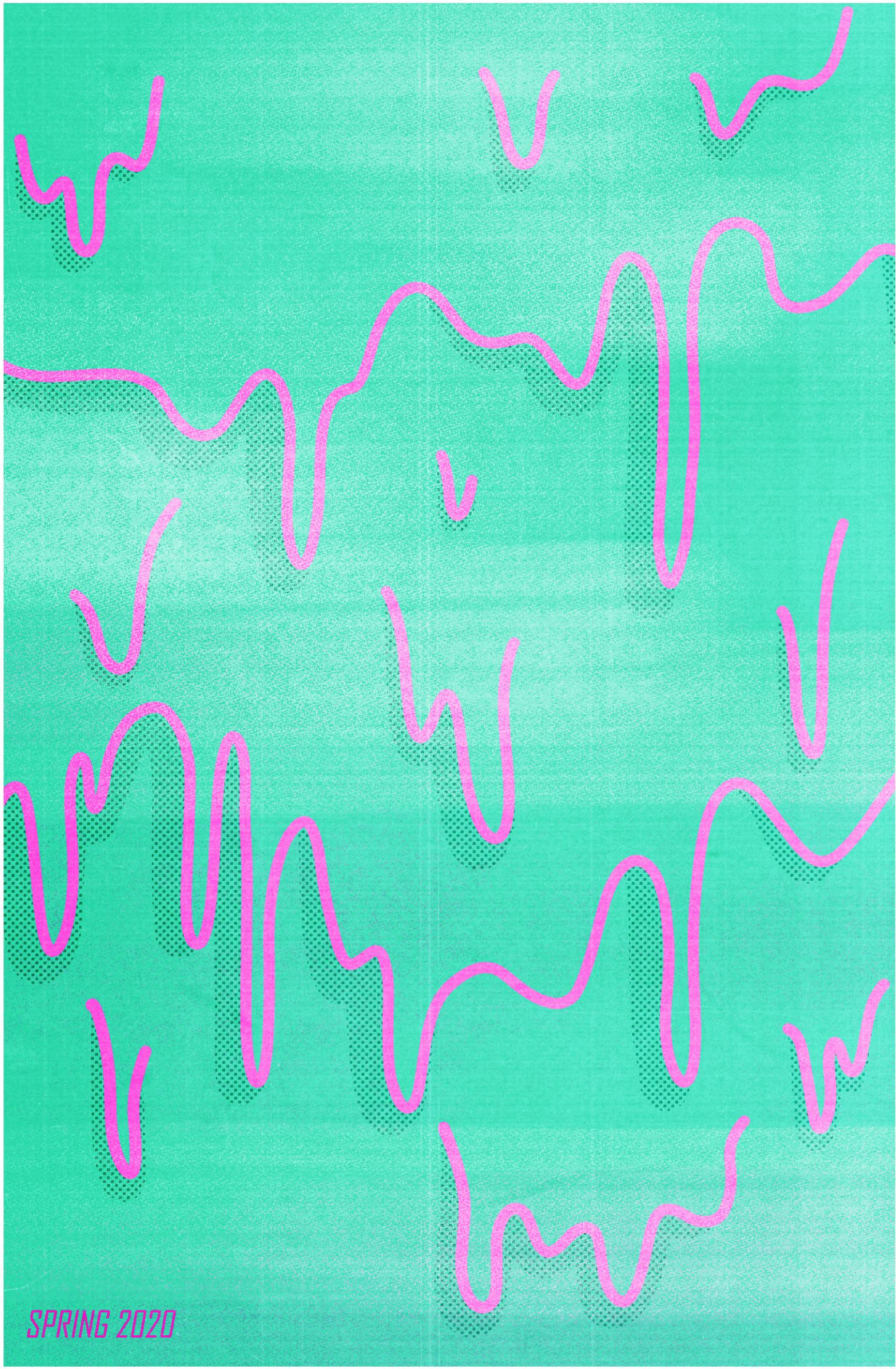




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MONSTERS

A LOOK AT SCI-FI AND
HORROR THROUGH
MONSTERS!

