

# **Zombies and the Century of the Self**

## *Identity Anxiety in the Age of Consumption*

The scene is a familiar one, a ghastly ritual played out on screens across the country. In the dark early hours of the morning they have congregated, drawn by the light and signs of human activity. We watch in horror as their grey forms press up against the locked doors, shuffling and murmuring with anticipation. Meanwhile the unfortunate occupants scramble to prepare for the onslaught, its only a matter of time before they are overcome. Finally the waiting mob can be held back no longer and the doors are pushed open. A flood of bodies spills through, ready to consume. It is the day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday.

With the Christmas season looming ever larger and our fervor to consume reaching monstrous proportions, the discussion of zombie cinema seems oddly appropriate. After all, what could be a better symbol of the season than legions of undead driven solely by the desire to consume? Joking aside, the relationship between zombies and the consumer culture of the past century promises significant insight into the underlying anxieties of mainstream American culture.

As a genre that came into being in the early 20th century, the zombie represents a unique opportunity to observe the shifting anxieties of a burgeoning empire. It is only fitting that the story of zombies in American culture should begin in the Caribbean (namely Haiti), a region that had been subject to U.S. empire building for much of the 19th century, making it fertile ground for the imaginations of the American public. While

the first appearance of the term zombie dates back to the early 19th century<sup>1</sup>, it wasn't until 1929, when William Seabrook published *The Magic Island*, that the idea of zombies truly took hold within popular culture. Seabrook's description of zombies, "plodding like brutes, like automatons"<sup>2</sup> can be seen as casting the mold from which a century of zombie cinema would spring. Indeed, the first examples of zombie cinema, most notably *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie*, remain close to Seabrook's depiction of pitiful drones mindlessly obeying their voodoo masters.

While a far cry from contemporary zombie films<sup>3</sup>, these films, and the zombie folklore they spring from, already bear the hallmarks of the anxieties that will come to exemplify the genre. Most notably, it is the Haitian's<sup>4</sup> fear of zombies that is most pertinent to the discussion of contemporary zombie cinema. As Jamie Russell explains:

For most Haitians, the predominant fear was not of being attacked by zombies, but of *becoming* one...For a population whose ancestors had been captured, shackled and shipped out of Africa to the far off islands of the Caribbean, dominated by vicious slave masters and forced to work for nothing more than the bare minimum of food to keep them strong enough to live another day, the zombie symbolized the ultimate horror. Instead of an escape into paradise, death

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jamie Russell, author of *Book of the Dead*, the Oxford English Dictionary mentions the word as early as 1819. Russell also makes note of an article appearing in an 1889 edition of *Harper's Magazine* written by Lafcadio Hearn as the first widely published account of zombies.

<sup>2</sup> Quote taken from *Book of the Dead* p.13, original source *The Magic Island* p.110

<sup>3</sup> Such as *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* (which will be discussed later) and more recent films such as *28 Days Later*.

<sup>4</sup> While zombie folklore exists in all Caribbean cultures in which voodoo is present, Haiti is singled out due to the long standing association with the zombie phenomenon thanks to the works of Seabrook and early zombie films that take place there.

might just be the beginning of an eternity of work under a different master, the voodoo sorcerer.<sup>5</sup>

Already we can see a pattern emerge, with the zombie serving as a grotesque reflection of the everyday horrors that occupy the lives of their would-be victims. While the terror of mortality is perhaps the most universal fear embodied by the zombie given their nature as the *corps cadavres* or walking dead, the zombie also has the capacity to represent a great deal more.

That the zombie managed to insinuate itself so successfully into the American psyche speaks volumes on the potency of the zombie as an avatar for greater societal fears. Like all good monsters zombies reveal the horrors that we try so hard to conceal. For early 20th century Americans this was the increasingly dehumanizing nature of capitalist industrialism:

It is significant that these voodoo charmed slaves first struck the popular imagination of western capitalist society at the dawn of industrial automatization: they are the perfect metaphor for an utterly alienated modern workforce.<sup>6</sup>

And so we come to see the anxiety of the Haitian plantation worker transferred to the Detroit autoworker. The zombie is no longer an exotic denizen of folklore, rather it has become the most terrifying thing of all, ourselves.

