Combined and Uneven Apocalypse

Evan Calder Williams

Winchester, UK
Washington, USA

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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 incommensurable 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 way[23]: 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 sating 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 overdetermination, 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?

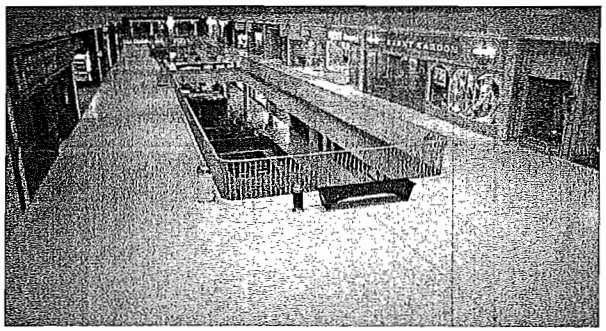
On a superficial (and perhaps more resonant level), they are "us," the everyman and woman, regular Johns, Janes, and all between. The genre takes deep and recurrent pleasure in raising the zombie types, so that the viewers get the game of spotting the shambling incarnation of "what they were before": 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 metropoles 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 literalized 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 subject[34], 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.

To be clear, if recent zombie films have involved a certain betrayal of the Romero trajectory, that Romero trajectory – and with it, the dominant line of zombie thought – is itself a betrayal of a history that could have been. This is the lost heritage of those *forced* to work, raised from the dead to do the compulsory bidding of a master. Yet this "betrayal" registers a powerful shift that's ultimately faithful to the core of the voodoo-inflected zombie model. The particularity of that nightmare form is distinctly postcolonial, a deep existential horror of being a slave still or once more, even after death, and the recognition that relations of domination and subordination have distinct faces: *someone* is doing this to *me*, particular actions had to be taken by that individual in order to control me as the hollow remnant of an individual. Power is personal, and so too the antagonism on which it uncertainly rests.

The zombie film, from Romero on, derails this particular emphasis on forced labor, and with it, the closer connection of the zombie and the laborer, in favor of an emphasis on compulsory consumption.[39] Yet in doing so, it nails something else. Not that class antagonism and its attendant anxieties are "about" consumption now: those fears are the underbelly of an older period, of postwar boom and new sectors of society starting to purchase in ways never before available to them. Rather, if the later films symptomatically capture something of the particular anxieties of the emergent post-Fordist/post-capitalism's-golden-years period, it has to do with those relations of domination. It approaches, however darkly, an awareness that the problem of the age is no longer the horror of being controlled by a discernible master but the indecipherability of those relations of domination, the lack of discernible masters at whom to aim. While the voodoo-inflected zombie film recoils at the thought of being forced to assume a direction dictated by your master, the Romero mode remains troubled by *lack* of direction: *What if I'm doomed to not get anything done, other than some reprehensible cannibalism, and worse, what if there's no one I can blame for this?* The powerful capacity of the zombie film to approximate totality is a consequence – if it is to be located historically at all – of 1) the violent foreclosure of organized resistance to global capitalism by counter-revolutionary state action, 2) the related dissolution of working class power and the very idea of working class identity, and 3) the emergent new planet-spanning structure of flows of finance, information, and goods. To be sure, these are trendlines that gain shape only in hindsight, but it is no stretch to see the torsion of these massive shifts in the cinema of the long '70s into the '80s. And nowhere more so in the zombie film, particularly when that doesn't simply mean films in which the undead eat the living.[40]

But to get a sense of that lost history that roils beneath the surface of the films from this period on, we look to a remarkable other beginning, the British 1966 film, *Plague of the Zombies*. If we imagine the openings and closures of different traditions and lineages, this is one that both continues and reworks the Caribbean roots of earlier zombie productions (*White Zombie, I Walked with a Zombie*) while also blazing a path that was not to be followed: overlapping modes of production, the literal return of the postcolonial repressed brought home to solve labor shortages, and a peculiarly British awareness of decorum, class, and general nastiness towards others. We are speaking of a film, after all, in which zombies work as tin miners.