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When you think of zombies, are you thinking **HORROR** or *sci-fi*? What about vampires? Or werewolves? Or robots?

What about these monsters makes them creatures of horror? What makes something science fiction? Is the answer simple, a "we'll know it when we see it" situation, or has the line been blurred beyond recognition?



A striking distinction between science fiction and horror is their scale. Science fiction focuses on grander scales, depicting conflicts of society or institutions in what can be called "social chaos." Horror, on the other hand, tends to shrink its scope and concerns itself primarily with the conflicts of the individual or "moral chaos" (Canavan).

Think about the scale of Star Wars (1977) versus the scale of Frankenstein (1931) with the scale referring not to the setting of the narrative but rather where the conflict lies. Star Wars' original trilogy makes a political statement through its overarching narrative of intergalactic warfare and colonization. Frankenstein, however, largely centers on matters of morality, the morality of Dr. Frankenstein, who attempts playing God, and the Creature whose lack of morality makes it a horrifying monster.





How about Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979)? What about this film makes it walk the tightrope between horror and sci-fi? The premise of this 2002 Library of Congress inductee is rather simple: an alien monster chases a crew around a spaceship, picking them off one by one.

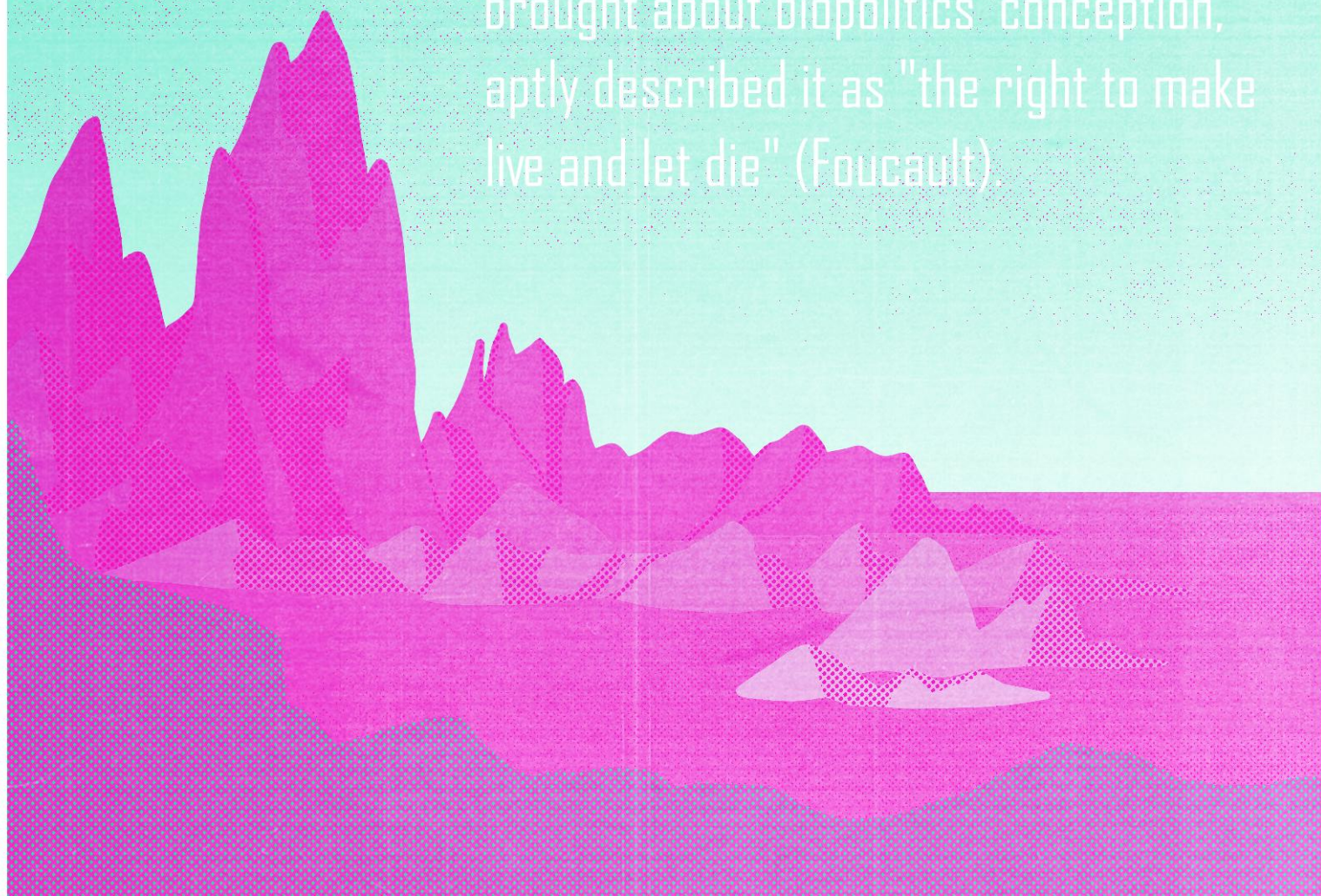
The background is an abstract composition of geometric shapes and patterns. It features a mix of solid blue and pink colors, along with halftone dot patterns in various shades of blue and pink. The shapes are angular and layered, creating a complex, textured visual effect. The text is overlaid on this background, with some words highlighted in pink to match the background's color scheme.

