

## IT IS US WHO ARE THE DEAD The Living Dead as a Walking Mirror

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In the opening shots of *Shaun of the Dead*, by Edgar Wright, an intelligent comedy ignored by Spanish cinemas, a procession of sleepwalkers performs an everyday dance to the sound of the lounge tune *Sunny Delights* by the British band I Monster. Before the first zombie (strictly speaking) even makes an appearance, this prelude makes it clear that in our world of iPods, supermarket checkout queues and lives held in suspended animation at the bus stop, we all are all zombies to some degree or other. This was the inevitable conclusion that the genre would arrive at from the moment George A. Romero, the father of the living dead as the archetype of modern horror, turned the resurrected legions in *Dawn of the Dead* in 1978, his brilliant sequel to *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), into the mirror of consumerist inertia, voracious and insatiable even after brain death.

In Wright's film, a happy echo of the TV series *Spaced* (1991-2001), the zombie plague also serves as a pretext for a critical portrayal of our contemporary culture of narcissism, in which the private realm always wins out over the collective sphere. In the first part of the film, while the TV news reports on the increasingly apocalyptic situation, the characters remain so engrossed in their day-to-day concerns that they pay no heed to the problem. In a sense, *Shaun of the Dead* anticipates what *Cloverfield* (2007), Matt Reeve's film that the producer J.J. Abrams converted into powerful hype, tries to tell us: that the subject has already become inadequate for decoding catastrophe in terms of collective disaster, expressing it instead as a minor apocalypse of the feelings. In both films, the action is driven by sentiment and the fantastic is reduced to mere context. These are not tales of survival but of emotional redemption, of reconciliation: perhaps what counts is not so much about saving your skin as dying with a clear conscience and a heart at peace. A trend, in short, in keeping with that ego culture fuelled by the blogosphere, in which everyone's private little anxieties achieve (or strive for) global resonance.

*Shaun of the Dead* also dares to create a comic scene out of what remains latent in all orthodox (and serious) explorations of the cinematic archetype of the living dead: in order to cross an area swarming with zombies, at a certain point, the main characters resort to the strategy of acting like zombies themselves. What Wright does not make explicit is that the characters themselves already were, in a sense, the living dead. In other words, perfectly adapted to present times.

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The horror genre usually draws a clear distinction between the zombie of Haitian folklore and the living dead as reinvented by Romero. Yet the two varieties of undead may be related in more ways than one. According to David J. Skal, author of *The Monster Show. A Cultural History of Horror*, zombies of the first kind were used as a political metaphor in fantasy films as early as the 1930s: the zombies of Victor Halperin's film *White Zombie* (1932) raised the spectre of the rationing queues at the height of the Great Depression. This dimension of the zombie in those difficult times did not escape Katherine Hill's attention, film critic at that time for a San Francisco newspaper, who commented that they did not seem to mind doing overtime. In *White Zombie*, which boasts among other qualities that of being the first zombie film in history, they were employed quite literally as cheap (or rather, free) labour in the sugar industry. In other words, they were the proletariat in the hands of a vampire-like power, to which, fittingly, Bela Lugosi lent a Transylvanian face and voice.

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Fantasy film has no room for tautology: a monster is never just a monster, but always the echo of a collective fear or the metaphor for a shared, contemporary angst. George A. Romero gave birth to the zombie as a modern archetype, but its characteristic traits did not emerge out of the blue. Richard Matheson's novel *I am Legend* (1954) has been an acknowledged source of inspiration, although Romero may have been unaware at that time of just how prophetic this model would appear to be about the direction the archetype would take in his hands. Matheson's post-apocalyptic vampires constitute the stage leading up to the evolutionary leap that would replace mankind: the so-called hero of the novel, Robert Neville, ends up being the monster of the tale, the exception to the rule, who cannot be accepted by the majority and hence must be exterminated.