Released two years before *Night of the Living Dead*, it shares little with that genre-forger. It's a period piece in brilliant color, complete with cadmium paint blood, diabolical squires, and the other trappings of the Hammer Studios films in that period (recognizable actors, loads of cleavage, an insistence on telling fully fleshed-out narratives, even while they collapse under the weight of their own contradictions). It is not a "siege" film, thereby lacking the spatial ordering of inside barricading/outside threat. And most crucially, it features non-

accidental zombies that require the active efforts of individuals: there is no zombie holocaust here, no threat of it spreading beyond the small town.

To summarize very briefly: Sir James, a retired professor of medicine, receives a letter from his ex-pupil, Peter, telling him that strange things are going on in his Cornish village. Sir James and his daughter Sylvia go to the town, and it becomes increasingly apparent that the vague plague is in fact the work of voodoo, a skill picked in Haiti up by Squire Hamilton, who rules over the area with an occult-ring bedecked fist. Conditions in his tin mine had become too dangerous to convince laborers to work there, hence he has started killing off and resurrecting members of the working class to employ as shambling corpses who require a lot of whipping to get any work done. Things go from bad to worse: Peter's wife Alice is killed, and Sylvia falls under the voodoo command of Hamilton only to be saved from becoming a (presumably) virgin sacrifice after her father and Peter burst in at the last moment. The three escape, as the zombies catch on fire (their voodoo dolls have been burned elsewhere), kill their controllers, and the tin mine explodes.

From the start, *Plague* develops a world of barbed pleasures, of getting to respond to your daughter's exhortations with, "I don't know why I put up with you at all. I should have drowned you at birth." Unlike the sadism of false necessity, this is a world in which antagonisms remain conversational, with each character hell-bent on not giving others the satisfaction of feeling that their satisfaction matters. That is, of course, with the exception of the class hatred on which the film turns, posing a striated world of landed aristocracy, non-landed but quite comfortable aristocracy, upper-middle class educated doctors trying their hand at village life, the various government and police functionaries of the town, the farmers and working class, colonial exports brought to serve as butlers and "voodoo drummers," and, finally, the tin miner zombies. (One should ask, in all seriousness, how the film

positions the last two categories, the black servants and the zombies, in terms of who is afforded more respect.) Yet while the film makes very apparent this hierarchy, it cannot – at least on the surface – deal with its implications without fleeing into a certain language of transhistorical human nature and of evil. Consider the early exchange between Sir James and Sylvia, after Sylvia has witnessed, with great displeasure, the goons of Hamilton hunting a fox.

SIR JAMES: "Men have always hunted."

SYLVIA: "For food, yes, not for bloodlust."

At that point in the film,[41] we are intended to side with Sylvia, in supposing that there is indeed something qualitatively different here. Yet this difference is not that of new historical forms of cruelty and micro-barbarism. Rather, it is coded as a throwback to a blood-dimmed pastoral of aristocratic rule, incontrovertible laws, and superstition. If there is an explicit arc to the film, it is the movement toward Sir James' position away from that of Sylvia: men kill because that's what they do, but there are some who are pathological in the way they do, insofar as they can be seen to combine bloodlust with greed. And they do so because they have missed the news about the Enlightenment and the solid rationality of the British middle class: they are brutes and haughty elites, superstitious fools and sadist perverts. The most explicit formations of class antagonism function in this way, as a battle between modernity and the bastions of country life. When Peter refuses – because he is unable – to give the villagers a satisfactory account of just what the hell is going on, he couches it in terms of refusing to betray his principles of scientific rationality: to give them a lie to appease them just wouldn't be "good enough." To which, in a moment that would likely elicit a cheer from not a few readers, one of the "working class" men responds, "*You're* not good enough for us!" However, the champions of local custom hardly fare better from our perspective. As given in the film, the range

of their positions runs on an attenuated continuum from sullen anger and the inability to question the social structure of the feudal/pastoral, to the canny sadism and calculation of those in positions of power, well aware that the world is changing but equally aware that capitalizing on it requires an insistence on preserving the status quo. As we are reminded, "This isn't London," and it's hard to grasp this as anything other than a condemnation. That said, similarly to Lucio Fulci's brutal masterpiece, *Don't Torture a Duckling* (1972), *Plague* is largely about a battle between "modernity" (London/science) and "backwardness" (Cornish village/superstition). But given the fraught intersections between the two positions, and the violence that consequently emerges, neither option seems worth saving or defending.

