

Combined and Uneven Apocalypse

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Plague in the gears

... it is evident that there is something uncanny about this reality. Its disproportion to the powerless subject, which makes it incomensurable with experience, renders reality unreal with a vengeance. The surplus of reality amounts to its collapse; by striking the subject dead, reality itself becomes deathly.

(Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*)

BART: "Dad! You killed the zombie Flanders!"

HOMER: "He was a zombie?"

(*The Simpsons*, "Treehouse of Horror III")

BAD SURVIVORS

In these dark, anxious years, the undead are having their day in the sun. None more so than zombies: the contemporary vision of the walking dead horde has, without doubt, become the nightmare image of the day, a necrotic counterpart to salvagepunk's dream work. But "nightmare image" should be taken in a doubled sense. First, the image as vehicle for the explicit content of the reigning cultural bad dream – zombies! cannibals! graves! – and hence what is repeated ceaselessly until the trope generates no further profit. Second, the image as manifestation of that most contemporary nightmare, an eternal present of the world not coming to an end. It is the sign of a closure, a terminus of the chance of something being different, a rejoinder to salvagepunk. A morbid suspicion that no amount of repurposing can break the banal spell of the present without getting stuck in the stalemate of brain-eating nihilism.

In our transition from salvagepunk's grave robbing to zombie graves that rob themselves, we also pass from a cultural and political form to be cultivated to one that needs to be put to rest.

To adopt the language of the genre itself, we need to kill the undead so as to locate what may have been worth saving. This is a necessary excavation of something still very thriving, even as it becomes more and more hollow, its idiotic self-knowing smirk bleeding out from every conceivable outlet.

For it is a frenzy indeed.

If it wasn't already apparent, recent years have made it incontrovertible: the media flurry around Seth Grahame-Smith's lamentable mash-up novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), LOLzombies (and "moar brainz"), zombie flash mobs, endless videogame versions (from new iterations of the *Resident Evil* series to *Left 4 Dead* where you get to be the zombie mob), zombie-themed knitting patterns, neo-grindhouse productions like *Zombie Strippers* (2008), bad kitsch zombie musicals (*Z! A Zombie Musical* [2007]), fake how-to survival guides and "reports" from the zombie holocaust (*World War Z* [2006]), our general discourse of the return of unwanted labor in the collapsing era of financialization, the desperate attempts to cash in again on the older George Romero legacy, the Danny Boyle *28 Days Later* (2002) version of contagion zombies, and *Shaun of the Dead's* (2004) romantic comedy zombie gags. Hell, even *The Economist* can't leave it alone: a cover from February 2009 illustrates the "return of economic nationalism" with a necrotic, clutching hand bursting from its grave.

Our point isn't to be dour, or to fall into the trap of claiming master knowledge, a walking dead version of the cult music fan: *I've been watching these from back before they were cool, and now I feel betrayed by zombies selling out*. Rather, the story to be told is how the zombie film, now arguably the dominant vision of apocalypse in the latest stages of "late" capitalism, has produced distinct captures of a certain thought about totality and of how real abstractions affect real bodies. In the self-perpetuation of the genre, however, that thought has transformed, a consequence of shifting political landscapes, attempts to make "political films"

(for example, the not-very-veiled critiques of consumerism), and the internal pressures of the horror genre (out of which the attempts to repeat with fidelity and minor difference produce long-term mutations of what zombies do and what we do about them).

So if salvagepunk is the dream image vision of rust-and-bolts restructuring of the ruined built world, the lurch and rot of zombie hordes is its seeming negation. The obscene persistence of the human animal shows itself, and not as built or builder. Salvagepunk's *homo faber* (Man the Maker) meets its *homo superstes* (Man the Survivor), defined not by how it refashions the apocalyptic world but by the bare fact of its survival (beyond its own personal world-ending event, its death), a survival that nevertheless signals the end of the collective world as we know it.

In other words, in the zombie scenario, the problem is not the immensity of what is to be done by the too few survivors, the problem confronted and fetishized in so many visions of the ruined, vacant world. Nor is it how to make a world so as to avoid its trendlines toward systemic failure while still salvaging and repurposing the ruined tools of the "before." The problem, faced with zombies, is that there are too many survivors.¹⁹

Yet it is always the wrong kind of survivor. In an echo of surging anxieties about overpopulation, the "planet of the slums," contaminated commodities from afar, and the ongoing degradation of the global south, the passion for all things zombie has the quality of a perverse, almost subversive joke. Rather than the production of corpses that results from 'capitalism's management (supported coups, ignored genocides, blocking of access to food and medication, destruction of ecosystems, poorly constructed infrastructure) of its unwanted poor, the production of corpses in the zombie scenario becomes the assembly of *more* mouths to feed. World hunger at its most naked, the sick repetition of want let loose on a global scale. Yet we need to bear in mind the specificity of the recent period of zombie-fixated

culture and its fixation with contagion. For in this wave, exemplified by Boyle's *28 Days Later* films, the focus is less on the insatiable hunger of the zombie and more on the danger of the bite and the transfer of the virus. To be sure, we might read in this persistence of fears about pandemics, AIDS, and other "literal" figures of contagion and transfer via the bodily act. But this would miss the crucial aspect at hand, namely, why the undead aren't even undead anymore – and why they perhaps never have been.

To give our investigation of the buried politics of the undead an appropriately "wrong" starting point, we might begin with this poster from the Situationist International. It was produced right around the years in which Romero made *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and when the trajectory toward our zombie-present commenced openly. We start here with the bloodied, one-eyed glare of the accusing, raised up to get beaten down again, the endless cycle of not being allowed to die and being blamed for that fact. Not the campy schlock of the mass moaning "brains ..." but the quiet rage and planning of the group in formation. *Bourgeois, you have understood nothing*, and we have some things to teach you. The collective pedagogy of those beyond the pale.

FUNNY, IT'S NOT USUALLY THIS HARD TO KILL THE POOR ...

Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, the real launching point of zombies into mass culture, is one of those odd "foundational" films. It has its antecedents, to be sure, in three major strands. First, the voodoo-inflected zombies of, for example, Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), Jacques Tourneurs's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and the shoddy knock-offs of both (i.e. the remarkable/awful *Zombies on Broadway* from 1945). Second, a more direct inspiration for what Romero was "trying to do," Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*. This would also

include Ubaldo Ragona's 1964 film adaptation, *The Last Man on Earth*, in which we watch a survivor defend a house against hordes of the invading undead, perhaps the most common image found across zombie movies. Third, a tangled mess of aesthetic and formal influences that give the film its distinct look: film noir lighting, *Psycho*-era Hitchcock camera angles, newsreel footage, art-house discontinuous cutting and spatial disorientation, and the basic fact of doing the whole thing for very, very little money. All that said, *Night of the Living Dead* fires a shot in the dark: excepting the third strand of all the aesthetic/formal elements cobbled together, it is a singular film, largely in just how far it goes in leaving behind those antecedents.

But like other horror films that seemingly start a genre-defining image (*Nosferatu* [1922], *Frankenstein* [1931], etc), *Night of the Living Dead* is already weirder and more sharply knowing about its absent source material than it "should" be: it seem to play with, and off of, an established template that cannot be found.²⁰ Romero's film establishes the rules of the genre to follow in its wake, from the "look" of the film to the kinds of stock characters and settings, from the broad tones and set moves to the effects it aims to have on the audience. Yet at the same time, *Night of the Living Dead* is already screwing around with those very rules: it defines a genre by the way that it "misreads" source material that was never there, at least not in any immediately accessible direct lineage.

In other words, like other films that inaugurate endless series of imitators, spin-offs, reloads, mash-ups, and sequels, *Night of the Living Dead* – the "original" – is original largely because it nails something about "what we've seen before" and know very well. It articulates the new via the inherited tropes and moves of the old: the inherited language of film conventions eases us in and makes even that which we've never seen before seem familiar, well-worn, and expected. Conversely, what seems recognizable immediately, the "ah, yes, here we go again," is precisely

the point of departure into the uncertain, where it turns and goes the wrong way. Fittingly for the film that starts "the zombie film" per se, the uncanny and unsettling happens because something goes through the motions wrongly, just like the zombie's obscene parody of the movements and habits of everyday life. The zombie film, both in its generic content and in how it relates to other genres, is situated in a gap between the inertia of a genre or historical moment's norms and a yearning pull toward other, weirder directions that entirely leave behind the expected and everyday. And more particularly, it elaborates and widens that gap as the crack through which the unwanted pour in.

Think here of the beginning of *Night of the Living Dead*, where the first zombie we see – the first recognizable zombie of late capitalism – looks like nothing so much as a homeless drifter of sorts, a gaunt raggedy man. Tellingly, Barbara and Johnny, her soon-to-be-zombified brother, hardly give him a second glance: at worst, he'll ask them to spare some change. He is not marked as undead, at least not in the technical sense. Just as unwanted. Therein lies the explosion out of and against the accepted codes of who we recognize and who we don't: the zombie's furious attack, which here has nothing to do with trying to eat them, is the feral assertion of the right to be noticed. Even to the end of the encounter, we can practically read on Johnny's face the bourgeois frustration: *funny, it's not usually this hard to kill the poor...*

GNASHING AT THE AIR

It is now a commonplace for theorists and critics to elevate zombie films, along with other splatter and dismemberment oriented film, by arguing that they tell us something new about the "real." (Or, when those of us who read psychoanalysis get our hands on them, the "Real.") As in the following:

- The primal "real" of deep reptilian urges that get to return in all their anti-Rousseau fury, tearing away at living bodies like very ignoble savages.

- The thought of zombies as a kind of meta-return of the repressed, the "Real" of contemporary life that cannot be included in the dominant symbolic order: a loopy perverted death drive whose cannibalism parodies the drives to excess consumption.

- What's "really" going on, the zombies as embodied manifestations of racial, class, and gender conflict, as well as registrations of anxieties and resistances to contemporary events.

- The forbidden, visceral, abject real of the body, where we get to see all the bloody bits brought to the surface, the abstract spirit of the mind rendered into just one more pile of succulent warm nutrition. Spirit is not a bone, but it is the juicy bits encased within bone.

Fair enough. None of this is wrong per se, and many of the films themselves court these interpretations. Nevertheless, these readings about the "real" content of zombies are limited because they aren't really readings: they just describe what happens in the films. To say that the ending of *Night of the Living Dead*, with the "accidental" murder of an African-American man by the white redneck zombie hunting mob, is largely about race relations is just to say that you've watched the movie all the way through. To say that *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), with its hordes of blank-eyed shopping mall zombies, is a critique of consumerism is just to describe the surface texture of the film. As with other films and cultural objects that upfront their political/social critique, that very critique often becomes an obstacle to better critical thinking: *Well, we know very well that it's against racism, sexism, crass*

consumerism, corruption ... Simply because a film seems to point out problems of social inequality does not mean that it is a radical film, or even one that is therefore "smarter" and more aware than those films hell-bent on entertainment, social critique be damned.

