: even a young person who roamed the streets for years and was tattooed like a zombie could become an icon and a money-making machine.

Young people who have chosen to permanently mark their faces as a sign of their total rejection of our society and our way of life should not be disregarded or misunderstood. In the days surrounding the death of Zombie Boy, we learned news that is much more worrying – yet we did not even react to it.

Aug. 2 marked the day when we as a species had consumed all of the resources that our planet can produce in a year. This year, this date fell 5 months before the end of the year; in the 70's, Earth

Overshoot Day – as it is now known – happened on or around Dec. 21. It now occurs earlier and earlier every year.

Fortunately, not all of humanity lives like Canadians or Americans. If that was the case, Earth Overshoot Day would occur sometime in February or March. At the rate at which we consume and waste resources nowadays, a planet 1.7 times the size of Earth is necessary to meet our needs. To date, NASA has not found a habitable planet the size of our own that can provide us with the resources that we lack.

On Aug. 6, another group of scientists announced to us that the Earth could be transformed into a real sauna within a few decades. It is almost certain that the objectives of the Paris Agreement, which seek to limit global warming to 2 degrees, will not be met. We are probably heading towards a temperature increase of between 4 and 5 degrees and a rise in sea levels of up to 60 meters.

In these conditions, the planet would only be habitable for 1 billion people. We don't dare imagine the fate of the remaining 8 or 9 billion. For many, the possibility of changing their lifestyle is out of the question: many are of the attitude that, 'in a few decades I'll be dead anyway.'

Just like Zombie Boy or street youths, the Earth has 'destroy' tattooed on its forehead. Just as many people do not look at those with facial body modifications, we too are guilty of finding it easier to look to one side and to ignore the truth that stares us in the face.

*Translated by Kara Innes
Courtesy of L'Itinéraire / INSP.ngo*