What the film approaches, but remains unable to fully comprehend, is the particularly capitalist – and distinctly not retrograde – nature of the wrongdoing. To be sure, *Plague* paints a world in which that edifice of landed gentry and all its social codes still has sway. But it's out of sync with the progress toward industry: the voyage to the Cornish village is a voyage to a backwater, an earlier organization of feudal life confronted with the peculiar new horrors of capitalist accumulation. (In this case, the grinding horror of knowing that just because a job is too dangerous for workers doesn't mean that workers will not be forced to do it.) If one of our preoccupations here is the question of combined and uneven development/apocalypse, of overlapping regimes of production/catastrophe, *Plague* captures this out of the corner of its roaming eye. Literalizing all those vague allegories of undead labor, of the black magic of drawing forth value from nothing, of undermining the natural order in the name of profit, Hamilton's "disgusting" enterprise is an oblique, parodic freeze-frame of a moment in the unfreezing of capital via advanced techniques, imported from afar and brought home to mine the heart of the empire.

This first becomes evident in the assumed opposition between science and superstition. In the bravely immoral new world of Hamilton, rational calculations of profit margins and labor affordability turn to esoteric, "magical" means. It is the scientific application of non-scientific techniques: even Sir James, reading up on voodoo methods in the priest's library of occult volumes, declares, "It's all clearly scientifically stated." The film differs from the majority of "men of science vs. supernatural occurrence" horror movies, in which the enterprise of Enlightenment critical thought is abandoned in the face of what cannot be explained, complete with the requisite invocations of faith and the failure of those men of science to adequately become men of action, to stop theorizing and just pull the trigger. Conversely, *Plague* is an indeterminate zone, and the problem of the zombies is that they are *not* supernatural: they are the result of hard work and ingenious arcane methods brought to bear on a ruthless drive to reopen that abandoned tin mine. Hamilton preserves his status as the squire of the region by adopting fully the mechanisms of that new social structure which will displace him. In struggling to cling to the vestiges of authority granted by feudal order, he overleaps the logic of that order.

Of course, he keeps this all quite literally underground. For he is the emergent product of a mode of domination in which nothing is sacred, a saturnine hack Nietzschean who insists on raising the dead only when the living become too expensive. A moral debate between science and superstition matters not at all. It is at that point, when the cost and difficulty of obtaining labor "scientifically" (a calculation of wages, resources, proto-industrial reserve army, etc) as an extension of the feudal mode that Hamilton turns from science, at least in its Western conception. When you can no longer squeeze a profit from your workers, the point is not to squeeze harder. It is to change the nature of the work. To change the nature of the workers, of the structure of exploitation itself.

And change this he does. Not however, because the workers are technically dead and hence mindless slaves. (As we see, they require a fair amount of coercion – i.e. constant whipping – and remain capable of striking back when their moment comes.) Rather, because his enterprise represents a radical innovation in the shape of the colonial enterprise, folded back upon itself. Free labor is no longer to be extracted from the colonies by the intellect, will, and brute force of its colonizers. Rather, the colonial heritage comes home to roost: the repressed truth of empire returns to corrupt and innovate its tired home market. Black plagues strike indeed, but from afar. In short, the innovation – and perhaps the underlying horror – is not just "how horrible to be killed and brought back to life as a slave" but: what if our past is never forgotten? Not remembered by historians or marked into very landscape and bodies of the colonies, but smuggled back in, dark knowledge too powerful to be lost and too tempting for capitalism to ignore.

To be more specific: it is *black* knowledge, wielded by a white man. The racial composition of the film – and its portrayal of value creation – needs to be considered. A rich white squire left England to travel abroad. In Haiti, he was somehow educated in the arts of voodoo. (Foreign currency opens a number of surprising doors.) He returned to find his father dead, and the stable hold on the position of landed aristocracy in crisis. Worse, the rich vein of tin running below his lands could not be mined; the white townspeople refused to engage in that work. They rejected the equation of compensation offered for work that would probably kill them. Hamilton, then, employs Haitian drummers (and, in one of the more compelling minor roles, a black butler) to aid him in the rites which kill, raise, and control the townspeople. Here, however, is the crucial question. In what way is it economically advantageous to create zombie laborers? (And moreover, zombie laborers out of those same white villagers who turned down the work in the first place?) The film