Here, the conflict lies almost entirely within the commercial space tug, *Nostromo*, between a dangerous monster and a small cast of human characters (read: prey), checking the boxes for a horror film. However, the titular alien isn't the only antagonist threatening the lives of the *Nostromo*'s crew. Ash, the crew's science officer, serves as a secondary antagonist, being the one who deliberately puts and keeps the crew in danger. In a shocking twist, Ash is revealed to be [spoilers] an android tasked by the company to bring the alien back to Earth so that it might be studied and used as a biological weapon. While the crew faces the immediate danger posed by a deadly alien predator set loose in their ship, they only face this danger because of the malicious intent of an android servant of a larger institution.

Genre is distinguished by more than just scale. Science fiction is becoming increasingly informed by hard science and as time progresses so do developments in science and technology. They become so integrated in our daily lives that we anxiously wait for when science inevitably goes too far. Sci-fi's ability to target contemporary anxieties can be better understood through analyzing its biopolitical underpinnings.



Biopolitics is described as the political rationality concerned primarily with the regulation of life. Its goal is to take life and the human body as its subjects and make them as efficient as possible (Adams). Michel Foucault, the 20th century French philosopher who brought about biopolitics' conception, aptly described it as "the right to make live and let die" (Foucault).



Now equipped with this definition of biopolitics, we begin to see the role it plays in sci-fi media. Biopolitics' aim of making life ever-more efficient recalls the technoscience frequently seen in works of science fiction. Sci-fi narratives typically present themselves as a kind of discourse on hypothetical and increasingly not-so-distant futures in which unprecedented developments in technoscience have been achieved (Vint). In many popular science fiction narratives, advanced technology is used to achieve feats we might consider draconian, thus technoscience becomes the basis of governance. Life and the body become "biological commodities" and their value is determined by a market established by the biotech industry (Vint).