Of real concern is the symptomatic content: the effects and sets of meanings whose sources cannot be found in the film "trying to say something" about social issues. Instead, that rat's nest of historical anxieties, concrete organizations and administrations of the world, and affective relations which cannot but inflect the final product. In a more Marxist language: the film is a capture not just of how the structuring effects of the "base" (the organization of productive capacity and the modes of labor there employed to produce value) are registered by the "superstructure" (the social relations that both support and are produced by modes of production, the realms of culture and "politics," the whole ideological project of a period and its tangle of contradictory impulses and rules). It is not the issue of cultural output reflecting or expressing the economic order, as in the parodic version of Marxism in which everything is unidirectionally "about" the economy in a banal and dogmatic way. ("What is this slapstick hockey comedy about?" "Class relations. Obviously.")

Rather, the capture is of the messy passages *between* base and superstructure. From the perspectival dizziness of the tracking back and forth (between the forms imposed on a world and the uncomfortable, uncertain fit of that world into those forms), the sharper edge starts to develop. This sharpness is not the result of criticism. It is honed both in our clumsy grasps at understanding objects and in how those objects themselves are constituted by attempts to understand the pressures and determinations of their historical moment. Under the diffuse weight of these pressures, this subjectless drive to knowing must be mediated, translated, fragmented, and shoved underground, emerging only in brief

instances where we can tell that something doesn't feel quite right.

To apply this to zombies: the zombie film, we claim, had a distinctly sharp capacity to think these passages in both their sloppiness and painful accuracy. And this indeed takes the form of the "real." At their best, funniest, and meanest, they are the thought of *how real abstractions work on real bodies*. What this means is that they hold out a way to model and map what happens when seemingly spectral shifts in the global architecture of a totality (capitalism), which cannot be traced to any one cause or agent, touch earth and produce real consequences. Or, in this case, touch beneath the earth, stirring the dead. Of course, it takes the form of the fantastic and the impossible: *the dead walk!* Yet the point is that this operation – the mutations and developments in the impersonal global logic of value affecting every speck of the "real" it infects – happens all the time. It is precisely what capitalism does and what defines it. (This does not mitigate, however, the sense of this operation as fantastic, uncanny, and never quite fully comprehensible.) Capitalism doesn't just abstract, in the more direct way of seeing objects as "just" commodities, "just" material instantiations of a certain exchange value. It also deploys these abstractions to dictate the conditions of objects themselves, to force their flows and determine their right to existence.²¹ Echoing the death certificate in *The Bed Sitting Room*, this takes its most directly sadistic form when the objects in question are human bodies.

This is the particularity of what the figure of the zombie does and its position in the mass culture of capitalism. It thinks how real abstractions work on real bodies, of the nastiest intersections of the law of value and the law of inevitable decay.

And more specifically, it thinks this via two central concerns:

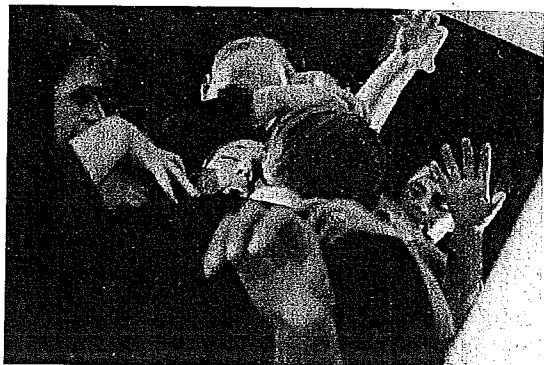
reanimation (transmission)
consumption (hunger)

In each pairing, the latter term is not the underlying cause, contrary to appearances. Romero zombies are not reanimated because of infectious transmission of a "zombie disease" from the bite of a zombie, at least not until we get to the recent *28 Days Later* model. They are reanimated because the world has changed in a way we can't fully determine. (How did the dead get the message to rise up? Why weren't we informed? Worse, if it indeed is related to the radiation of the "exploded Venus probe," what the hell is that radiation doing to those of us who are still alive?²²) And they do not eat because of hunger, in any physiological way²³: think here of the moment in *Day of the Dead* (1985) where Dr. Logan has removed all the vital organs of the vivisected zombie to watch it still strain to tear the flesh from his hands, its gnashing teeth clamping down again and again on the air ...

Rather, the latter term is the asubjective truth of the activity: it is the obscure center of a thought that exceeds what a zombie does or does not do, not verified by the reason why an individual subject, albeit necrotic and "without reason," acts a certain way. Hunger decoupled from the act of satiating hunger, and transmission that we cannot trace: each is the absent cause produced by the activity. Precisely because it is not the reason for these things happening (the dead rising and the dead eating the living), it is raised in relief, the strange shadow undergirding and blackly illuminating the deeper workings of a totality. It is the point of the whole enterprise, from yawning graves to gnawing meat, precisely because it is missing from it. For what is hunger at its barest and most obscene if not a consumption that cannot end, for the very fact that it was never caused by hunger in the first place?

But before tracking this out, we should mark the recurrent images of zombie apocalypse that first get full treatment in *Night of the Living Dead*. In other words, the construction of the tropes and clichés that show us what it looks like for the world to end

at the hands and mouths of the stumbling dead.



Inside/outside: order/orgy

First and foremost is a spatial opposition that visually orients the zombie genre as a whole, between the domestic interior – or interiors that become sites of cobbled-together domestic living – and the wilds of the outside, always trying to break through the doors and windows. This produces, almost inevitably, the great money shot of the zombie film: the horror and ecstasy of a survivor getting dragged across the threshold, screaming as he or she is welcomed into the waiting horde. Hence we get one of our era's greatest fantasmatic images, of just giving up on the entire domestic sphere of responsibility and family values, pulled "against my will" into the orgy of irrationality and swarm collectivity. But no, in these films, a man's house – or any house secure enough to hole up in – is indeed a castle, and a castle exists for protection and siege, for shoring up the splintered remnants of the distinction between private and public spaces, between zones for family bickering and zones for all-out war.

The enemy within

Unfortunately, things aren't much safer inside. The consistent

question across Romero's films seems to be: what divides us from them, the rational humans trying to survive from the zombie hordes? The answer: well, at least zombies won't stab you in the back or constantly pull guns on you during an argument.

In the later films, *Land of the Dead* in particular, zombies do learn indeed how to pull guns, but there it is in the service of a developing solidarity the petty and hysterical living can only envy.²⁴ The humans prove to be your real enemies. Unpredictable, stressed, and cowardly, they get everyone killed in trying to save their own skin, over and over again. Romero's films, like those of fellow "social critic" horror director John Carpenter, have been from the start about the clusterfuck that is group dynamics, joined to a deep, lingering awareness of the damage we remain uniquely capable of inflicting on one another. It may be the zombies who we are supposed to shoot in the head, but that won't be nearly so satisfying as blowing away the jerks who make surviving the apocalypse so unpleasant and dangerous.

Bad faith

Here we find the darkest, and simultaneously most joyous, heart of the zombie film: the consummate bad faith of the savagery you've wanted to inflict all along. It is bad faith because it veils the real desire under the sign of necessity: *I had to kill her, she was going to "turn."* It is the misanthropy of everyday life, the common urge to just stop talking things through, to stop biting your tongue, to unload on your friends, neighbors, siblings, and parents. And even more, on the stranger, on the human body we don't know. This is analogous to the response to the Columbine high school shootings and other supposedly random public massacres: so much of the horror and shock was due to the eruption in "real life" of what was supposed to remain a secret

communal fantasy of nastiness toward our fellow human. The point here is not that there are certain pathological individuals who are the bearers of this wrong urge. The pathology is structural, shared by all social beings, or by all those who have successfully become good citizens and people, all who have learned that conflict and urges are mediated by and disseminated throughout all language and discourse, that massive horizontal net of rules and conventions. In this way, the zombie film lets us bare our open secret and celebrate in it, watch an endless sequence of strangers get shot in the head, the audience cheering at particularly "good" kills.

However, it keeps this bloodlust on a tight leash via that blind of necessity. It thereby replicates all the more the structures of what is and is not allowed. In a line repeated across the genre with minor variation, "that was before ... nothing is the same anymore." This is marshaled most often before or after killing a neighbor/mother/friend who has been bit and may "turn" into a zombie. The question it raises, obliquely, is how long you've been waiting to do this, before you got the excuse.

And "apocalypse" should be stressed here in its proper sense, as the revelation of the hidden. Namely, what is apocalyptic about the walking dead is what they reveal about the conditions of the *living*, all those deep, rutted grooves of antagonism and violence seething beneath daily life. The open secrets of an economic totality, at once the violence of abstraction (the brutal consequences of shifting patterns of valuation) and the abstraction of violence (this is just business, folks, nothing personal).

However, the zombie apocalyptic fantasy is that of a world in which just such abstraction is destroyed, producing all the utopian possibilities and ideological pitfalls of a world beyond value. In a desperate echo of salvagepunk, the world of zombie hordes is a radical contraction of what is desirable to possess; if it can't kill, heal, feed, help escape, burn, or barricade, then it only

slows you down. Exchange-value rots even faster than the bodies, leaving behind objects in their naked utility and hardness.

Yet the vision of the zombie apocalypse is never a *post-apocalyptic* vision, not a single event and revelation out of which we regroup and attempt to rebuild.²⁵ Rather, they are the mapping and figuration of apocalyptic duration, the crisis that will not quit and the ceaseless work of slaughter, partition, burial, and moving on. So too the content of the revelation, the hidden re-revealed endlessly, from the deep inheritances of racial and class prejudice to lingering models of erotic possession and familial structure, from the cathartic pleasures of corporal savagery to the sinking realization that it was never the zombies who made this world unlivable. They just give the subjectless catastrophe of this century a necrotic, yearning form.

In the fundamental non-progression of this apocalypse, stuck and skipping like a record, a full recognition and mobilization of the revealed remains impossible. A full recognition and mobilization of the revealed remains impossible. This is both on the level of the diegetic content of the films (i.e. what's going on in their worlds) and the films themselves: in neither case can anyone get past the personal. The trauma is of the species itself, but the survivors, and the supposed critique internal to the films, cut themselves off at the knees by their resolute inability to think anything close to totality. To hearken back to the "missing question" of transmission, they lack the capacity – or, more frequently, refuse the consequences of such a capacity – to fathom how the global transmits to the local. As such, one faces two options. You can abandon whatever community to which you temporarily belong and get the hell out of town, preferably to the wilds of Canada (as happens at the deeply reactionary end of *Land of the Dead*) or a Caribbean island (the oddly unconvincing conclusion of *Day of the Dead*). Or you refuse to keep moving and establish your stronghold, whether it be mall, house,

bunker, farm, prison, or factory.²⁶ Which essentially means, given the less-than-rosy view of what we do to each other, to stay in one place long enough for the worst tendencies of the human animal, post-capitalism, to come out. Hence the deep nihilism (at least concerning behavior toward each other) of the genre: stay with a group of other survivors, and soon you won't be a survivor, falling victim to what inevitably happens when you're trapped together in one house with too many guns and an entire social order worth of loathing.