The first film adaptation of Matheson's novel—*The Last Man on Earth* (1964) by Sidney Salkow and Ubaldo Ragona—provided the iconography that inspired Romero in his *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the key film that legitimised the zombie as an archetype once and for all, but in which, nevertheless, the significance of the monstrous still remained undetermined. There was talk—possibly rightly so—of the film as a reflection of the collective tension sparked by the Vietnam War, but perhaps it was not until the sequel that the political sense of the zombie as an image of the contemporary subject acquired its full import: the living dead are not the Others, but the premonition of our own immediate future. Or the echo of our own fundamental social structure.

*Diary of the Dead* (2007), Romero's fifth film dedicated to the zombie archetype, puts a new spin on the subject: an exercise in the horror-vérité of the YouTube era, the movie recycles the living dead as victim-spectacle within a culture of narcissism that, if you will, is the opening chapter in the history of post-humanity (or post-humanism).

In contrast with the aristocratic manifestations of Evil, the zombie, commonly positioned on the far left of the fantasy imaginary, has evolved as a flexible metaphor: just recently Joe Dante turned it into the putrid reappearance of an awkward memory in his “Homecoming” episode (2005) of the TV series *Masters of Horror*. Shortly before that, the Briton Andrew Parkinson had slipped it into the hyperrealist parameters of the films of Ken Loach, in *Dead Creatures* (2001). It comes as no surprise that the archetype has also drawn the attention of Robin Campillo, scriptwriter of *Time Out* and regular editor for the socially engaged Laurence Cantet: in his début as director, *Les Revenants* (2004), released in English as *They Came Back*, he explores the theme as an economic and social problem.

In many ways, all these contemporary rereadings of the living dead are closely related to a drama that does not, strictly speaking, belong to the fantasy genre: *J'Accuse!* (1938; I Accuse), the anti-war epic directed by Abel Gance and a new version of his silent film of the same title shot in 1919, in which he added an eccentric supernatural finale. At the end of the film, his main character, a survivor from the First World War who has become an inventor, manages to revive soldiers who died at the front, most of them played by actual members of the Union des Gueules Cassées, soldiers wounded in the line of duty. The deformed faces of these war veterans was in keeping with the iconography of the horror films of the time made by Universal and represented a radical shift in the spectacle of monstrosity: the monster became a potential mirror for every viewer. The living dead were thus incarnated for the first time as a metaphor for that which any new order wants to exclude from the social equation: the guilty burden of every state at peace. The soldiers who died in Iraq and demand their right to vote in “Homecoming” are the natural descendants of the war ghosts in *J'Accuse!*

While not explicitly related to the archetype of the living dead, the Japanese film *Pulse* (2001) by director Kiyoshi Kurosawa presented an idea picked up by subsequent contributions to the zombie genre: regarded by French critics as the Antonioni of the new Japanese horror cinema, Kurosawa shows how, in our sedentary lives, staring at computer screens, the difference between the living and the dead is almost irrelevant. In *Pulse*, a website that shows real suicides filmed by webcam becomes both a centre of attraction and a source of infection. Through the computer screen, the world of the dead infects that of the living, since the living have stopped being alive and have become what the Lacanian Slavoj Žižek terms the “residual organic element” of existences that have crossed over to the other side of the looking glass, transferring their cognitive content to the virtual realm. In other words, the realm of the immaterial, of the spectral.

In the credits of the remake of the unavoidable *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), directed by Zack Snyder in 2004, a suggestive, almost subliminal, association is made between the indiscriminate irrational anger of the living dead and the suicidal nature of Islamic terrorism: a shot of devout Muslims praying in the direction of Mecca appears amid the cocktail of images that form a picture

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of chaos, to the sound of an apocalyptic song by Johnny Cash. The living dead thus add a new signification to their polysemic nature: in some ways, the zombie is al-Qaeda.

It is hardly a coincidence, therefore, that the zombie invasion should figure as a leitmotiv of so many flash mobs, often convened for the purpose of high-spirited anti-consumerist activism. In contrast, though, it is curious that zombies should serve as nothing more than an exercise in style for Danny Boyle in *28 Days Later* (2002): *28 Weeks Later* (2007), the sequel directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, demonstrates that, sometimes, a spin-off can go where the original falls short by presenting the zombie (or his viral likeness) as the one who is most painfully alive in the dead time of reconstruction and new world orders.