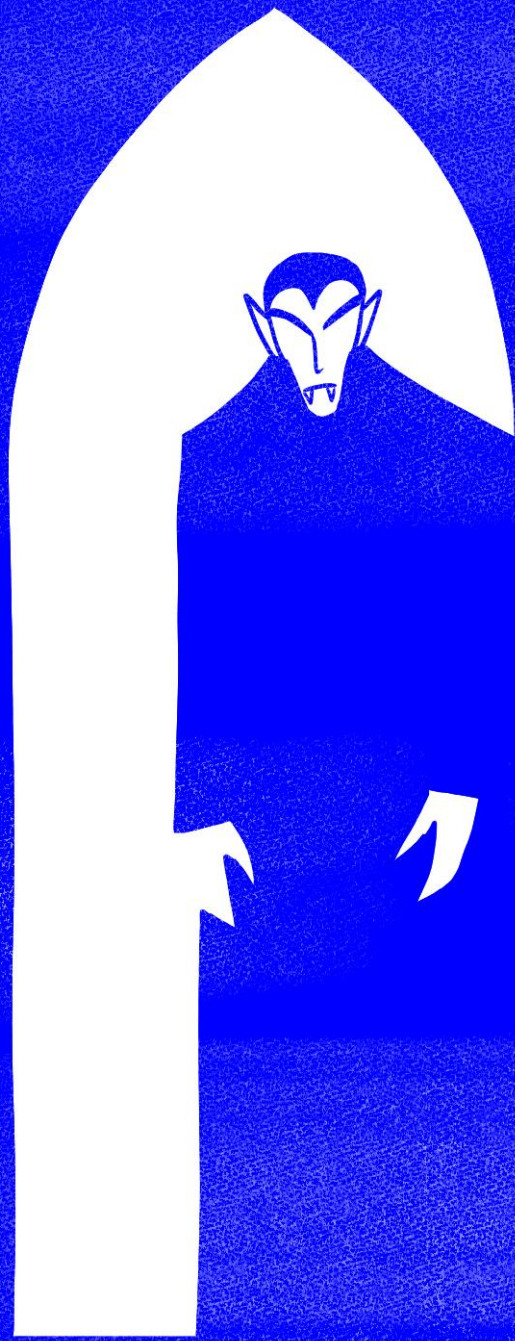


How then does biopolitics play into horror by comparison?

To answer this question it might be helpful to refer to an example like werewolves. A classic horror monster who lives as both human and animal, the werewolf strikes fear through its ability to traverse across the border between the social order and the wild. It is a monster that lives among us. The social order depends on conformity, which is precisely what the werewolf refuses to do. It is a representation of a criminalized