Above all, the films institute a cycle of passages between these visions of fixity and flight. Their texture and tempo is precisely this gap: one gets to rest, but only uncertainly, with the awareness that the idyll is a calm before a storm that never stops. And just as these passages are stunted, thrown off course and kilter, rendered hectic and abortive, the passages of thought from base to superstructure are themselves messy, precise only in their failure. It is because we *don't* get a proper realism or cognitive mapping that zombie films better capture the logic of the times, that opaque "almost-thought" which always escapes the closure of facile critique. The work of sharper critique and understanding, of making sense of what is revealed and what is hidden, is forced into this position of the itinerant, the unwelcome guest forever pulling up stakes at gunpoint. But the gun, here, is the inertia of the past, the savage insistence of the old roles and rules. A constant refusal to admit that things have changed: *no, the government will come, there must be a rational explanation for this, we aren't the kind of people who do this.* Coupled with this, the permanent flight, both in thought and action. *We need to keep moving.* All those forms of resistance that foreclose the possibility of real resistance, all the mental and social immobility that ends where it starts, back in the arms of the dead.

SURPLUS-LIFE

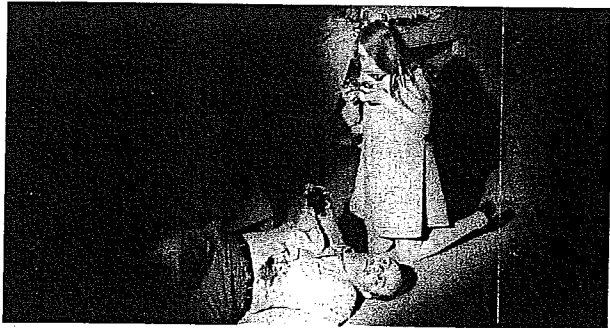
This isn't to disavow the critique – of race, class, nation, gender, etc – embedded in much of the genre, and in Romero first and foremost. Indeed, the vague, and often misleading, leftism of its perspective constitutes the texture and tone perhaps as much as the relations between interior/exterior, fixity/flight, and care/brutality. And it remains, from its incipient moments on, capable of real moments of vitriol and shock: the sinking stomach feeling becomes a freefall in the total horror of Ben's death, for instance. But, as raised earlier, the on-the-surface social critique is the least interesting part of the films, *particularly* from a political perspective. If there is a sharper turn of critique and thought, one not caught in the abortive passage bound to the personal trauma, it can only lie in the zombies themselves, the real protagonists of the films. For not since Eisenstein's films have we witnessed such a startling construction of the mass subject: the slow pained birth of the new group from the wreckage of the everyday. Not so much class consciousness, but the wracking formation of something that, like all revolutionary movements, starts from the universal and lurches, however ineptly, toward its negation.²⁷ Stumbling and swarming, single-minded and mindless, they are the unhalting drive toward the destruction of the world that exists and all it stands for.²⁸

That said, they might be rather surprised to learn of their role as eschaton made flesh. In the Romero films, they are surprised to *learn*, period. And so before considering what it means for the "irrational" to develop a sense of what they have been doing all along as well as the advanced tactics of how to do it better, we return to that dual core of what they do without "meaning to": they consume, and they do not die.

What do they consume? Despite the endless LOL-zombie level jokes, it wasn't always about "Brains ...". That particular iteration, with all its monotonous staying power, comes from

Dan O'Bannon's *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), to which we will return at length. No, for Romero and the meat glee of his SFX man Tom Savini, it is flesh, ripped from the bone, and it is entrails, the wet horror of the unraveling guts.

But even aside from the fact that consumption does not answer hunger, the very eating and hunting practices were never about filling bellies or persistently butchering the living to get every last bit of protein from them. Instead, they absent-mindedly snack. More crucially, they are distracted by the fresher living, the not-yet-touched by zombies. Pragmatically, they should stick with the kill they've already made, not waste energy chasing new prey that will likely turn out to kill the hunter. Of course, none of this matters or applies here, because of that odd doubling: they don't need to eat, yet it is what they do above all else. And not yet to turn the living to their side, not just a quick bite to convert the uninitiated and add to the ranks. (It can't be good for the effectiveness of your zombie horde to have a significant number of them missing large chunks of muscle and connective tissue.) They are consumers, so it seems, and the unaware manifestation of consumption compulsion hits its joking stride in the mall wandering slack-jaws of *Dawn of the Dead*.



No moment so captures this bare anti-hunger and shameless consumption as that when, in *Night*, the basement door opens to

reveal "zombified" Karen – a young girl holed-up in the farmhouse – munching away on her father. The shot is remarkable, an entire case-study of familial tension and libidinal investment in a single frame: her mother opens the door, a crack of light reveals Karen, and she freezes, mouth full of Daddy. Not in knowing shame at the act, but with, at most, the minor embarrassment and sudden stillness of one caught midnight snacking in the harsh glow of the open refrigerator. (To appropriate a Freudian moment, this is something approximate to, *Mother, can't you see I'm eating?*) The absence of her shame is more than compensated for by our revulsion, our knowing laughter and shudder. However, we should insist, our laughter/horror is not a response to the "body horror" (the tasteful black-and-white gore details are restrained, even for Romero), but at her fundamental misrecognition.

This is not the misrecognition of eating your father by accident, not even of being unaware of how awkward the situation appears to one who stumbles into it. It is the fundamental misrecognition of zombies and of our attachment to them. This is the misrecognition of one who has risen without reason, compelled to rise for no purpose beyond the mere repetition, consumption, and imitation of life. For the basic fact of the true zombie gesture is not the animation of the dead body but the over-animation of the living body.

To make this less cryptic, we might ask: how do the dead rise/walk in these films? And *which* dead?

As explained, these are not movies about transmission, at least in the explicit sense. You don't become a zombie by coming into contact with one. Being bitten may hasten the process (an unbrushed, rank, rotten-meat-reeking mouth plus a jagged bite will likely lead to a nasty infection), but it isn't the cause.²⁹ The cause is an irrevocable change, something that descends upon the living and the dead alike.

Indeed, we should stress the *living* aspect of this. In the

graphic novel *The Walking Dead* (2003-present), which consciously expands the moves, tropes, and themes of a Romero film into a long, unfolding narrative, the central character Rick realizes, upon discovering that the “roamers” include those who happened to die without being bitten, that if “they revived without a bite – that means we’re all infected. Or could be. That means we’re just waiting to die before we come back as one of those things.” Later in the series, as the death toll mounts and the survivors turn more and more ferociously against each other, he delivers the titular line, pointing out that “We ARE the walking dead”: it isn’t us the living against the animated dead, but the remapping of the entire world into the fields and enclosures of the already dead, the apparently living just biding their time before becoming the unavoidable.

In other words, it’s not dying that makes you a zombie. It is *not-dying* that does, already present in you as you fight off the hordes you will one day join. It is the fact that you don’t, can’t or won’t – in the varied inflections of will and non-agency of each option – stay down. All that is known, the one certainty after the tectonic shift of the “world revolution” that can’t be repaired, is that the dead will rise because they never really die. Hence while the effects are personal (the pathos of the family consuming itself, the existential angst at the certainty of becoming a zombie), the cause is not.

Romero’s own comments about this, and the relation of his film to Matheson’s *I Am Legend*, are instructive:

I thought *I Am Legend* was about revolution. I said if you’re going to do something about revolution, you should start at the beginning. I mean, Richard starts his book with one man left; everybody in the world has become a vampire. I said we got to start at the beginning and tweak it up a little bit. I couldn’t use vampires because he did, so I wanted something that would be an earth-shaking change. Something that was

forever, something that was really at the heart of it. I said, so what if the dead stop staying dead? ... And the stories are about how people respond or fail to respond to this. That’s really all [the zombies] ever represented to me. In Richard’s book, in the original *I Am Legend*, that’s what I thought that book was about. There’s this global change and there’s one guy holding out saying, wait a minute, I’m still a human. He’s wrong. Go ahead. Join them. You’ll live forever! In a certain sense he’s wrong but on the other hand, you’ve got to respect him for taking that position.³⁰

One could say much about how Romero articulates the origins and trajectory of his project here, but for the moment, three comments.

First, the sense that it was never really about the zombies: they are representations – more precisely, the external embodiment – of how people respond to a global shift. In a strange doubling back, they are nothing but the registration of the response to them, an echo chamber with a hollow void at its center (you are just our response to what you are). Second, there is the slippery question of at what point *you* are still human. The Matheson schematic of obstinacy and refusal to adapt, for which we all do have some respect indeed, is centered less on the level of his unwillingness to become something other and more the problem of one who doesn’t realize he is already a consequence and product of that change. Or, we should insist, at least the Romero reload of Matheson achieves this: if the zombies are a projection of how we respond to “earth-shaking change,” such a projection is needed because we lack the ability – or willingness – to read ourselves for the signs of such changes and to grasp what has befallen us all. Third, and most crucially, is just that sense of tectonic shift, of that “global change,” which provides the injunction to start from the beginning. However, to show the “beginning” of this revolution is not to locate a false origin or

precise cause. The radiation loosed from the exploded probe may be "to blame," but what is never explained, through any of the series, is *how* it is to blame. There is a gathering storm of over-determination, a blur of intersecting influences and pressures. All that we can witness is the point of no return.

And indeed it is a *point* of no return. For what is the world condition that occurs? It is clearly not that all the dead who ever died arise. It is not even just those dead with enough connective tissue and meat remaining on their bones to stand and shamble. The condition is the rising of those who died *after* the new set of rules came to be, after the radiation has spread.

In this way, zombie films are not about the living dead, at least not in any direct way. They are about the undying living. They are about *surplus-life*, the new logic of excessive existence: something has given us all too-much-life, an inability to properly die in a system that no longer knows how or when to quit. If there is an infection or viral model here, it is of a systemic change that infects all and demands of us that we not die. Instead, the continuation and modification of the human animal in its furious and unnatural perseverance. The instinct to survive turned against itself in parody, the conatus gone haywire.

And more than that, the end of the sovereignty not just of the subject but also of the working body, now given a task that it can't finish and a job from which it doesn't get to punch out. In this way, both on the local scale of each body and mind compelled to stop minding and just keep going, and on the global scale, the zombie apocalypse is not the end of the world. It's the "end of the end," the world never ending. The films may be obsessed with things that rot and fall apart, but they are visions of *frozen decay*, a halted approximation of the process of disappearance that serves only to insist on stasis. They are always decaying, but never decayed. That is what's so horrifying. Not the possibility of it ending this way, in plague and rot and terror, but instead, in the drawn out sigh of the thought, *My god, what if it never ends ...* And

worse, the possibility that this may be so central to the dominant logic of our age that it no longer is capable of horrifying, the soft whimper of protest drowned out in the roar of the self-same.

WHEN HELL IS FULL, THE DEAD WILL BE MOCKED FOR THEIR CONSUMERIST TENDENCIES

Who, then, are the zombies? What are the ideological and political echoes of those unwilling survivors doomed not to die?