seems to say: obviously, because they are mute slaves who work for free, they just ceaselessly mine and turn a profit. But in one of those remarkable moves in which what the film is "about" and what actually happens become unmistakably divergent, it becomes clear that maintaining an army of undead miners is a ton of work, particularly for wannabe overlord Hamilton. (What also becomes apparent throughout the film is that the only real reason for him to be doing all this is because he quite enjoys it, that he gets off on being "beyond morality," putting on his voodoo mask and robes, and mess around in graveyards at night.) He doesn't just dig up corpses that come to un-life to work for him. No, he has to find a way via clumsy subterfuge to cut each future zombie, surreptitiously gather a bit of that blood, perform complicated rituals, wait for the "plague" death of the individual, and dig him or her up. And it doesn't stop there.

In the establishing shots of the tin mine, we notice two things. First, the zombies require a lot of whipping to keep moving. Even though it is the sadistic stooges of Hamilton who do the whipping, they don't seem particularly to be enjoying it, as we might imagine, asserting their position in the hierarchy of masters. They seem genuinely worn out from constantly trying to goad the shambling dead into action. And when the zombies do "work," it seems startlingly ineffective, some pathetic approximation of human labor. Raising the hammer weakly to let it fall. They may work for free, but they surely don't work very well.

Second, this would be fine if we imagined a real horde of them, hundreds of fumbling, ineffective, rotting hands pulling shreds of tin from the earth. But Hamilton's tin mine is woefully understaffed, with no more than fifteen to twenty of these workers. And hence we can only ask: how does he turn a profit? The presence of the Haitian drummers and butler immediately raise the seeming obvious solution, exporting cheap labor from afar. If the townspeople are not willing to work in the mine, Hamilton surely knows that there are others who would throw

themselves – or more realistically, be thrown – into this situation at the prospect of escaping crushing poverty and famine. The other solution, again more obvious than it appears, is to make the mine safer. Put in some structural reinforcements, draw workers back with minimum wages and the assurance of non-collapse, and start drawing tin from the earth at a rate far faster than that of your "free" labor. Put your very able-bodied thugs to work not whipping zombies or digging up corpses, but mining some tin themselves. And if living humans won't work there, consider not just inhuman labor but non-human labor: the shadow of the real historical development, of automated machinery, looms large over this film.[42]

If there is an answer to this question, it is in part simply that it wouldn't be this kind of film without this intersection of the occult, the murderous, the witty class-based barbed jokes, the lust and loss. In short, it couldn't be a horror movie, and that was what Hammer did consummately well. And yet, we need to clarify what *kind* of horror movie. And more precisely, what is the horror that the film purports to be about? We know what kind of horror movie it is, in a way: lightly bloody, pseudo-surreal, atmospheric, one that splits between a whole lot of carefully scripted talking and moments in which one cannot talk, the voiceless shock of watching your wife die a second time. In this way, it is a horror movie with intended scares every so often (the seemingly dead man threw down her corpse! Sir James just cut off her head! Hamilton is about to rape/stab her!), with a general atmosphere of creeping unease.

But what about the horror it depicts, rather than the terror/unease it hopes to provoke in us? First, the horror of everyday relations in which minor exceptions merely cut away the fat to show the brutality beneath. Like the other Hammer (and, in a sense, the Romero-inflected zombie lineage) films, equal stress is placed on the problems caused by the undead and by those who have to deal with them yet who are capable and

willing to inflict serious harm of their own.

Second, the horror of the "natural order" being disturbed, that doing this with corpses goes against nature and disturbs the peace of the dead. Yet as a character in the film wonders: "Peace ... what is that?" And further, what is so wrong about any use of the dead? We should briefly interrogate this attachment, even from within a framework of the capitalist reproduction of life and wealth. For we could easily imagine a form in which we wouldn't care, in which we would happily sell our posthumous labor. That is, if we were properly remunerated for it. This is the true problem lurking behind the anxiety of meddling with the natural order of things. In a conservative form: if I'm not getting paid, there's no way I'm working for someone else. And in a radical form: if we refuse work, if we refuse to accept a system in which I should put myself at risk for minor recompense, we also refuse to be brought in against our will, black magic-tricked into participation. In short, the seething anger at the prospect of not having a choice. The true underbelly of "freely selling one's labor," the realization that it has been a non-choice from the start.