person, ostracized from the city, the realm of sociopolitical recognition, and forced into the forest, the realm of chaos (Guidotto). In biopolitical terms, it is a danger to the ordered system, threatening to disrupt "valuable" life and therefore must be left to die beyond the borders of civilization.

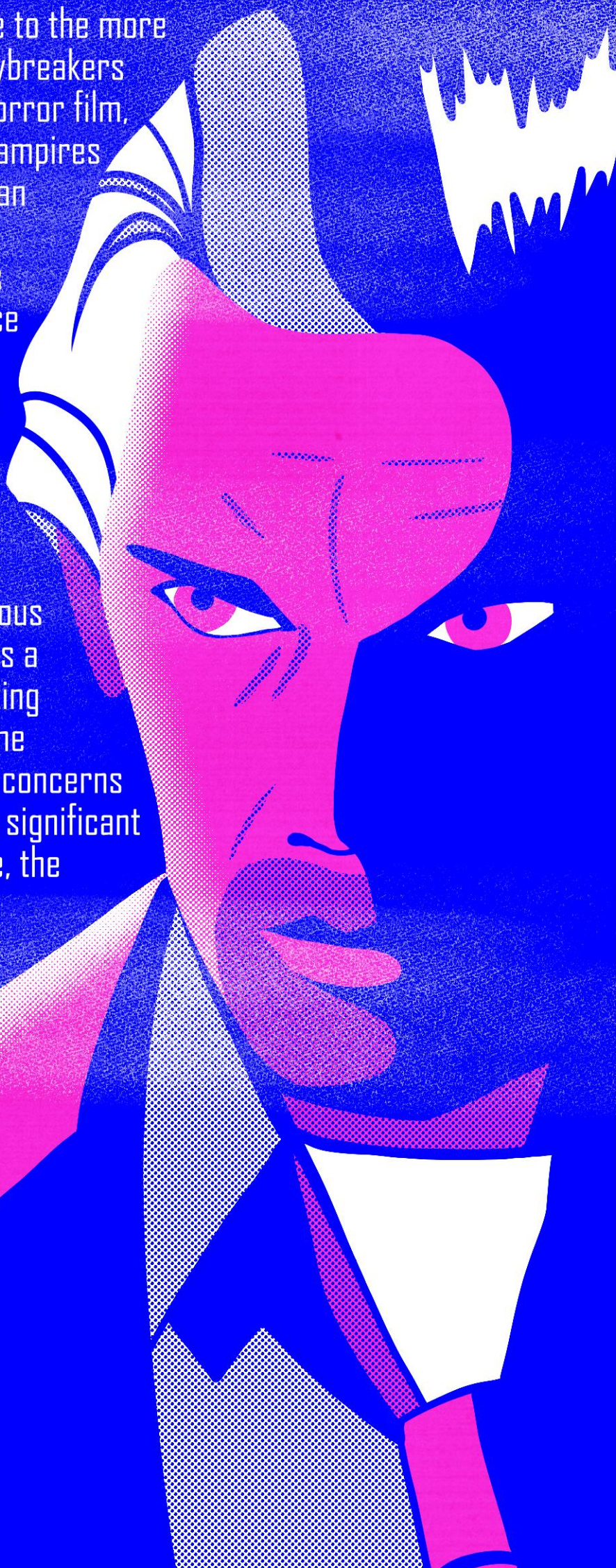
While picturing a werewolf might conjure beastly images, our fear of this particular monster, and our fear of all monsters for that matter, lies distinctly in how unlike us it is.