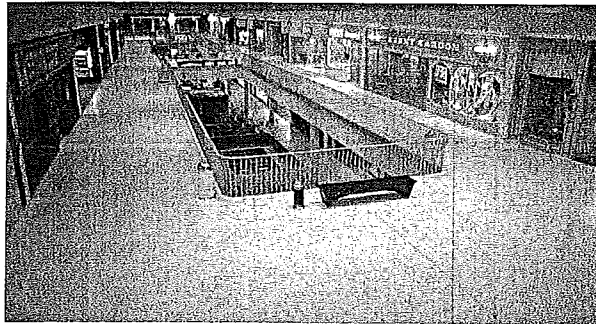
On a superficial (and perhaps more resonant level), they are "us," the everyman and woman, regular Johns, Janes, and all between. The genre takes deep and recurrent pleasure in raising the zombie types, so that the viewers get the game of spotting the shambling incarnation of "what they were before": zombie clowns, zombie hare krishnas, zombie cheerleaders, zombie bike messengers, and so on and on ...³¹ One effect of this, beyond the mild chuckle, is indeed a sense of the zombies as the underbelly of the everyday. Not merely the manifestation of how we react to global shifts but also the detritus that persists through any of those shifts. If the apocalyptic New has yet to be fully revealed, it is in part because the old not only refuses to rot away, it also keeps doing anew, with an uncanny sense of fidelity, what it used to do.

Including, go to the mall and hang out, wandering aimlessly without really buying anything.

In Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, arguably one of the century's greatest, cruelest, and darkly funniest films, that's just what they do, thereby inaugurating the endlessly recycled line of embedded critique: in the society of the spectacle (here in its vaguest sense), we already live like zombies. The zombies are us, in all our cowed ignorance, shambling through the motions of an impoverished existence. They are "unaware," stupid, and easily tricked, barely able to navigate an escalator, reeling in the

perma-shock of the always new and the glossed bounty of commodities displayed.

Yet of course, they are also threat, a "monstrous otherness" made uncanny by its proximity to normal textures of everyday life. Their specificity and threat is to be found in the particular fantasy position they occupy: as a figure, they stand as an impossible triangulation between 1) concrete mechanisms of dominance and exploitation in capitalism, 2) capitalism's abstract form of valuation and antagonism, and 3) all those who populate this system, the full range from those too abject to register to those who reap its profit.



Any materialist account – or any account capable of thinking beyond internal genre shifts – must be conceived roughly along these lines, passing back and forth from *what* and *how* zombies threaten to *who* they are (rather than just *who* they *were*), all mapped onto the specificity of the envisioned world. And it goes without saying that this envisioned world is, with notable and powerful exceptions, the emergent late capitalist world: shopping malls and suburbs, postcolonial islands and teeming metropolises barricaded and eaten away from within.

What (or *who*) and *how* do zombies threaten? One influential account, best known in the version advanced by Robin Wood, is that the zombies threaten all that is not compatible with advanced capitalism: their cannibalism is consumerism in liter-

alized reification overdrive, a desire to consume and possess not just objects but the bodies of fellow citizens.³² However, this consumption has a particular edge and articulation in that they dominate and destroy the "Other" of American society: persons of color, women, homosexuals, anyone vaguely or explicitly countercultural. As such, the zombies stand as the swarming enforcers of a social order familiar to us all, even in a vision of the end of that order.

This account is quite flawed and feels oddly unmoored from the texture of the films themselves: if zombies remain capitalist subjects, they are surely not *capitalists* per se. Capitalism works concretely through a small number of capitalists exploiting the labor power of hordes of workers, with the attendant threat and pressure of the industrial reserve army hungry for access to jobs. Zombies may be many things, but managers they are not. This is not to misrepresent Wood's point: his argument is subtle and recognizes that it isn't an issue of what the zombies think they are doing but *how* and *to whom* the violence is done (an all-out assault by the many on a smaller group of individuals largely coded as marginal to mainstream American society). It isn't a model of intentionality but of the creation of films in which we witness men of color and (primarily white) women struggle for their lives against the white men locked in the houses/malls/bunkers with them and against the rainbow coalition of the undead outside. (That said, it's difficult to truly argue that it is the *zombies* who are the ones "targeting" these Others, even within the Romero films: it is the redneck cops at the end of *Night*, dead boyfriends and biker gangs in *Dawn*, and coked-up/adrenaline-fuelled military macho men in *Day*.)

The bigger problem with the argument is its conception of possessiveness and consumption. The collective hunting and *enjoying-wrongly* – the fact that enjoyment is no longer mediated through the value-form but through a gory mining of the potential hunger-sating use-value of one's friends and neighbors

– point, if anywhere, to the fact that individual possession has nothing to do with it. While hunger may be the symptomatic absence that gives truth to consumption, possession is merely a misconstruction of what happens. They move en masse, they work together, they rip and tear, and move on. If anything, this is closer to a model of mutual aid or collective goal oriented hive mind than atomized life in the face of market relations. *They do not own what they kill, and they do not care.* One could begin to imagine how different the films would be if this were the case, something far closer to a vampire film, in which the one who has bitten and “turned” you has a position of ownership and control, or is at least more ancient, and hence more legit. In a zombie film, this would produce an endless chain of pseudo-ownership and authenticity, but it would also undo the very core of the films, the glimpse of a totality that affects everyone. There is no original, and certainly no aristocratic glamour even if one could be found. (The most nobly rotten?)

A related analysis, one manifested on the surface of the films themselves, figures the zombies as consumerism run amok: the barbaric forces underlying the management of commodity culture are unmasked for all to see. Mindless consumers from life to un-death, they simply move from a slavish devotion to plastic trinkets to a slavish devotion to the flesh of the living. Folded into this is a vague sense of apocalyptic immanentism, something worth guarding even if its articulation is the worst form of critique: *It's the apocalypse, man, we're already mindless zombies, it's all ideology and spectacle, and we're just thoughtless drones watching the world burn ...* Crucial to note, however, is that in this vision, stressed in both cultural responses/parodies/reloads and the films themselves, the zombies are still “consuming subjects.” They may wander without buying anything, yet the stress is put on their consumption as a *continuation* – at most, a slight perversion or unmasking – of how they consumed before the apocalypse. They are not the poor or the homeless, or at least not

truly lumpen. The first zombie/“ghoul” we see in the Romero films indeed is coded as a homeless drifter, a man down on his luck, but in *Dawn* and in its echoes reaching far beyond zombie cinema itself, the zombie becomes the “good” consumer simply gone too far, an indictment not of a system that lets people “fall through the safety net” but of a system which encourages decadent, selfish, brutish behavior. Hence if we accept the argument presented in *Dawn*, that the zombies return to the mall because they came here in life, with as much critical gravity as it seems intended to have, we also accept that their remembrance establishes them as the continuation of “correct” consumption, even as they learn to *consume wrongly*.³³

What are the ideological consequences of this dominant mode of reading zombie films (i.e. zombie films are about the anxieties of late capitalism, with particular focus on the consequences of excess consumerism, individual greed that threatens communities, and the decline in individual critical thinking in favor of shared consumption of mass ideology)? More specifically, if there is indeed a “critical” connection between the consumption of the zombies and the general consumption of commodities, what is it?

The operation at work is a division of the world into two:

1. There is “everyone,” the mindless masses of consumers, regular folk hoodwinked into accepting the impoverished world of commodity-centered life. This “everyone” is a universal that functions by undermining its own claim. It explicitly does not mean *everyone*: rather, it serves to designate who is allowed to count as part of the *everyone*, a non-encompassing claim that excludes all those who do not or cannot work, who very well might like to participate in excess consumerism but who have been cast out of the ranks of the purchasing classes, (i.e. the truly poor, the homeless). It is an “everyone” that negatively illuminates

what it means to be beyond the pale of normal life.

2. Those who know better than everyone, who don't buy into buying, who escape the clutches of mass ideology and who could save us all if the herd of slobbering consumers learned to listen. The vanguard of clarity in a foggy age are fittingly also those who survive the zombie apocalypse. This, it should be clear, implicitly includes all of us, the viewers in on the joke, who "get what it's all about."

Taken as a whole, the zombie film – insofar as it not only is misrepresented in this manner but also fosters this ideological construction – is a fantasy of just such a division and of being on the right side of the divide. And that fantasy does not go by the name of Romero or Fulci or any director. It goes by the name of cynical reason. To clarify, this is not in the sense of ancient Cynical philosophy. Here cynicism is the modern mode of "enlightened false consciousness" that Peter Sloterdijk outlines in *Critique of Cynical Reason*: it makes "knowing better than" part of the structure of non-action, so you get to feel smarter than a social order and receive the assurance that you can't do anything to change it. By passing through the door of supposed anti-consumerist left political critique, it smuggles in both the self-disavowing illusion of standing outside of the system and the self-sustaining fantasy of freedom of choice. As such, what is really at stake here is the cynicism of master knowledge that claims to act so as to "make the unthinking think": to help the cowed sheep of the post-proletariat stop mindless consumption and to cure the bourgeoisie of their false consciousness. Put otherwise, to face the anxiety about the unknown that lies beyond the illusory stability of capital and to confront the possibility of acting otherwise. Hidden in the critique is the formulation of the critical speaker's position, as the one who can bravely push through anxieties toward the new horizon.

Indeed, this question of *anxiety* is the crux of the issue: how does it function and what is the particular anxiety of which the zombie film is a manifestation and to which it contributes? Who do we imagine to be anxious and about what?

The real problem with this cynical reason/consumer model is its short-circuited leap that conceives zombies as at once über-consumers – the blind, ideologically determined subject – and as the monstrous other. In short, doubly coded as the subject who doesn't know better and who just does these things for no rational reason. Worse still, for those of us who do know better, is that there are a lot of them. We are quite outnumbered. As such, the critique falls firmly on the irrationality of the living consumer, on what the zombies "were before they were dead": one tends to assume that zombies are beyond reform, therefore the source has to be located in the kind of people inhabiting the kind of world now rendered catastrophic. And it is the anxiety of "these people" that seems to be the problem, a crippling anxiety of the prospect that the world might become unrecognizable and impossible to navigate. An anxiety so massive that it can only lead to complacency and clinging to the edifices of ideological certainty of what's safely new, objects for purchase that reinforce the perpetuation of the same.

Hence, the general anxiety about the decline of the West finds a blamable source in the particular anxiety of the masses toward the New, their incapacity to envision modes of life that exceed the forms modeled in the shopping mall. To be clear: in the schematic of the cynical subject³⁴, anxiety emerges *for the masses* at the prospect of the New which terrifies them, and the role of the critic/artist is to produce texts that call into question the inability of the unthinking ones to see beyond themselves to these horizons of possibility. As such, the alleged power of Romero's *Dawn* as a cultural object is not that it shows how "we are all like zombies" but about how we, the knowing subjects, need to be vigilant in our attacks upon these consumers.