This transformation is best exemplified by the work of George Romero<sup>7</sup> who's films have had a profound impact on zombie cinema since the release of his first film,

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<sup>5</sup>*Book of the Dead*, FAB Press, 2005. p.11

<sup>6</sup> *The Undead and Philosophy*, Open Court, 2006. p.93

<sup>7</sup> Widely considered the father of contemporary zombie cinema, having directed *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and *Land of the Dead* (2005).

*Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. In the film the zombie has been transformed from the enthralled slave to an animated corpse complete with putrified flesh. Most terrifying of all however is that these zombies no longer yield to the commands of a zombie master, instead they are beholden only to their insatiable hunger for the flesh of the living. Up until *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies had been relatively mild monsters, “content to scare, strangle or bludgeon their victims. Romero upped the ante by giving them the taste for warm, human flesh.”<sup>8</sup> With the change in appetite comes a change in origins as well. No longer the product of voodoo sorcery, Romero’s zombies are given life by some strange contagion<sup>9</sup> allowing them to zombify the living through their bites. It is with these adaptations that Romero gives birth to the “radicalized post-modern zombie”, which “acts on its own initiative, a seemingly inexhaustible compulsion to devour the flesh of living humans”<sup>10</sup>.

It is with the creation of the “post-modern zombie” that zombie cinema comes to truly embody the latent horror of American society. While its predecessor may have filled its viewers with anxiety regarding the disjointed regimentation of their own lives, Romero’s zombies conjured absolute terror:

Zombies, we might conclude, are the monsters *par excellence* of late-capitalist culture. If voodoo mind-controlled zombies translate the uncanny into a 20th century context of alienated labor...post modern and post nuclear zombies...push us beyond uncanniness. They are not just symbols of repressed desire or

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<sup>8</sup> *Book of the Dead* p.69

<sup>9</sup> The origins of the zombies in Romero’s *Dead* series is never definitively identified, although it is attributed throughout the films as stemming from such diverse sources as radiation emanating from a space probe (*Night of the Living Dead*) to hell being full (*Dawn of the Dead*).

<sup>10</sup> *The Undead and Philosophy* p.93

anxiety; they are the radically embodied, limit breaking consequences of repression in its social totality, the inevitable eruption of crisis on a global rather than personal level.<sup>11</sup>

In eating and infecting its victims the zombie presents a host of fears wrapped in rotting human guise. It is this human semblance that is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the zombie as presents the viewer with the ultimate conflict of otherness. As animated corpses the zombie represents the complete embodiment of the other. Yet due to its nature the zombie is perfectly capable of manifesting itself within our friends, loved ones and even ourselves. This anxiety goes far beyond mere bodysnatching. It is not enough that the people closest to us may become mindless monsters, but that these familiar monsters are bent solely on devouring us in a manner that is both horrific and perversely intimate.

This convergence of identity anxiety and consumption is perhaps best exemplified in George Romero's 1978 film *Dawn of the Dead*. The sequel to the highly successful *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* expands upon its predecessor in both story and message. Taking place the morning after *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* follows four main characters who barricade themselves inside a shopping mall in order to protect themselves from the legions of zombies that have taken over the world outside. The result is a very biting (no pun intended) commentary on the rampant culture of consumption with dialogue such as:

"They're after the place. They don't know why. They just remember. Remember that they want to be in here."

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<sup>11</sup> *The Undead and Philosophy* p.101

“What the hell are they?”

