

Apocalyptic Visions of the Present: the Zombie Invasion in Post 9/11 American Cinema

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In his article "This Is Not a Movie" (2001) published in *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane describes the reactions of New Yorkers and mainstream media journalists after the 9/11 attacks. Whilst some saw the incident as an invasion of horrific reality into the everyday life of a naïve nation, witness testimonies suggested a much more fictional interpretation of the event. Thus, in their descriptions of the terrifying sight of the attacks, people resorted to numerous cinematic similes: "it was like a movie", "it was like *Independence Day* [Roland Emmerich, 1996]", "It was like *Die Hard* [John McTiernan, 1988]", "No, *Die Hard 2* [Renny Harlin, 1990]", "*Armageddon* [Michael Bay, 1998]." (LANE, 2001). Not only did these movies become a reality for New Yorkers, but a reverse process took place as well, as the visual nature of the attacks, combined with the real presence of horror in the everyday world, turned this terrorist act into a central theme for the film industry in the years that followed. Moreover, the change in political direction taken by the Bush administration after the attacks resulted in years of war atrocities, widespread paranoia, and staunch defence of the capitalist system. This new era of panic found an excellent means of expression in horror cinema, which has traditionally been a source of meaningful metaphors for a society's fears.

The horror genre has experienced a dramatic resurgence in the past decade¹ and, within the more general context of this trend, it is the zombie that seems to have had the most spectacular rebirth. Rising from the abyss of the B-movie series of the 1970s and 1980s to the paradise of the blockbusters, the zombie has become a central figure in present-day popular culture. From action role-playing games and themed walks down city streets, to a variety of merchandising, survival guides, volumes of criticism, cultural studies and philosophy², the figure of



AMC's billboard of the third season of *The Walking Dead*:
"Fight the dead. Fear the living"

the walking dead seems to have *zombified* contemporary Western popular and academic culture.

Some authors have connected this invasion with the economic and human crisis of late-capitalist societies and the postmodern subject (FERNÁNDEZ GONZALO, 2011: 48), understanding the zombie in popular culture as the perfect metaphor for our frivolous human interactions, built upon a constant selfish yearning to own more, know more, eat more. The zombie is presented as an empty figure, as a signifier with a great number of potential signified which, having no meaning of its own, can serve as a metaphor for anything (FERRERO AND ROAS, 2011). Its representative value is updated with each new appearance, making it an excellent source of cultural allegory. George A. Romero, indisputable master of the genre, has equated the signifying capacity of zombie stories with that of children's fairy tales, concluding that both operate as "political stories" (LERMAN, 2008).

The figure of the zombie as a political allegory in the United States is reflected in the genre's increasing popularity in the country in recent years. Bishop (2010: 9) offers a plausible interpretation for the phenomenon in linking the zombie's resurgence with the terror and paranoia experienced by American society in the years following 9/11, when people realised that they were not as safe in their homeland as they once thought. According to this idea, the reappearance of the zombie in a post-9/11 context is directly related to these cultural fears and to some of the basic significations the character has been given in films. Thus, from a conservative perspective, the zombie appears as the ultimate representation of the

Other. As Fernández Gonzalo (2011: 25) suggests, the living dead "are always alienated, foreign. And they bring out our fear of the outsider". This fear of alterity is reflected in recent films that radicalise the otherness of the monster, which is identified as the enemy of the *status quo* of conservative American society. On the other hand, from the more subversive perspective represented by filmmakers like Romero, the zombie is the image of capitalism, consumerism and media manipulation, operating as a critique of some of the actions taken by the Bush administration in the months following 9/11. Taking a historical and philosophical perspective to explain the persistent presence of the zombie in popular culture, this article will analyse these two faces given to the zombie in contemporary cinema. First, I will consider the presence of the zombie as a metaphor for the strange and monstrous which needs to be destroyed to preserve the conservative state of things; I will then offer an analysis of the use of this figure in films as a vehicle for caricature and social commentary.