And isn't that the heart of the pleasure we see taken and which we take in watching? No more cultural mediation and propaganda, no more trying to convince someone that there is a better life beyond the circle of work and consumption. Years of failed arguments replaced with the simple clarity of a gunshot or the libidinal spray of a chainsaw: *You dumb fucker, how could you not see?* This is pleasure of enlightened false consciousness, the trademark of cynical reason, those who know very well, but nevertheless ... Who know very well that they cannot themselves change anything or escape the ideological network, but who make this knowledge of impotency the very condition for their claiming to know better than the rest. The deep cancerous form of smug resignation, of letting the world burn while you repeat to yourself, *At least I know that there wasn't anything I could do about it.*

Self-knowing and self-disavowing or not, this needs to be dismantled.³⁵ On two fronts. First, we should reject a causal chain of the *fait accompli*, a bad reasoning that goes as follows: *Dawn* has been enormously influential and popular, part of that influence has been the embedded social critique, that critique (and the horror of which it was a part) struck a nerve with contemporary anxieties, therefore the anxieties represented in the film – rampant consumerism produces the kind of world that ends this way – are the underlying anxieties of an audience and

their historical moment. Against this we should insist that just because it has an "anti-consumerist" tone, and indeed has become such a classic in part because of that bent, does not mean that this is the real underpinning anxiety. This is not to claim that fears of a general trendline toward societal decadence, due in large part to consumerism and a naturalization of capitalism as the only option available, are absent, or that the film did not savagely capture some of those fears. Rather, it is to claim that if we speak of the anxiety of an era, the film must be thought of as an elaboration, a perfect storm of contradictory tendencies, a working-through of sub-currents and patterns of fear and desire that cannot be simply represented. What remains powerful about *Dawn* isn't that Romero put his finger on a "widespread anxiety," but rather that the film represents a particularly knotty and canny constellation of factors and influences in which we can detect what is missing – think here again of the conspicuous absence of hunger – and on which we can discern the cynical logic we project to protect ourselves from having to admit our deep complicity with this way of the world.

The second, and more important, attack on thinking zombie movies as being "about" consumption is the model of anxiety it employs. It is the common notion of anxiety: we get anxious at what we do not know, when we have a lack of knowledge and don't know if the New will be a pleasant or unpleasant surprise. We feel unmoored and uncertain, and anxiety is the affect of that inability to predict the New. It is an obstacle to action, pushing us to remain content with what is certain or to find other, safer ways to get the shock of the New without exposing ourselves to all the risks of undoing the assurances of this world order (or relationship or housing situation or pattern of behavior, and so on). But let's take on another model, one drawn from French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Following and moving out from Lacan, we could say that anxiety is never about the radically new but rather about the horrible possibility of the same persisting.

Lacan refers to this as the "lack of a lack."³⁶ In short: what's worse than Mom's breast not being there when I need it? Mom's breast always being there, forever. Anxiety emerges with the creeping realization that there may be no lack, no space in which to move, leaving us crushed by the awful possible certainty of knowing how things are and knowing that they will remain that way. Mass anxiety, in this way of thinking, arises in and fixates on a world without a clear directionality or progress, a world in which the self-same repetition of drive – or the self-same accumulation of capital – is king.

So if it is indeed the case that Romero "put his finger on a widespread anxiety" about the state of life in late capitalism, is it not the case that the real encounter here is not about the knowing critique of political art pointing out the anxiety and resistance of those who don't know better, but precisely the inversion, that the real encounter is the rendering comprehensible of the zombies? Not the difficulty of getting "them" (consumers, zombies) to comprehend but the sudden opening up of our thought beyond the deadlock of cynical reason? This is not a rendering empathetic, nor is it simply understanding that we don't really know better and that we're still subject to mass ideology. Rather, these are the first steps toward leaving behind the notion of irrationality and illusion. Precisely not by claiming, *We're all just like zombies*, but rather that, *Zombies are all like us*. And not to further generalize, so that we see we're all in this together, but rather to locate in them the emergent possibility of something truly wrong, beyond feeling that they are beneath our conceptions of morality and proper decorum. The real difference emerges: not between us and the zombies but between us as bourgeois subjects (those who know better) and us as we are in all our situated messiness. What disappears is that *everyone*, that universal category which allows the exception of the cynical subject and demands the exclusion of those who can't be included without rupturing the category's capacity to restrict the

meaning of being *one of everyone* to a limited range of acceptable thought and action.

The anxiety proper to zombie films is the deep horror of something not being different, of *everyone* remaining as limited a category as we know it to be, of the same persisting, of the end of death and lack. In this way, the consumerism account very much identifies the problem, namely, the pseudo-new of late capitalism, the foreclosure of other possibilities and the contraction of experience to petty alternatives. But what it misses is that this situation isn't the *result* of an anxiety about the New. This material situation is the very source and site of the anxiety and awareness that this may be all that there is. People are not consumers because they are scared of change. They are scared of change because they are consumers.

More than that, the zombie is not the simple manifestation of this anxiety, not a monster that makes clear the "truth" of consumerism. Zombies are not the problem but a blood-spattered possibility, still nascent, still reeling from the shock of undeath, still learning how to speak. We should not take aim at those who don't know but rather at this entire stress on "purchase politics" and on thinking that that the real problem could ever be ameliorated, let alone solved, by more sustainable, informed ways of buying commodities. We have to counter the whole reduction of critical thought to the facile move of claiming that some people consume wrongly, for the consumption deemed "wrong" in that schematic is precisely the kind of consumption needed to keep the system afloat. That is, anyone who supports capitalism as a system cannot speak of those who "consume wrongly." It is a purely aesthetic and moral condemnation, saying that the uncultured should be more subtle about their participation in the reproduction of wealth.

That is, until you get to those who really do consume wrongly. Namely, the zombie: the obscure, halted-decay vision of something really outside the systemic logic, something truly

wrong. Not bad taste but bad hunger. (Therein the specificity of *cannibalism*, which mirrors the urge on the part of those still living to do violence to members of their species.) A spreading shadow making darkly clear that even our attacks on those who can't think beyond the degraded world of consumption are expected attacks, just demands for more subtle degradation. That is the injunction of *Dawn*, against itself: to make the dead talk clearly, to take on and talk from that position, to hear the unseen speak rationally out of the irrationality of managed life, and to force *everyone* to take on a very different meaning. It is an injunction that will be answered, but never by zombies and always uncertainly.

PLAGUE IN THE GEARS

We haven't entirely answered the question raised before: who, then, are the zombies? To proceed negatively ...

They are *not* extensions of the capitalist injunction to consume. Or, if they are, not because "purchasing unnecessary shit to bolster your social capital is like becoming part of a roving horde of undead cannibals." To be sure, the real linkage is that of non-necessity. In the Romero vision of zombies, they physiologically need to eat like we physiologically need a certain brand of jeans: not at all.³⁷ But the analogy ends here. For their consumption is not the will to possess, the momentary grasp of the New in the form of the passing fashion. It is a mode of consuming that is against all ownership, against exchange value, against reification, against representation itself.³⁸

Allegorically, they are both the dream and nightmare of the ruling class, the motor that turns the gears of the system and the rotting wrench forced into those gears. In an era of overproduction and overcapacity, when there are both too many workers and too many factories, zombies are the fantasy form of the real necessity of "creative destruction," clearing the ground of the

dead weight of outmoded industry. Provided, of course, that the living eventually rid themselves of the pesky undead, what opportunities for growth, for rebuilding! As a character in the oddball Italian zombie film *Nightmare City* (1980) puts it, "It's part of the vital cycle of the human race. Create and obliterate until we destroy ourselves." Perhaps not "the human race," but we know for certain that this economic regime cannot function without the cyclical destruction of whole swathes of productive capacity. Recalling our earlier discussion of the sadism of false necessity, the zombies serve another crucial function: they are the crisis which allows for powers that be to declare a "state of emergency," to suspend the normal channels of legislation and to bring about drastic changes (the barricading of cities to foreigners, forms of martial law, restructuring the social order, etc). And as with the false necessity of *But I had to, she was going to turn ...*, we should ask here: *Sure, but for how long were you waiting for the excuse to do these things?*

And yet ... even in that vision of creative destruction, of being the accidental tool of the order against which you rage, the center on which the fantasy of the zombie hinges is the horror of that which cannot quit. What's been trailing along but missing, hinted at but rarely brought forth, in our analysis should be obvious by now: *It's about labor*. It's never been about consumerism gone bad, but the lost heritage of the zombie film, the horror from more Haitian origins: of being forced to work, of knowing that "choosing" to sell one's labor has never been a choice, just a particularly nasty illusion of free will. If the surplus-life nightmare of zombies sticks with us, fascinates and disturbs, it's because it brings to its logical conclusion not the vapid barbarism of the consuming classes but the buried antagonism of the labor relation, a world order dragging us from our rest incessantly to do what "must be done" yet for which we will be blamed. The infernal position of workers, cursed for doing wrong what can never be right.

They will share that hell with us, one and all.

RETURN OF THE DYING DEAD

Dan O'Bannon's 1985 *Return of the Living Dead* ruined zombie films.⁴⁵ Or that is what intelligent critical thinkers are supposed to think. Coming out the same year as the manic, claustrophobic *Day of the Dead*, *Return* made zombies self-aware kitsch, made the whole thing about moaning *Brains ...*, about Linnea Quigley stripping in a graveyard to the thought of being eaten alive by rotting corpses, about the kinds of jokes that can only end in our current idiotic quagmire of LOLzombies and zombie apocalypse survival guides. It is the beginning of the end, the point at which the fissures of crass commercialism, and the elision of left critique can be detected.

None of this, however, is the case. *Return* is a startling film, shot through with deep, unabiding sadness, visions of collectivity, the blackest of comedy, a treatise on pain and memory, an unsteady shaking oscillation between cobbled together constructions of cheap gags, gory excess, and moments of lyrical quiet. Of course, the ways in which it is remembered – and perhaps, the dominant way in which it asks to be watched – is rather kitschy, cheap, and ultimately not that interesting. Yes, there is the cheap frisson of auto-referentiality, of people talking about how to kill zombies based on the Romero movies they have seen. There are really shitty jokes about eating brains. There are running zombies who chase and swarm. (Which, contrary to the supposed innovation of *28 Days Later* and its imitators, are nothing new. Idiotic starving rage hordes that also run are.) Superficially, it is a film populated with petty, hysterical, and generally moronic people. But in the midst of all that is rather forgettable, the altogether unexpected emerges.

From the start, it's a film about work and non-work, about those caught in the structures of employment and those punks

who seemingly opt out. In a medical supply company warehouse, Freddy – coded as a semi-punk kid aiming to make a working-class run at it – starts his first day of work. It will consequently turn into a film about the worst first day of work in history, yet one which curiously demonstrates the deep hooks of an ideology of respect and worry about the job you have: in the midst of the soon-to-come zombie apocalypse, Freddy is ordered to watch his foul language (“If you want to keep your job”). On this first day, to impress, scare, and gently haze him, his older coworker, Frank, tells him that the events of that famous film, *Night of the Living Dead*, were very real indeed, but that the film got it wrong. It was actually an experimental chemical weapon, the soon-to-be infamous 245 Trioxin, which caused dead bodies to jerk about. The military dealt with it predictably, sweeping it under the bureaucratic rug, sealing the bodies in barrels and then promptly losing track of their location. Of course, those barrels happen to be in the basement of this particular storage facility. And, of course, what would breaking in the new guy be like without showing him a corpse in a military-issued barrel?

