The day that I started really thinking about Exemplaria’s anniversary, the Washington Post ran a story from the International Botanical Congress with the lead-in: “Latin is a bit like a zombie: dead but still clamoring to get into our brains.”¹ The botanists had just voted to name newly discovered species in English. This change in language policy is nothing short of a seismic epistemological change. It’s going to change the way we think about the world. It’s going to affect the linguistic politics of scholarship. It’s going to impact scientific teaching. It’s going to restructure the archives of scientific history. As such, it reminds us that other archives are changing around us all the time. And the zombie metaphor—however much it has become a pop culture cliché—suggests that we might address the so-called opposition between surface and symptom as a problem of metaphor. If we change metaphors, the drama of opposition will change or even dissolve—and if we hit upon a successful metaphor, reality will change too, and with it the prospects for meaningful critique.

I started thinking about zombies even before the botanists put the wooden stake through Latin. (that’s a mixed metaphor, I know, but that’s the point). In fact, the zombies ate my brain for reasons directly tied to Exemplaria’s so-called “anniversary problem.” Like the journal, I started life as a medievalist devoted to theory in 1989, having calculated that too many people were focused solely on theory and I’d rather do something cooler. One of my first graduate courses was the relatively new genre, “introduction to literary theory.” Now, almost every year, I face the challenge of teaching just such a course without turning into the walking dead. How do you teach this class in an era where publications entitled “death of” compete with those that promise “intro to”? and for students born well after 1989? To ward off the zombies, I tried most recently a book called Theory after Theory by Nicholas Birns (coincidentally, Birns just published an essay on Chaucer and Shakespeare in Exemplaria²). Birns defends the ongoing relevance of Foucault and Derrida by referring to “zombie categories”—categories no longer understood as originally meant, yet still in use, whose productive plurality can free us from the homogenizing march of time and ideas (65).

Birns doesn’t delve deeply into the zombie metaphor, so I was curious to learn more about the scholarly framework that generated this passing comment. The footnote pointed to Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist, as the popularizer of the term “zombie category.” For Beck, the term refers to categories that are holding back sociological research—ideas no longer vital yet still organizing our thought (203). For Beck, the zombie has a mainly negative connotation. His prime example is “the family”—a category whose classical sense is still widely valued. That sense, though, does not correspond to almost anyone’s experience of family life. Beck writes: “Each person thinks that he or she will solve
the problems that their parents didn’t get right” (204). Beck also talks about “class”, “nation”, and other staples of social description.3

Beck’s negative use of zombie, alongside Birns’s more positive take, raised two questions for me. First, I wondered if the zombie metaphor itself was a help or a hindrance to thinking about theory, archives, and all the issues embedded in “zombie Latin.” Second, I wondered if an unexamined notion of “archive” is holding us back in some way even as digitalization and data mining expand.

The answers must be interrelated. On the “positive” side, thinking of “archive” as a “zombie category” does seem helpful. The “classical” sense of archives as dusty places with low light certainly persists in people’s minds, and is even highly valued. And this sense corresponds less and less to our experience of life with archives. Technology has changed them, even those that are not digitized.

On the negative side, as anthropologist Edward Dutton has pointed out, the zombie metaphor includes death, not exactly a useful way to think about the life of the mind. The metaphor also implies that those who disagree with a particular idea are somehow possessed by evil. I agree that the “death” issue is a problem, although I wouldn’t go so far as Dutton to conclude that Beck’s metaphor is a “danger to scholarship” (189). If we take “death” as a metaphor for “fixed meaning”, zombie categories describe well the way in which terms circulate with assumed fixed meanings yet are used to describe situations that do not correspond to those fixed meanings. This is about the cognition of connotation. Archive—you may think of a room, holding things still. Maybe you think of Foucault. Maybe we all have slightly different thoughts. The point is: zombies are in the room unless we’re all having the same thought.

Death-bound metaphors are a problem because the “dead” (the Middle Ages, literary theory...) get dismissed while “life” moves forward. Zombies are a great reminder that death isn’t necessarily permanent, quiet, or still. Latin does want to eat your brain, and that can be a good thing. “Theory is dead”, “the humanities are dying”...in this environment, the zombies can save us all.

Some say that in the digital era, the archive is dead. If you can’t find it on Google, is it really worth finding? Has the archive been zombified?