The zombie as the *Other*

The ability of the living dead to evoke the absolute otherness of the monster can be seen clearly in the zombie-vampires of the most recent film adaptation of Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* (1954). The monsters in this homonymous version — *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007) — are "abject displays of horror" that are "unambiguously not human" (HANKTE, 2001: 170). The physical aberration of the monsters establishes a contrast between them and the humans at every level, and contributes to the development of a dualist perspective that locates morality at one end of the dichotomy. This strategy is also recognisable in the Bush administration's speeches following September 11, which emphasised the differentiation between Good and Evil in a Manichean reality in which "Americans were represented as 'good' people who are victims of 'bad' people, of those who are 'evil'" (ROCKMORE 2011: 5). In a public appearance following the terrorist attacks, President Bush himself asserted that "[o]urs is the cause of human dignity; freedom guided by conscience and guarded by peace. This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it. May God bless America" (MORI, 2006: 62). This discourse of absolute concepts, along with a religious imaginary also reproduced in *I Am Legend*, portrays the United States as the Light, on the side of Good, while the country's enemy, the Islamic terrorist, the zombie, is irrevocably condemned to darkness.

From this perspective, the US government depicted its enemies as evil and of questionable humanity, identifying them with a widespread conception of Islamic ex-

tremism. The human protagonist of *I Am Legend*, played by Will Smith, is the personification of the other end of this opposition; the ordinary citizen turned hero, a representative of the American people, chosen by God to achieve great things. This idea, present in religious and political discourse in the US since the arrival of the first Puritan colonisers, is still apparent in the Bush administration's assumption that it is engaged in bringing democracy to a number of countries around the world, even if this means going to war (ROCKMORE 2011: 7).

The protagonist's sacrifice at the end of the film, bursting with Christian allegories, is essential to the preservation of conservative society, or for its transformation into a new traditionalist community free of the mistakes of the past. This new idealised traditionalist society is represented in the final scenes, in the community of plague survivors. Located in New England and referred to as "the colony", this new settlement evokes motifs of the colonial period as a metaphor for a new beginning. Surrounded by high walls that keep all foreigners out, protected by an armed guard, covered in American flags and built around a Christian church, this new community is a clear depiction of the conservative American dream.

The zombie as us

However, as noted earlier, the zombie is also often associated with a critical vision of the society of the countries in which it appears. Fernández Gonzalo takes a philosophical perspective to sketch out a view of the living dead as a revolutionary being: "As opposed to conservative models, which develop formulas designed to reinforce essential ideologies, philosophical currents, lexical, scientific or technical concepts, the zombie suggests a change, the challenge of corroding traditional categories of thought and crossing the thin line separating a philosophy as conservation of established models from another as transgression and reformulation of everything we constantly take for granted." (2011: 103).

From this perspective, the zombie becomes an invitation to revise the *status quo* and acquires a potential for political satire. In the episode "Beside the Dying Fire" (#2x13, Ernest R. Dickerson, AMC: 2012) of the TV series *The Walking Dead*, we see Rick, the sensible hero and leader of the survivors of the zombie apocalypse, impose his judgement upon his frightened companions. "This is not a democracy anymore," he tells them. This warning (threat?) invites the audience to question the actions taken by the powers that be in emergency situations. To what extent can we justify violence, torture of prisoners of war, and the dictatorial decisions taken by governments to implement their ruthless, alienating policies as the only way of solving the economic, moral or national security problems of their countries? Whom should we fear: the Other, or ourselves? The poster for the third season of the

series seems to offer an obscure answer to these questions with the caption "Fight the Dead. Fear the Living." In the US context, this proposal to question traditionally accepted truths is reflected in the zombie movies that have sought to offer a criticism of the Bush administration and its staunch defence of neoliberal capitalism, of the investment in national security and of the need for the Iraq war.