1985 was evidently a big year in drawing connections between the undead and the military-industrial complex: first *Dawn of the Dead* set in the bunkered world of major military spending, now *Return* set against the backdrop of the biotechnologies developed and left to wreak havoc elsewhere, in other times and places. In a horrible prescient echo forward to Hurricane Katrina, we are wrongly assured that the zombie cans are safe.

FREDDY: “These things don’t leak do they?”

FRANK: “Hell no, these things were made by the Army Corps of Engineers.”

We know now all too well what sort of guarantee this is, and sure enough, the barrel cracks and spews forth its toxic load.

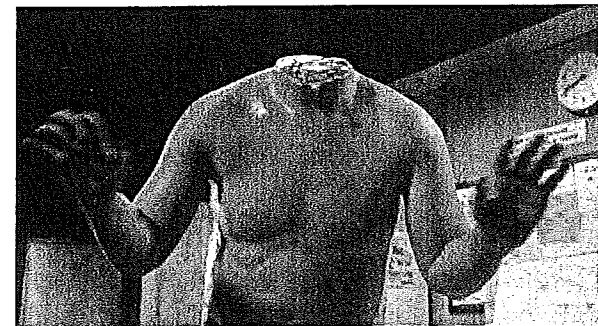
Before we return to the inevitable result of this contagion, we are offered a glimpse of another sort of contagion let loose onto

the American landscape, the idiocies of the self-declared punks, here in every pop culture permutation: tough leather and pierced skinhead, Rick James-esque fancy dresser, over-sexed/sexually frank dyed-hair slut, tag-along "good girl," couple of New Wavers, as well as the obligatory mohawk and dirty Converse-wearing weirdo. Until the outbreak of the undead forces a shift in their non-routines, their daily life seems to consist of making inane pseudo-Bataille statements ("I like death" and "I like death with sex," immediately come to mind), driving around carefully so as to better preserve gas, visiting cemeteries, and declaring the various ways in which they are punk. This raises a key question, not just for this film, but for our approach to this genre as a whole: what movie do these people imagine themselves to be in? The answer in this case has to be, at the very least, three-fold. Frank, Freddy, and their boss Burt try their damndest to play the parts inherited from a Romero movie: both their failed tactics and increasingly frustrated way of talking about those failures derive from the sense of, *Goddamnit, it worked there, why not here?*⁴⁶ In addition, they are indebted to some imaginary Abbot and Costello sketch about the perils of the working world. In their turn, the punks have watched a mainstream news report on the "punk movement," early MTV, perhaps a documentary on British punk, and, apparently, this movie itself, in a weird doubling back on a film that distinguishes itself in part by its punk soundtrack and iconography (and with the film's tagline, "They're back from the grave and ready to party!"). And the zombies? A longer question to be addressed, but we might as well say upfront that they didn't particularly care about *Night of the Living Dead* but found Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925) and Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) worth remembering.

Back at the medical suppliers, we're at the early stages of another fierce return of the repressed, now staged on the most bodily of levels, a mute sputter of surplus-life, the will to survive triggered and grown monstrous. Hacking and coughing, Frank

and Freddy leave the basement to enter some of the more remarkable minutes in any zombie film I've seen. The gas, it appears, not only animates whole-bodied human corpses. It is an obscene principle of life itself, a whisper to everything that has lived that, *you never stopped living*. A bisected dog for classroom use barks and pants, its exposed organs throbbing. A display on pinioned butterflies flaps its wings gently. And a cadaver hung indifferently by meathook in a freezer wakes up very, very angry its current state of affairs.

The workers and their boss, as we would expect in a film like this, decide that dealing with a representative of the pissed-off undead means killing him more thoroughly. But, as we learn in this film, in an echo of that first moment of realization in *Night of the Living Dead* (the "Funny, it's not usually this hard to kill the poor" epiphany) is that it is no longer about destroying the body as a whole by removing its head.



Because in that case, you just get an even more furious, acephalic zombie running and flailing blindly through the warehouse. The sightless and thoughtless refusal to die, from the whole to the smallest part. Tied up and hack-sawed apart, the severed limbs shake in rage.⁴⁷ Flesh melted away with acid, the bones will not be quiet. And incinerated, the ashes may lay still, but the desperate insistences of the body do not stop. They rise up in a cloud of smoke, to meet the rain and trickle back down through

grass, earth, and coffin lids, to pass the message to the other dead bodies that hadn't gotten the word.

In terms of transmission, *Return* represents an odd intermediary between the global totality cause in the Romero cycle and one-to-one infection logic emphasized in recent zombie culture. Here, there is a discernible event (the army created a gas with certain properties) and that event has to be directly transmitted (exposure to the gas or something already affected by it), but it remains strangely diffuse, raining down on dead and living alike. Furthermore, its effects break with either of these opposed models. It doesn't give the living a virus or surplus-life that "resurrects" them after death, it doesn't create a condition that only affects those who die after that condition has come to be. Yet the zombies we see in the film are, more than anything, a continuation of what they were in life, far more than in the parodic shambling of Romero's shoppers and munchers. Here, they run, they talk, they scheme and fool around, they work together toward common goals. If the thought of surplus-life hangs heavy over the whole genre, it does so here negatively. It is decisively present, in that form of a fanatical insistence of all once-living matter to flex its rotting muscles. And as for those who are alive when they face the gas, indeed, they become "dead" in the eyes of the living, but more than that, they become unable to truly die. The motivation for this uncanny life is not the urging of the body itself or a deep impulse transmitted by radiation or saliva-borne bacteria. Even the gas itself seems a cover story, a phenomenally present form of transmission that isn't ultimately about chemicals. Instead, it is about thought, a death-knowledge, a knowledge – *and a hostility* – strong enough to counter life.

This death-knowledge, which is less an allegorical reading of the film than a description of how we see the transmission and reanimation work throughout it, is a certain awareness. It finds some lingering shred of consciousness and infects it, brings the faint memory of death into the dominant horizon, and with it the

"pain of being dead." Crucially, this isn't just an intellectual knowledge. It is somatic, speaking another tongue to the minimal units of living matter which, once made aware, cannot forget and won't settle down. The implication which forms a powerful nihilistic core to the film – one which entirely exceeds the petty immoral sex-and-death nihilism of the costume punks – and which cannot be shaken, is that being alive is solely the consequence of ignorance, of not being cognizant of your own decay.



Nowhere is this more evident than with the workers exposed to the gas. The major arc of the film is their story, as they move from mock frustration (with a bit of real terror) to a deep sickness, an ontological horror as they become dead without dying. The gas gives the same message to the living and the dead (*Did you know that you are dead? What are you going to do about it?*), yet while this knowledge animates the dead, stirs them into an action impelled by the pain of awareness itself, this shock to thought produces a mournful stasis for the workers, and dialogue that would be funny if it weren't injected with a rending, lingering sadness. When the paramedics are called to treat Freddy and Frank, and find them shivering, pale, with no pulse, and the temperature of a cold morgue, they are understandably stupefied.

PARAMEDIC: Because technically you're not alive. But you're conscious. So we don't know what it means.

FREDDY: Are you saying we're dead?

PARAMEDIC: Let's not jump to conclusions.

PARAMEDIC: I didn't mean you were really dead. Dead people don't move around and talk.

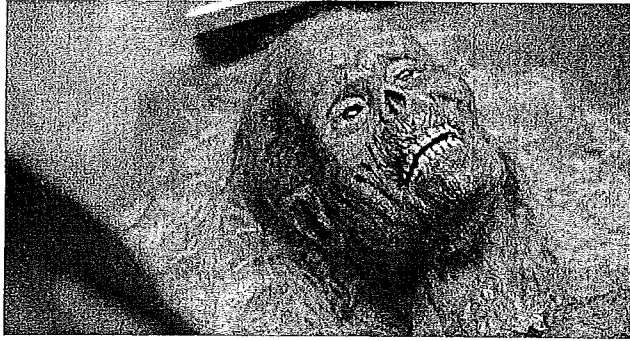
Because technically you're not alive. But you're conscious ... In a move familiar to the horror genre, we are supposed to be unsettled, spooked, or disturbed by the prospect that animating consciousness can exist in forms that exceed the living. That there are consciousnesses alien, and likely hostile, to our own. The standard narrative logic of those films tends to function via initial disbelief (*How could this be possible?*), then a recognition that belief must be suspended in order to deal with the threat, to conquer it so as to return to a "normal" that can never be truly normal again, because it is now infused with the knowledge that there are textures and shapes of being that exceed our ability to grasp.⁴⁸ All that we need to grasp is how to deal with them, with adequate violence and skill. In *Return*, we are indeed unsettled. But this unsettling is the consequence of a far darker operation: not that there are other kinds of perhaps undead consciousness, but that the very condition of normal life is itself a mere symptom of actively repressing what we know to be the case, that we're dying from the start, death warmed over and stretched out across the duration of the heart winding down, a self-tiring clock. Consequently, the return to death is the approach to the original state of things.

Almost. What this leaves out is the messianic undertones of the film and how it explores this schematic of the hard work of convincing others to join "the movement," via a sort of radical zombie pedagogy, a third way, the undead truth. The message begins with the gas, but it becomes part of the flesh of all that it touches, so that when the corpse is burned, it is the conviction and knowledge now part of the flesh itself which turns to smoke and spreads. The structure is essentially missionary, soldiers of God spreading the word: *Have you heard the good news? Jesus died*

for you. Or, in the case of this film, Have you heard the bad news? You've already died. A necro-version of the sunglasses that lay bare the class/alien race structure in Carpenter's *They Live* – once you see, you can't go back to seeing otherwise.

What of *brains ...*, the constant, self-mocking cry kicked off in this film that the figure of the zombie can't seem to shake? We should consider it two ways, in how it derives and deviates from the Romero model and on the terms established by the film itself. In Romero's *Dead* series, the zombies have no particular love or appetite for brains. (One might imagine a particular distaste for them, given the difficulty of opening up a skull, especially for hordes of the undead who aren't very adept at using tools.) They fixate on general gutting and tearing, a non-targeted sloppy free-for-all. And while the unsatisfactory and incomplete explanations of *why* varies from film to film, the rough consensus is that they do it because of some deep, and now misrecognized, memory: of a savage primal past, of the mechanism of hunger which no longer physiologically applies, of rampant consumer consumption. In each case, the point is that *they do not choose to do it* and that somewhere along the way, the message got mixed up. ("Consume *commodities*? Hell, we've been going about this all wrong.") Things are quite different in *Return*, although they also have no real "need" to consume. The zombies know very well what they are doing, and they're quite good about making sure it gets done. It is an active choice, one that can be delayed in order for the greater collective enterprise of spreading zombie mayhem. And if anything, the problem isn't that they don't remember clearly enough. It is that they remember far too clearly, an awful clarity of mnemotechnic pain, searing reminders of the decay of all things living.