And out of this anger something bursts through, intermittent at first before truly exploding at the end. Its first real expression is not one of labor betrayed, at least not in the form of masculine mining labor. It is an expression of desire that the staid middle class-ness of the film's world cannot fathom.

Peter's wife Alice, voodoo-seduced and killed by Hamilton, is to join his dead work force. (A rather odd plot conceit, given that the miner-zombies are resolutely male and that when he gets Cynthia in his clutches, his interest seems primarily in threateningly molesting her before pulling a sacrificial knife. We might question just what he has in mind and the ways in which this indicates how much Hamilton does these things for pleasure and the reassurance of knowing that he can.) When Peter and Sir James interrupt her disinterring by Hamilton and his masked

crew, they witness her skin and hair go gray before she rises. And the walks, with a look of direct lascivious lust, and the proper graveside smile of one who has knowledge of other horizons, the likes of which have no place in this film about men and the things they enjoy talking about. If there is a return of the repressed here, it cannot be separated from this instance as easily as her head is cleft from her body.

For as before, the question is one of apocalyptic *fantasy*. And this should be stressed in its particularity. *Fantasy*, in that it is a mode of narrative that consists of frozen captures: it naturalizes a story out of irreconcilable instances. It is a way of organizing desire[43] so that it can produce the appearance of approaching what it "wants" without ever having to get it, without having to confront the shock of drive's blind repetition. For what are all these films and cultural objects, political theories and ideologies if not series of crystallized desires, ordered to avoid the real apocalyptic confrontation with the anxiety of the same, of realizing that the punch-line has been out in the open from the start? Hence, to speak of *return* and *repressed* is misleading, for these things never left. Shoved to the side, caught at the edge of our vision, perhaps, but only because we so resolutely turn from them, again and again.

And in this case, none more so than the colonial past repurposed in *Plague*, a bloody, teeming site of experimentation and innovation, brought back to break the impasses of stagnant capital. But like the attempts to manage and control these pasts, fantasies slip and fail, symptoms overwhelm, and the never-left comes back wrongly. It's just a matter of time before your undead miners get their shit together. Here the occasion is perhaps an accident (the burning of the voodoo dolls that preserves their control), but what happens is striking. Because when the technics of control and animation are destroyed, the dead don't just go back to being dead. We might imagine that the destruction of the instruments of plague, the willful sickness that put them to death

to put them to work, would be the end of the zombies, now just lifeless corpses in an abandoned mine. But no. The plague persists and turns back on its source. The zombies, some on fire in psychic bonds with their voodoo dolls, swarm and attack their whipping overlords. It is a plague that cannot be separated from its victims: they are nothing but the embodiment of this sickness to be given back, in full ferocious rage, to all who have capitalized on it.

And so the film ends consumed in flames, consuming the site of their condemned labor. In the particular history that could have been, of which *Plague* is the outpost, the zombie film writes the full apocalyptic obscenity and frivolity of this scenario: you are raised from the grave to perform the work of digging the grave of the world that brought you back. Yet we should stress this is no impossible imagining relegated to schlock horror. However hyperbolic, this is the plague of capitalism. The point is to learn how to give it back. Following Italian Marxist Mario Tronti, we begin to grasp that the development of capitalism is not a story imposed from above, of new technologies and modes of accumulation and circulation, of a constant drive forward against which workers struggle, like harpooning a leviathan that drags us forward and casts us off.[44] For Tronti, capitalist development must be understood from below: it is because workers struggle and refuse to freely give their power to production, that capitalism develops. It innovates, becomes stronger, more flexible, precisely because workers resist the world and wages it offers them. Class antagonism – and its expressions in riotous moments and long grinding struggle, in the gulf between bourgeois ideology and proletarian theory – is not the secondary consequence of the drive to profit. It is the motor that drives the whole ungodly enterprise forward. And as this trajectory of films shows us, when the condemned and damned, plagued and unwanted begin to act in concert, when hell isn't just full but mined for its innovations, the dead won't just walk the earth.

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