Zombie movies could be classified within the wider context of gore horror. Many horror films of recent years display a fascination for abject, dismembered, bloody bodies and the violence inflicted upon them, in a cinematographic approach rather less "underground" than that of the B-movies of the 1970s. As Tom Pollard notes, films "simply became more violent after 9/11, and horror films, among the most violent anyway, became even bloodier" (2011: 57) because "far from satiating public demand for violent entertainment, the events of September 11 only whet audience appetites for more torture, murder and mayhem" (56). Fernández Gonzalo, adopting a more ideological perspective, directly connects the pornographic exhibition of the dismembered body with the existential crisis of the postmodern subject: "The paradigm of the zombie film plays with the iconography of the naked body, and its mutilation and its explicit carnality is always suggestive of what individuals in postmodern societies are lacking, the emptiness that makes each of us just another traveller wandering aimlessly and hopelessly through the media world" (2011: 55). Examples of this tendency are the *Saw* (James Wan, Darren Lynn Bousman, David Hackl, Kevin Greutert, 2004-2010) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, Scott Spiegel 2005-2011) franchises, which fall within what critics since Edelstein (2006) have labelled "torture porn", and which have been linked to the torture inflicted upon prisoners of war in Guantanamo Bay.

The use of gore becomes especially suggestive when filmmakers use it consciously to achieve a typically ironic postmodern effect, as do Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodríguez. In 2007, Rodríguez presented his own version of the zombie apocalypse with *Planet Terror*, a violent satire of US militarism and the War on Terror. The film offers a sort of miscellany of bodies disfigured by the zombie virus, all manner of amputations, and the ubiquitous carnality of its heroines, semi-naked *femmes fatales* with remarkable skill in the use of any type of

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firearm. The exaggerated aesthetic of Rodríguez's film is very much a conscious approach; according to Martínez Lucena, the intention is to use excess in order to "empty itself of ethical content, equating human life with nihilistic fiction" (2010: 158). Rodríguez's playful exaggeration is reflected in a comical use of staging and plot development which, according to Christopher González, continues a rich cinematic tradition of "blending what seems to be antipodal emotions: amusement and horror" (2012: 155)³. By presenting a group of zombies which, despite being physically revolting, are much less violent than the human protagonists, Rodríguez introduces a burlesque vision of the human condition. The criticism of war is presented through the film's depiction of the US army; its scientists are the ones responsible for the creation and subsequent release of the zombie virus, which was originally designed as a biochemical weapon to be used in the Iraq War. The lower-ranking soldiers are also caricatures, as reflected in the cameo role by Quentin Tarantino, who tries to abuse the heroine Cherry Darling. The parody reaches its climax when the militia leader and the story's villain (played by Bruce Willis) confesses to the murder of Bin Laden at the Afghan border, while he turns into a quivering mass of ulcerated flesh as a result of the virus.

As suggested above, the zombie has also been used as a metaphor for a capitalist economic system which, like the bodies of the living dead, although still walking, is rotting on the inside. Fernández Gonzalo also examines this dimension: "In this sense the zombie represents the brutality of an economic structure which allows a kind of Dionysian capitalism, of useless commodities, regulated leisure technology and hyper-codified spaces" (2011: 48). The US horror movie industry has successfully exploited this subversive meaning of the zombie to critique some of the basic pillars on which the neoliberal system advocated by the Republicans is founded.