The startling moment in which this is fully laid bare is one unlikely to be forgotten by any who have seen the film. A long-dead, grave husk zombie captured by the living, with nothing left of her but her head, shoulders, and an exposed spine



swaying to and fro, is interrogated on an examining table. When asked "why brains?", she responds in a hissing whisper, "The pain of being dead ... I can feel myself rot." Pressed further as to the connection between this "pain" (which already seems closer to the pain of *knowing* you are dead) and brain lust, she replies, "Eating brains makes the pain go away." I'm not interested in speculating as to the ways in which the consumption of brains might physiologically dull the pain of a rotting body. For one thing, the film itself has little interest in this, leaving any direct connection cloudy and pointing in more compelling directions. If it is knowledge that causes this pain, a certain brutal deconstruction, willful misuse, and redeployment of knowledge can be the only solution. An overliteralized version of giving you something else to think about, albeit thoughts which enter through the guts rather than ears and eyes, swallowing a different sort of knowledge, distracting yourself from what you can't stop thinking about. (A distraction that never lasts: how could it when we never stop falling apart?) And more sharply, a sort of pain sharing, an act of spreading the bad word. Gathering ranks for an army and a war that may truly end the world as we know it. Having inherited a pain that comes with your position in a system you didn't choose, solace comes in knowing that this pain – and what it drives you to willfully choose to do – is not singular but collective. If, as Fredric Jameson has put it pithily,

"History is what hurts," *Return* is the story of how the already dead attempt to write a history "back from the grave" and into this world, a trajectory in reverse, written in a pain experienced by those who are doomed to hurt and who demand in turn that we all hurt. It's hard to envision another cinematic instance of such direct propaganda work. *Want to know what the pain of thought and thought of pain is? Give me your head for a moment.*

Out of this unyielding "pain," one has two choices, at least according to the film: suicide or mass participation in knowledge-sharing. (The other non-choice that we see pursued, with no great success, is to skulk around a cellar, biting into the brains of idiot punks who have little knowledge to share, or to wait around until your "turn" to make a bad joke and go for your girlfriend's head.) The first choice we witness in a moment that genuinely shares pain beyond the film, to all who watch it, as Frank, now "technically not alive," prays briefly, removes his wedding ring, and pushes himself into the blazing fires of the crematorium. Yet even this attempt to cut himself out of the cycle, to refuse to participate in the zombie holocaust, cannot succeed. It may remove his ongoing personal pain, but as we witness earlier, it is the fact of burning and the transmission of the buried message in the smoke, out into the night air, that allows for the mass dissemination of knowledge. In opting out of the cursed game, Frank becomes a martyr for a cause he died to avoid supporting.

If Frank's death is the awful pathos of a broken man caught in a cycle of the inevitable, the other alternative is the joyous center of the film, its recurring cheers from the audience, and the "utopian" kernel of it all. It is collectivity formed out of what could be a crushing awareness, knowing that you are not even special in the ontological pain you feel, that you are just one of a growing horde of those powerless to change it, to die properly, to quit the pain. Yet against either the dysphoric retreat or the escape into the fantasy of the irrational – "I will act as irrational,

bloody shambling horde-like, as the system that made us" – that linger at the edges of this first knowledge emerges a new rationality.

This is a crucial point, for much of the ideology of the zombie situation hinges on the assumption of their irrationality. Sure, maybe they once knew what they were doing, and now remember a shard of it. Or maybe, in the later iterations of the Romero cycle, particularly *Land of the Dead* (2005), they can move toward an incipient group knowledge, rudimentary use of tools and implements, basic swarm strategies, and so on. *Return* shows something different altogether: what if what this thing we assumed from the start to be, at least initially, mindless in its anger, illogical in its hunger, what *if it has been rational all along*? What if it not only can hurt, but comprehends this hurt? And what if it realizes that this pain is not individual but collective? What if the ways in which it aims to destroy the system – the system that wants to destroy it – are rational?

Return approaches, in the midst of its gags and "punk" soundtrack, these very serious questions, although incompletely. The closest it gets is to ask: *what if they get their shit together*? The threat – and the supposed horror we feel at witnessing an uncanny imitation of almost-life – is not that of an otherness that shows our complicity in mindless structures of consumption or of an underlying savagery, not blind groupthink or hive mind, not of never being at peace and forced to wander, not of the very unearthing and undermining of the natural order of things. It is the threat of collectivity itself. It is something we have learned to fear, not the end of romantic individuality itself but the prospect that autonomous subjects may recognize the limits of that autonomy and begin to act together, an unholy assemblage of different tactics, motives, and skills unified into a shared weapon against a world gone very wrong.

It is also, in this case, getting onto the ambulance radio to pretend to be a concerned citizen and call for more paramedics to

be directed into the mouths of your fellow zombies waiting in the shadows. It is dressing up in the policeman's uniform, acting very official and directing drivers to where they will meet their untimely end (or, depending on your perspective, be "convinced" of the fact of their deadness and the need to do something about it). It is being very rational and coldly calculating about how to achieve and enact your apparent irrationality.

The world of the living is, to be sure, not interested in the utopian potential of this mode of organization and antagonism. Having learned that Trioxin has been leaked, with all its attendant effects, Colonel Glover receives a call in bed and makes the decision, still in his monogrammed pajamas, to nuke Louisville, Kentucky.

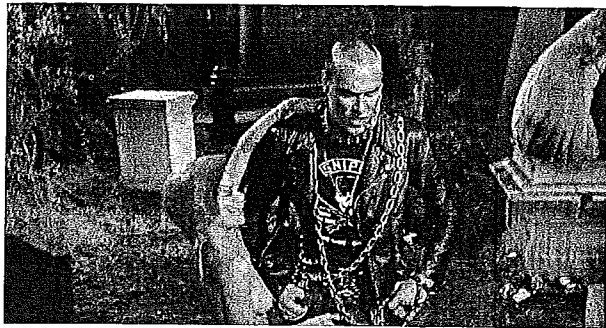
We hear a high, keening whistling as the zombies, their victims, and those trying to avoid being either look up and wait. And then, the mushroom cloud rises at dawn. It was a complete success, the threat has been contained, and, even more fortunately, the rain is putting out the fires. Of course, the rain now carries the atomized microparticles of the death-knowledge, sprayed infinitesimally small into the atmosphere, the diffuse message of antagonism and pain, now borne in clouds and tiny water droplets to fall onto other towns, onto other places of the dead. Here we go again.

TO BECOME NO FUTURE

What of those punks we left earlier, killing time, talking about the varying degrees of their punkness? In a supremely kitschy moment, they pull up to the "Resurrection Cemetery" to wait for Freddy to finish his shift. Spider – the leather and piercing punk, nominally the leader of this not-as-motley-as-it-wants-to-be crew – has a convertible that is covered in graffiti, evidently of his own design. On the door, "WHY." On the hood, "WHO CARES?" As

with so much of the pop-cultural versions of punk, you have to ask at what point someone doth protest too much. The inanity continues onto the gate of the cemetery, which features arguably my favorite bit of sublimely direct graffiti: "SEX." And in big red letters on the heavy wood, "NO FUTURE."

The "punks" in this movie are tools, shallow poseurs who we are only too happy to see butchered. But the inclusion of "NO FUTURE" points elsewhere and raises, even if it ultimately cannot answer it, the connection to the real historical anxieties, furies, and closed horizons of which the figure of punk and punks were a willful symptom and abortive anti-solution. If our interest with salvagepunk was on the *operation* of punk, here it is explicitly on *the punks*, those who are sneeringly labeled as such or who take on such an epithet as a badge of pride.



And indeed, the punks here have a lot of pride and libidinal energy invested in being designated as such. In one of his great laughable moments, Spider, draped with 'naked Trash (remarkably incapable of ever locating her pants once she takes them off), huffs and puffs that no one understand his punkness. "You think this is a costume? This is a way of life." We believe him, although not in the way he likely intends. It clearly takes a fair amount of effort to match up your appearance and character in accordance with a vision of punk from afar – the "ways" of his life consist of a complex parroting. Furthermore we should recall

that the film is set in Louisville, not London or Los Angeles or other historic punk metropolises, and that by 1985, punk was hardly cutting-edge. If anything, the problem was that by that time it was indeed a "way of life," just one more identity to take on as mantle, with its particular valences of commodity and identity, all wrapped in an increasingly stale version of a "fuck the world" ethos.

Spider does get one thing very right, although once more against the grain of how he means it. One of the thought-forms of punk – if we can talk of it this way – is a collapsing of essence and form, of visions of a humanist subject and unique individual that should be understood as who you "really are." Punk, at its best, is a frontal assault on this mode, insisting instead that if there is something that lies beneath our surface manifestations, it isn't particularly worth elevating. It is a negative subject, notable only in its absence: what future can there be when we no longer believe ourselves to be basically good, rational, and democratic, when our future isn't worth saving? Into this absence steps a logic of pure surface, insisting that there is nothing but *ways of life*, expressions without reference to *what* or *who* they express. The question is *how* you express. The question is a tactics of ornament and style. So while Spider means that this isn't a costume (a false garb) but rather a correct expression/translation of who he really is, the turn proper to punks would be to say that now, in the twilight of the West, there remain nothing but costumes, masks with nothing behind. Punk often remained incapable of dropping a certain moralism that underpins a version of this (society wants us to be false, but we can start living "true" lives), but the intuition remains both forceful and inseparable from its historical moment.

Something closer to the zombie policeman.

Return's zombie-in-police-drag is the real punch-line to the weak joke of the film's punks. He is aware that to wage war against the world, you sometimes need to wear a costume, and

that there is a crucially important gap between the ideology of "authenticity" (how you appear should express what kind of person you are) and the concrete practices of fighting against a totality (the world as such). Donning the garments of a cop, putting on the arrangement of fabric that codifies you as someone to be trusted bears no connection to who you are. There is only what you do once dressed in this way: uphold the social and legal conventions of a economic system and its mediated barbarisms, or, for this zombie-punk, work to viscerally undo these conventions and usher in a new system of visible barbarism. We should elevate and revere neither system, but the innovation, the dressing-up in order to take down, is hard not to admire.

This fundamental move of punk might be summed up as follows: the human experience is just an organization of surface instances and concrete actions - we don't like the constellations of surfaces forced upon us by this era and its institutions under the guise of possibilities for our future - we therefore declare war against this empty future (or one that we'll make damn sure turns out to be empty). That said, the sense of "no future" and manner of war varies vastly:

a self-destructive solipsism: *I wage war on myself* (I have no future in this world)

a withdrawal into micro-communities of the likeminded: *We wage war on the assumption that we would want to engage with the options presented to us* (we want no future in this wider world that does not want us)

a corrosive and raging negativity: *We wage war on everything* (we want no future for this world)

an apocalyptic politics of the end: *We take over the war the world wages on itself in order to shape its waging* (this world has created

its own end, and we are the agents and manifestations of that no-future)

One could begin to see how a film like *Return* acts as a sort of cognitive map of these permutations: the war on self (Frank's suicide), the war on participation (the punks dropping out), the war on everything (the blanket A-bombing of the town, the zombies before they act collectively), and the war on the world's organization/mode of future (the tactical zombies). Indeed, we should retain an awareness of the ways in which these mediated responses to a world to be destroyed shape not only the zombie film but apocalyptic culture more broadly. The question, now and always, is not just how the world may end, but what part you will - or can - play in shaping, causing, and mediating that end.