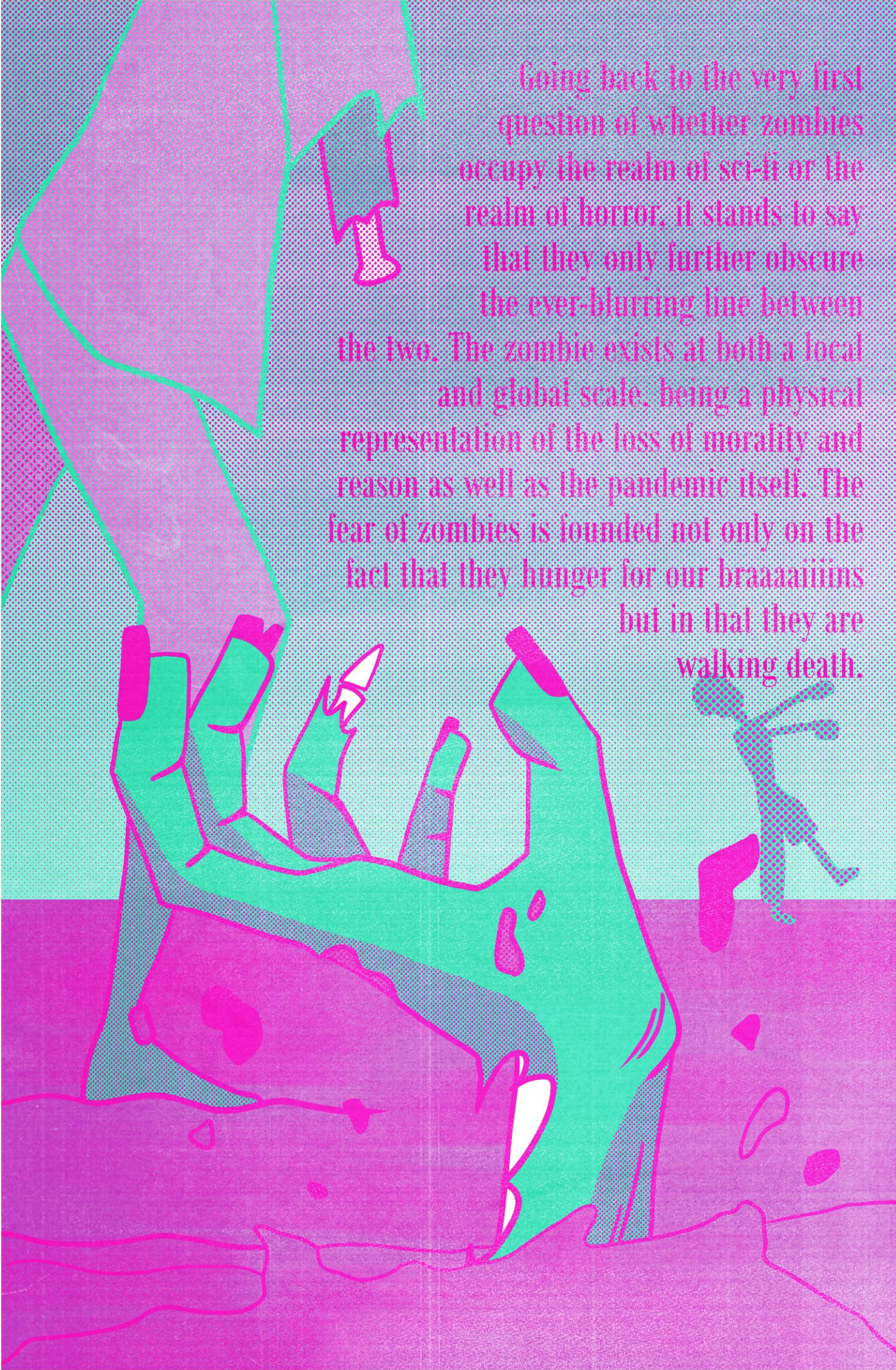




On the subject of monsters, with new perspectives comes new anxieties. Take for example, the werewolf's fellow monster mash attendee, Dracula (and his son). Dracula is the quintessential classic vampire, a "creature beyond control" (Bacon). As demonstrated in Bram Stoker's Gothic horror novel, *Dracula* (1897), Count Dracula is singled out as an Other with an insatiable appetite for blood who can only be defeated through acts of piety. The story's resolution speaks to the times as faith is ultimately the saving grace of Van Helsing and company. The classic vampire serves as the manifestation of the internalized violent impulses which man should strive to overcome.

Compare this classic vampire to the more modern iteration found in *Daybreakers* (2009). In this sci-fi action horror film, the roles are swapped, and vampires are the dominant species. In an extreme demonstration of biopolitics, the human body is regulated as a literal resource to serve the superior vampire population. They are punished for not conforming to what is an obvious metaphor for rampant consumerism. The film's narrative is free of any religious connotations and instead uses a viral pandemic and the resulting technological adaptations as the context for vampirism. While concerns regarding morality are still a significant part of this modern narrative, the method through which moral righteousness is achieved is an entirely different beast.