One of the clichés about zombies is that “they just keep coming,” no matter what you do. In this way, they link up with another enabling metaphor, the stutter. I’ve found myself hesitating to repeat myself on the stutter, since I’ve written about the idea a few times recently while thinking about translation and about editing.5 But then, the idea keeps returning. Which could be a good thing. So I am going to repeat myself, sort of, and not complete the idea, again. I’m going to quote Mireille Rosello, again. Rosello develops the stutter metaphor in her discussion of a Québecois novel entitled Chronoreg. She argues that when a sentence repeats in the story, the repetition installs a narrative stutter that creates queer time: discontinuous, non-linear, never complete (in the sense that ‘coming-out’ never ends). It’s easy to imagine the activities of editing and translation through Rosello’s description of the narrative stutter:

‘The stutterer is both repeating and not repeating, because no repetition is complete, and because no statement is unique or ever completed;’ ‘no real “truth” ever replaces an old “lie;”’

‘[e]ach new version both includes the earlier ones and moves away from them, refusing to become the absolute reality of the narrative, building on the past while suggesting that it is always possible to go back, to have to start from scratch again.’6

The stutter also describes the archival experience and even the “archive” as a concept. When we find materials in the archives, this is what we do: we repeat the text but can’t complete it, for it wasn’t complete in the first place. Archives are not repositories of stuff but structures that pre-shape the questions we can ask of them. These conditions become more complex as we negotiate the relations between physical and digital spaces. Each iteration (through publication in part or whole) creates a second (or third or fourth or however many) repetition. Each time, the recirculated form marks its source as incomplete. Relations between originals and copies become blurry, as new forms take the
place of their sources. The materials we touch daily—manuscript skins, printed books, keyboards, tablet screens—move both backward (as repetitions) and forward (as gestures toward completion). They trace a ‘stutter’, following and preceding other stutters. I think the stutter is especially important in the face of the rhetoric of ‘fullness’ and ‘completion’ that accompanies so many archival publishing projects.

Archives themselves also stutter. Perhaps they always have, but today’s knowledge economy makes this trait literally audible. Spoken books stutter through the overcrowded airwaves and exhausted memory chips of aging laptops. An eerie computer voice might “read” manuscripts scanned into the subscription-based archives of multi-national publishing companies.

Archives themselves also stutter. Many no longer occupy a single space. They are places of depth dispersed across many surfaces. Having gathered together, they are now spreading through electricity and lithium mining. Where is that manuscript I saw? I think I left on the flash drive. Where is this essay published?

Archives themselves also stutter. We can read their surface—of age, size, location. We can read their symptoms, the deeply cultural and political ideologies that brought them into being, the traces of repressed and absent materials that were excluded or simply overlooked. We can read the surface against the depth, details against the grain of official purpose, recover contests over knowledge and contestatory knowledge.

Archives themselves also stutter. Their time keeps changing. A medieval manuscript had a past, now it has an uncharted future. When will it be written by OCR? What does “completion” look like? Will it exist until this happens? We may have to start from scratch.

A “stutter” is a surface phenomenon, attached to symptomatic reading. It’s a pure repetition without content, an act with no agency—a symptom of nothing, or of a profound psychic Real.

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We are probably hard wired to think through comparison—hence the ubiquity of metaphor in human language. Even when we strive for the literal, images and allusions invade. You just can’t stop them. In the “surface versus symptom” debate, metaphor itself emerged as the target of “bad reading.” As Leah Price put it most directly: “the bibliographical turn... look[s] less like a flight from reading than a war on metaphor.” In a clash of metaphorical displacements, some scholars have been championing the pristine surface (“just what it says”) against the deforming whorls of depths that only reflect back critics’ own deepest concerns. “Surface” though is itself a metaphor—for the literal, it seems, for this debate has not (yet) targeted the grain of the page or glass screen, the color of the ink or pixelations.

Metaphor is the basis of the possibility of theory and even critique. For me, theory is getting out of context in order to get deeper into it: you start mixing metaphors and then you extend them; when they start to really explain something, you’ve found theory.

Zombies don’t talk, they moan. This metaphoric sound brings me back to the stutter. Thinking through audition underscores the visual myopia of so many other governing metaphors—like the graphs, maps, and trees required for “distance reading” (Franco Moretti). The stutter opens a different kind of vision. Donna Haraway links it to an embodied feminist ocularity that situates knowledge, that begins with the vulnerability of a specific location. The stutter, as an allegory of the “partly understood”, speaks in solidarity with the positive impossibility of knowing everything, with the refusal of what Haraway calls the ‘god-trick.’ Instead, a view, an utterance, from somewhere.
Metaphors shape thought. The stutter and the zombie shape perhaps useful thoughts about archives, about the archive as a condition of our work and as a figure of time, about our relationships with the past, about our relationships with those relationships.

Some other metaphors are also on my mind—neighborhoods, prayer wheels, avatars, mash-ups. The metaphors that I find most attractive collapse the dichotomy of surface and symptom; they just don’t function in that world.

For me, the surface/symptom opposition is, on the face of it, deeply flawed. Having reached this fairly ambiguous conclusion, I’d like to end with a few statements of position:

--I’m just not that into literary excellence
--I hate the notion that we can “just read.” I spend much of my time convincing my students that they have already taken a stance. They just need to name it.
--I like puzzles. I am an archivist with no interest in restoration.

Connected and disconnected. Superficial and deep. Critique, I don’t know. I would settle for a few explanations.

3 Ulrich Beck, “Zombie Categories,” Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences, by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (London: Sage, 2002). Beck turns upside down the classical Marxist relationship between consciousness and material conditions: individual consciousness can change even if institutions haven’t. For Beck, “class” itself is a zombie category; one of his recurring phrases is “the zombie science of the national.”