As Aviva Briefel (2011) points out, some weeks after the 9/11 attacks, George Bush posited the combination of patriotism and consumerism as a national recipe to fight the Islamic terror: "We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don't – where we don't conduct business, where people don't shop" (2011: 142). The political discourse stressed the need to stock up on household essentials, like tape, canned food or mineral water, to be able to bunker down at home in the event of an attack (BRIEFEL, 2011: 142). This commercialization of terror is the idea behind Zack Snyder's 2004 homonymous remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978). The new film retains Romero's main premise: a group of survi-



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vors of the zombie pandemic find refuge in an abandoned shopping mall. In the original film, Romero had already highlighted the connection between the monster's instinct and the Western need to consume with images of zombies "pressed up against glass doors and windows, clamouring to get inside the shops, in a gross parody of early-morning-sale shoppers" (BISHOP, 2010: 139). The unconscious drive to consume is also mentioned as a reason for the presence of the zombies in the mall because it had been a place of great importance in their lives. This idea is reiterated in the remake:

"Why are they coming here?"

"Memory, maybe. Instinct."

The zombie and the human are placed on the same level in this assertion, both viewed as beings governed by the pure need to consume, whether goods or brains, which is essential to the development of the new patriotic model.

Indeed, the subversion enacted by Snyder is updated to a post-9/11 context; in addition to a number of criticisms of religious fanaticism contained in the film, the twenty-first century shopping mall is notable for the ubiquity of security cameras and guards not present in the original, including the security guard caricature C. J. The fact that this character with racist, sexist and homophobic tendencies should be the representative of authority in the shopping mall constitutes another allusion to an age of ineffective national leadership (BRIEFEL, 2011: 151-2). This critique is also suggested, in this and in other zombie films of the new millennium, by the references to the collapse of the government and the spread of the infection in the survivors' colonies due to mismanagement of a chaotic situation.

In a society ruled by fear, national and personal security become merely another commodity, a point explored in Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005). According to Brie-

fel, the film “blatantly critiques the Bush administration’s exchange of individual freedoms for quixotic ideals of safety and wealth” (2011: 154). The motifs that Romero uses to make this critique are, on the one hand, the Fiddler’s Green complex, a setting that satirises corporate America and big money, and, on the other hand, the slums far away from this safe haven, where the excluded masses reside. The criticism of the effect of the all-powerful economic system on the less fortunate classes and the suggestion that this situation constitutes a violation of human rights are part of Romero’s attack on the dehumanising capitalism of neoconservative America. The movie also makes explicit reference to the War on Terror and its protagonists through the character of Kaufman, admitted by Romero himself to be a caricature of Donald Rumsfeld, and through dialogues such as “We don’t negotiate with terrorists” and “I’m gonna do a jihad on his ass” (BRIEFEL, 2011: 154).

However, Romero’s subversion is not limited to a mere caricaturing of the Bush administration; the filmmaker’s characterisation of the zombies also serves as a critique. While in the director’s previous films the figure of the zombie had been used to represent the most extreme state of otherness, unquestionably beyond the realm of the living, *Land of the Dead* depicts a type of zombie that blurs such absolute dichotomies. The living dead in this film retain part of their memories as humans, seem able to communicate among themselves with grunts, are organised in a society and gain the spectator’s respect and sympathy when they manage as a group to breach the security of Fiddler’s Green and eat the brains of the big business leaders. Contrary to the other versions of the zombie motif explored above, the living dead in this case do not represent the enemy of the United States, but are instead yet another victim of dehumanising capitalism. Both the marginalised humans and the zombies in the film are trying to survive in a harsh reality while they are exploited and massacred by the powers that be. Bishop (2010: 193) connects the explicit violence inflicted upon the zombies in the film to the inhumane treatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2004. This connection serves to underscore the brutal nature of the neoliberal US system and the incapacity of its leaders to govern according to the needs of the people.