More particularly, the issue at hand isn't the claim that the zombies do punkish things, or even that we can detect in zombies some of the same energies and anxieties placed on the figure of punks in film (i.e. considered as dangerous, pitiable, execrable, or just silly). Rather, the issue is that zombies and punks are bound together in a relationship both allegorical and historical. (Crucially, 'punks' here means not just those who think of themselves as punk," but those older senses, of the unwanted, of street trash, hoodlums, lumpen, and wastes-of-life.) For if zombies are both those incapable of consuming correctly and those who take revenge on a regime of work and life, they stand, however tenuously, in relation to those who can neither work nor afford to consume correctly, and to those who make an active decision to do neither.

This is ultimately a relation between two inheritances, political and cultural/aesthetic legacies that cross at the intersection of zombies and punks. First, a badly repressed political inheritance: the social fallout of counter-revolution and its consequences for the political climate and horizons in the long '70s

and the decades to come. To take the example of the American context, on which our zombie focus has fallen, this is the arc from social unrest and urban revolutionary movements (such as the Black Panthers) to the active work of COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program, the notorious covert FBI actions to infiltrate and destroy dissident organizations) to the wide-spread emergence of gangs and the crack trade. This is also the story of the collapse of the welfare state and its mental health services, loosing the dregs of society, its crazies and unwanted, onto the streets. This is the brutal closure, by active measure and shifting economic landscape, of a broader sense of social change and disruption, as those who *rationaly* contested the system via organization and action, declined into the amorphous swarms of those systematically excluded and declared *irrational*. This dismantling of the forms of resistance could not, of course, remove the energy and discontent behind it. Instead, it could only dissipate it across the city and into cultural forms that could only be marked deeply by this.

A second inheritance is one visible only now, in the present consumer feeding frenzy for all things undead. It is almost strictly cultural-aesthetic: the look and trope of the nervous laughter of the black comedic zombie film, now dragged into every multiplex, the backlog of specialized knowledge of supposedly hard-to-find old films (the game of the low culture mining virtuoso), and pseudo-hipster cultural obsession.⁴⁹ It has become – or so we are told – the sign of our times without registering the social content underpinning those '70s and '80s films. An inheritance with not enough of the repressed returning, glossed over into a banal thought supposedly about worries of contagion and vague apocalypticism in our swine flu and speculative bubble era.

In other words, if we can detect in the zombie films of that earlier period not a direct manifestation of mass anxieties about the unknown but a repeating set of attempts to elaborate a

persistent and horrifying same, then the generic conventions, aesthetics, and tropes taken up en masse in recent years function as a willful forgetting of those attempts. This isn't to say that these films used to be "political" and are no longer. It is rather that some of their odd force was the sloppy forging of the aesthetics of counter-revolution itself, meeting at that point of contact between the end of a political trajectory and the start of what would become a juicy and endlessly replicable bit of cultural zeitgeist. Yet the point of contact on which this relation hinges is perhaps not the zombie film itself, but its fellow traveler and necessary double, the "punk film" (and film punks) that gathers the critical energy, worries, and fears of counter-revolution with a near total absence of allegorical distance.



The kind of film "punks" we mean? To take a cursory survey: the psychotic and dissolute rapist scum of *Death Wish* (1974) and its sequels in 1982 and 1985; the everyone-can-be-possessed psychotic urban anxiety of *God Told Me To* (1974), not to mention a good chunk of Larry Cohen's other output; the multi-ethnic gang Street Thunder and their blood pact in *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976); the costumed, mutually destructive youth tribe "armies of the night" of *The Warriors* (1979); pretty much the entirety of *Repo Man* (1984); the literally melting winos in *Street Trash* (1987); certain eccentric, vaguely queer baddies plus the broad sense of a lumpen population able to be mobilized for crime in *Robocop* (1987) and *Robocop 2* (1990); the less reformed of the Joker's post-

Arkham henchmen and assorted grimy low-lives in *Batman* (1989) and the rest of that series (involving a real predilection for garish face paint and an excessive amount of leather and latex, pretty much evenly across the good and evil spectrum).

These punk films, varied as they are, and the zombie films discussed above have a relation of mutual disclosure, in which the stoppages and potentials that can't be addressed in one find a skewed reflection in the other. This centers on the conceptions of what kind of *no future* we talk about and what response it demands (the kind of war to be waged). At its best moments, the zombie film captures a diffuse energy lurking in the notion of the punk that couldn't find full formation in its cultural representations, an energy of diffusion itself, of the mass and the horde: not the street gangs or homeless of one city, but the global undead swarm, heterogeneous and menacing. Connected with that, the zombie retains a powerful perspective that few of these punk films are capable of mapping, namely, the movements from global totality to local consequence. The tendency for the hoodlum-punks or the punk rocker detritus to be cast, respectively, as evil or stupid is not just the result of a fundamentally reactionary tint to the films, as pervasive as that may be. Rather, it is symptomatic of the deep difficulty of grasping how these situated instances of the irrational – or that which is rational but counter to the available definitions of what discontent would look like – emerge from a set of “rational” calculations of profit, accumulation, and circulation.

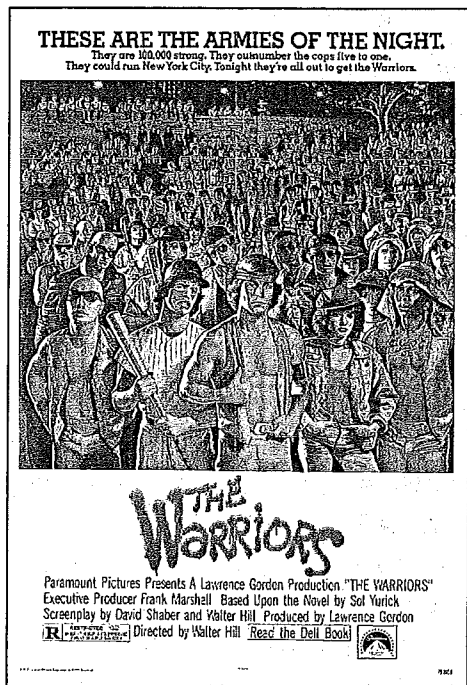
What, then, does the punk film do that the zombie film cannot or will not? First, it presents a vision of the irrational-to-rational arc of the Romero cycle (mapped across the films as the possibility of the zombies beginning to learn and act in concert) that remains “realist,” in which irrationality is never seen as a condition of exceptionality imposed from afar, from biochemical technology gone awry, or according to arcane law. At its worst, it flees into the conservative hysterics that paint the punks as

perverted low-lives who are simply “just those kind of people.” Yet even there, the recognition persists that something has changed on the ground, that something is qualitatively different now, and it has discernible roots in the shifting organization of urban spaces, social programs, and opportunities for labor and community formation. Second, if the zombie apocalypse (and hence the revelatory aspect) is the sudden and total unearthing of the savage heart of capital's antagonisms, the punk apocalypse is an inconstant and ongoing one: we can never tell quite where it stops and starts, when it started, and just how widespread it is. Third, most painfully, it presents both the fierce potential of the antagonist group's collective rationality and the auto-destruction of that possibility as those groups sabotage what may have been otherwise.

The real worry wound through these movies, mean-spirited, laughable, and bloodthirsty as they are, isn't that you will be overrun by those you condemn as irrational and subhuman. Rather, there are two worries. First, they might, as in *Assault on Precinct 13*, start firing in the same direction. The *cholo* placed on the police station isn't just a commitment to fight to the death. It's a flag, a marker of where to aim. Notably, it's at the moment when the blood is thrown and war declared that the film abandons the earlier plot interest in a cross-cutting focus on the vaguely revolutionary leaders. (A sort of COINTELPRO caricature of dissident groups: a Che rip-off, an IRA-esque sniper, pseudo-Black Panther, and so on.) At that point, they become faceless, replaceable. The would-be revolutionaries become zombies, dark hordes clambering through the broken windows. Of course, what *Street Thunder* could learn from a better analysis of zombie movies is to set their sights beyond the already evacuated pockets of hell on earth. To Hollywood, then...

A second worry: what if these degenerates not only feel pain but rationalize it, not to explain it away but to track out its sources, finding better targets than an empty police station? That

they won't destroy themselves in the ravages of drug epidemics (most potently and meltingly realized in *Street Trash*, in which winos drink the cheapest of all alcohol, quite literal rot-gut, and subsequently disintegrate before our eyes) or in turf wars and skirmishes over control of black markets? What if they get it together enough to run everyone else out of town, or perhaps worse, just stop giving a damn about the systems and processes that cast them out in the first place, stop giving you an excuse to "crack down" on them (i.e. massacre and imprison)? The derided other stops looking back your way for disapproval.



And yet ... The extended poster tagline for *The Warriors* begins: "These are the armies of the night. They are 100,000 strong. They outnumber the cops five to one. They could run New York City." And indeed, they could. We should gauge and note both the proximity and distance of this to zombie film. They are equally

coded as an infernal force, something unholy ("armies of the night" is essentially a stand-in for "legions of evil"). But what is different, emergent, and ultimately unsustainable, is this sense of density, purpose, and distinct shape: armies *that could run a city*. The film opens with the assembly of the disparate gangs and the prospect, notably, not of taking the city anarchically via an amorphous fury of looting, violence, and intimidation, but through an almost democratic calculation of numbers and a near anarcho-syndicalist model of how to do it (albeit with "crime" syndicates). The police, who stand as the guardians and stewards of the current social order of the city, are vastly outnumbered by the gangs, the heralds of an opaque but possible order to come, gathered beneath a collective but not unitary banner.

We never get the chance to see what rule by street punk coalition would look like, for, in a moment of cutting historical resonance, the possibilities of self-organization and autonomous control – in all its utopian and dystopian colors – shoots itself dead. A member of the Rogues shoots Cyrus – the leader of the assembly calling for gang collaboration – for *no reason*. The fundamental irrationality of a particle of the whole provokes the general collapse of the rational, as it slides back into bloody factionalism once more. The movie changes from what could have been the story of a battle between systems/*Weltanschauungen* to a hectic chase through the night, a tale of mistaken blame, and clearing your gang's good name. As the tagline concludes, "Tonight they're all out to get the Warriors."

And so they will remain, the punks never able to pull together again, not just in this film, but in the arc across genres, across cultural spheres, across the declension of insurrectionary politics in the neoliberal age. We are left with, and now witness the terminal conclusions of, the walking dead, shuffling ahead without the critical energy of the punk.