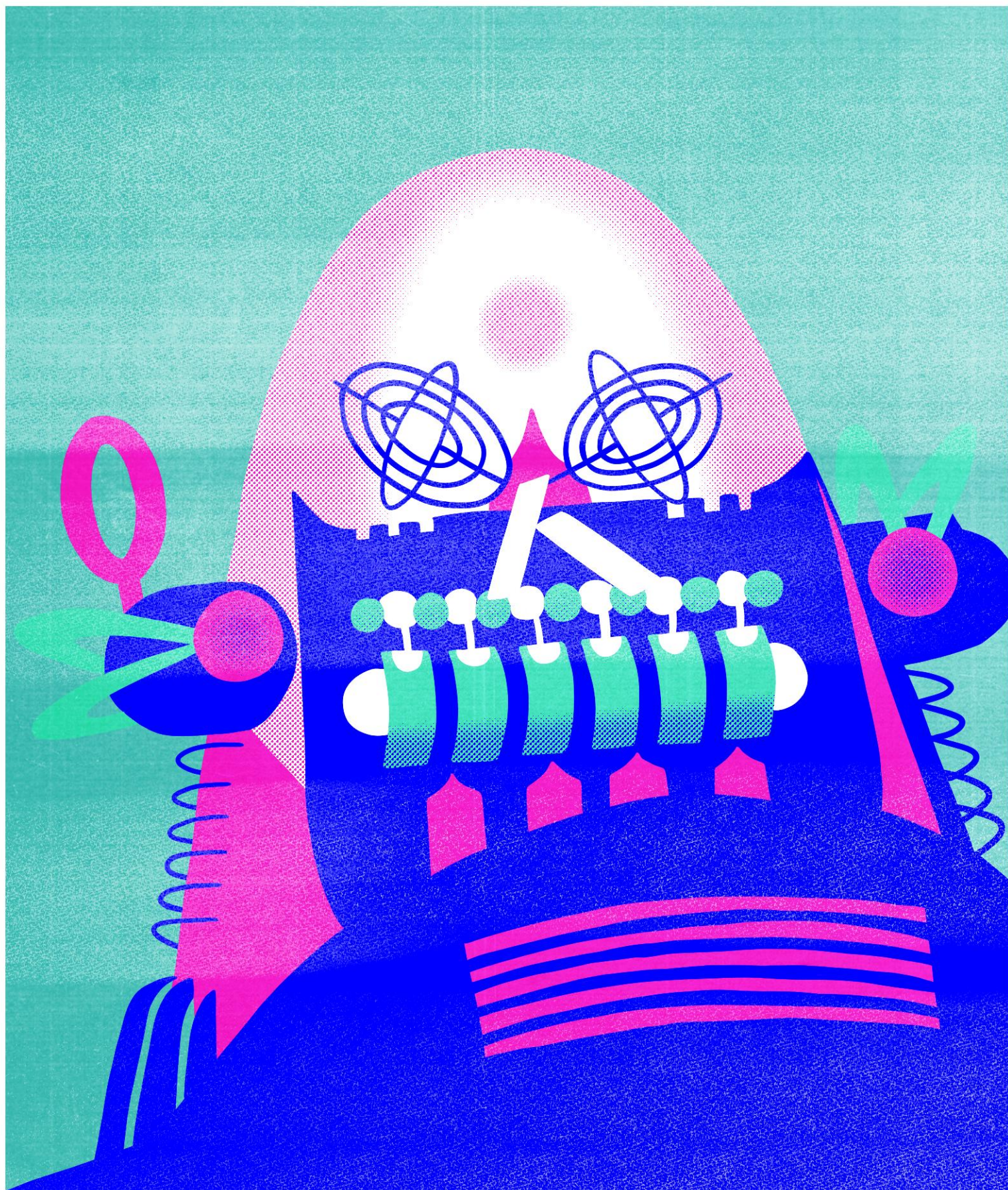


Going back to the very first question of whether zombies occupy the realm of sci-fi or the realm of horror, it stands to say that they only further obscure the ever-blurring line between the two. The zombie exists at both a local and global scale, being a physical representation of the loss of morality and reason as well as the pandemic itself. The fear of zombies is founded not only on the fact that they hunger for our braaaaaiiins but in that they are walking death.



The zombie's hybridity is also emphasized when observing them as a threat to biopower. As with the werewolf example, the zombie threatens the human population and inhibits the species' progress, so their elimination becomes a biopolitical necessity (Canavan). Gore and cannibalism aside, the zombie narrative acts as an allegory for the racialized exclusion that is very much a reality. In this narrative, society operates in a "state of exception" in which eliminating the undead threat takes precedence over whatever moral norm existed pre-zombie-outbreak. Species survival becomes a justification for violence (Agamben).





Just as the zombie narrative increasingly demonstrates genre hybridity, the frequency of media that finds the horror in sci-fi or the science of horror continues to grow. The integration of science and technology in the life of the average human creates an environment in which our greatest fears begin to look a lot like the very thing we're becoming increasingly dependent on.

New fears breed new monsters.

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Media references by page

p.2 The Galactic Empire's Death Star from George Lucas' Star Wars franchise

p.3 The Creature from the classic horror film, Frankenstein (1931) based on Mary Shelley's novel, Frankenstein (1818)

p.4 Interior of the Nostromo featuring the xenomorph from Ridley Scott's horror sci-fi film Alien (1979)

p.6, 7 The planet of Altair IV from Nicholas Nayfack's sci-fi film, Forbidden Planet (1956)

p.10 Dracula after his portrayal in the 1931 film adaptation; reference to Nosferatu (1922)

p.11 Edward Dalton from the Spierig Brothers' sci-fi action horror film, Daybreakers (2009)

p.14 Robby the Robot from Forbidden Planet (1956)