In 2007, George A. Romero released *Diary of the Dead*, a film that offers a criticism of the manipulation of information by the media. Jason, the film’s protagonist, is shooting a low-budget horror movie that ends up becoming a recording of his own experience of the zombie apocalypse. This playful shifting between the metafiction of the film that Jason is working on and the reality of the zombie pandemic reflects what Bishop (2010: 201) dubs “self-referential postmodernism”, and constitutes a

parody of the contemporary need to document the reality that surrounds us, which only seems real if we see it on a screen. The critique undertaken in *Diary of the Dead* is articulated with direct references to the media coverage of the situation following the 9/11 attacks. The media saturation of New York City turned the attacks into the most documented event in history, as noted in the HBO documentary *In Memoriam: New York City* (2002), which itself consisted of a *collage* of videos and photos taken by media professionals, film directors and amateurs who in some cases put their lives in danger to document the attacks (KELLNER, 2004: 4). This is just what happens to Jason who, when he can no longer hold the camera because of injuries inflicted by one of the zombies, asks his friend Debra to film his death.



George A. Romero's *Diary of the Dead* © 2007 Artfire Films

Romero’s film also offers a depiction of the manipulation of information by the Bush government in the months following 9/11. The radio and TV news seem to be tracking the experiences of the protagonists in *Diary of the Dead*, but they offer a false view of the situation, lying about the nature of the phenomenon and making constant references to a possible terrorist attack as the cause of the apocalyptic scene. This information, overlapped with images of the zombies attacking, constitute a hilarious parody of the disinformation and insistent focus on terrorism of certain media networks in the months after 9/11. The alarmist testimonies and repeated allusions to the possibility of biological or chemical warfare creates a state of panic among the American people, who see the multi-million government investments in weaponry as necessary and the War on Terror as justified.

Conclusion

Both Romero's most recent films and *Planet Terror* and *Dawn of the Dead* attempt a deconstruction of the figure of the zombie as a mere portrait of a Satanic Other, instead inviting the spectator to reflect on the *status quo* of contemporary society. The dualistic discourse of the Bush administration, which is reflected by other films such as *I Am Legend*, is picked apart in these films in their exploration of the subversive capacity of the zombie motif. In her analysis of literary fantasy, Rosemary Jackson (1981) highlights the ability of literature –also applicable, in this case, to cinema– to expose a discourse that is conventionally silenced. According to the author, the fantastic “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (1981: 4). This Freudian idea of the fantastic is directly related to the critique of the status quo made by the zombie movies analysed in this last section. In opposition to the dominant discourse of panic, of fear of the foreign Other, of consumerism and violence as the patriotic recipe that proliferated following 9/11, certain zombie movies have offered a subversive vision of contemporary American society, concealed among caricatured characters and metaphorical cadavers.

Whether it is used in defence of a conservative perspective or with a more unsettling view of reality, the zombie is a figure that has proven to be a valuable vehicle for a varied range of significations. Using Saussure's terminology, adopted later by Lévi-Strauss, the zombie is a “floating signifier” that can become a repository for a wide variety of social and psychological values in the context of Western patterns of thought (HOGLE, 2010: 3). In the post-9/11 society of fear, zombies became a means of recreating the American cultural trauma through the repetition of images of destruction, and a textual pretext for the radicalising of the otherness of the enemy. The postmodern zombie, on the other hand, is also the macabre foundation of a fierce criticism of George Bush's Republican regime and its discourse of panic, the inhuman capitalist system that continues to survive although it is rotting within, and the ultimate deconstruction of the border separating us from “the Other”. In a constantly threatened post-9/11 reality, in which information is manipulated and power is in the hands of faceless or constantly changing entities –corporations, markets, the global economy– the zombie is the ideal distorted reflection of human society: horrific, consumed, decomposed, dead. ■

Notes

- * The pictures that illustrate this article have been provided voluntarily by the author of the text; it is his responsibility to localize and to ask for the copyright to the owner. (Edition note.)
- 1 Notable among the texts analysing the resurgence of the horror genre in recent years are the articles included in Briefel and Miller's anthology (2011). For a more specific analysis of the figure of the zombie in this context, see Bishop (2010).
- 2 For a philosophical analysis of the zombie in popular culture, see Fernández Gonzalo (2011) and the collection of essays edited by Richard Greene's compilation (2006).
- 3 For a more detailed study of this tendency, see Carroll (1999).

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