“They’re us. That’s all.”<sup>12</sup>

While some are quick to dismiss Romero’s depiction of zombies as “simply a different kind of late-capitalist consumer”<sup>13</sup>, the association of zombies with consumption is an insightful one. After all, what could be more symbolic of American consumption than droves of mindless bodies driven by an insatiable hunger to consume that can only be destroyed by the elimination of the head.

As Jamie Russell points out, it is this fixation on the head that demonstrates a deeper critique on the part of Romero:

The constant refrain of *Dawn of the Dead* is “shoot ‘em in the head!” and in the unmitigated chaos of the film’s opening scenes, it’s a mantra that seems terrifyingly perverse. The headshot may be the only way to “kill” the zombies once and for all, but it also symbolises everything that’s wrong with the authorities’ response to crisis. “Shoot ‘em in the head” is the policy of a world gone mad. It’s also a policy that’s doomed to failure since giving up the head (reason, logic, the intellect) can only encourage the body (emotion, desire, the flesh) to gain ascendancy. Judging by all the mindless corpses milling around, that’s something that’s already happening of its own accord.

The zombie in this case becomes a manifestation of a culture already obsessed with the body and increasingly alienated from the mind. By fixating on the destruction of the head, the authorities in *Dawn of the Dead* present a power structure bent on the

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<sup>12</sup> *Dawn of the Dead*. 1978

<sup>13</sup> *Book of the Dead* p.94

destruction of rationality in the name of preserving order, all the while facilitating<sup>14</sup> the growing masses of undead consumers.

The comedy *Shaun of the Dead*<sup>15</sup>, which draws heavily upon the work of Romero, takes the notion of the zombie as embodiment of identity devouring consumption to its zenith. Set in British suburbia, *Shaun of the Dead* uses a comedic guise to reveal the extent to which contemporary life has driven all of us to become like the walking dead. Several times throughout the film the lines between the living and zombies is blurred, presenting living characters (being hungover, playing video games, etc.) in such a way that we are at first uncertain as to whether we are observing a zombie instead. The boundaries are so vague in fact that Shaun spends the first day of the uprising completely unaware that there is even anything out of the ordinary<sup>16</sup>. What is more, once the zombie menace has been neutralized and the film concludes, it is revealed that rather than being exterminated the remaining zombies have instead been brought back into society, working in menial labor<sup>17</sup> and serving as cheap entertainment<sup>18</sup>. Even Shaun has become part of this new zombie culture, housing his undead friend in a shed behind his house. While all of this is treated in a highly farcical

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<sup>14</sup> One of the recurring themes in Romero's films is the role of the human characters in their inevitable destruction. In the beginning of *Dawn of the Dead* this is exemplified by a bloody raid on a housing project in which white police haphazardly (and at times maniacally) shoot humans along with zombies, ultimately creating more zombies in the process.

<sup>15</sup> Written by comedian Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright (who also directed) and released in 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Believing a zombie to be a bum begging for change, for example, or thinking that a male zombie devouring a female victim was simply a drunken couple engaging in a rather intense kissing session (to name but a few).

<sup>17</sup> Equipped with muzzles and harnesses the zombies can be seen pulling shopping carts and performing other simple tasks.

<sup>18</sup> The closing scenes of *Shaun of the Dead* depict zombies competing against each other reality TV competitions and making their way through the talk show circuits.

manner, in many ways *Shaun of the Dead* comes closest to representing the subversive horror of zombie cinema.

With its zombies ultimately subdued and enslaved, *Shaun of the Dead* can also be seen as bringing zombie cinema full circle. Once again the zombie has become a mindless automaton, only they supermarket managers and television producers who's only sorcery is the manipulation of the overwhelming desire to consume. As such, the zombie does not so much represent an external menace as it does an innate capacity for horrific, mindless consumption. No longer is the zombie an arcane crime perpetrated on the innocent, rather it is a festering corruption that can manifest itself in anyone, anywhere, with only the most tenuous bonds keeping "us" from becoming one of "them".