

## **Unconscious Consumption:**

### **Anatomy of Zombie Life<sup>1</sup>**

Jaime Cuenca Amigo

The modern zombie, as characterised by George A. Romero, is a lethal machine whose sole purpose is to consume fresh human flesh. That which distinguishes it from any other creature can be described using the expression ‘unconscious consumption’. In this essay, I shall develop this argument and attempt to show its surprising validity as one of the central traits of our way of life. With regard to the physical characteristics of zombies and their patterns of behaviour, I base myself on *The Zombie Survival Guide* (hereinafter *ZSG*) by Max Brooks; in my interpretation of the modern conditions of life, I shall follow above all the work of Zygmunt Bauman.

From the moment zombies are reanimated, they busy themselves with consuming human flesh. Their limited intelligence seems to prevent them from engaging in any activity other than wandering aimlessly and attempting to eat every human being they come across. Zombies are consumers, above all, but with some very particular characteristics: theirs is a voracious and compulsive consumption, a primary (and single) urge that determines their conduct to the point of excluding any other pattern of behaviour. Films have repeatedly shown how the bonds of family or friendship are incapable of checking zombies’ compulsion to consume. Secondly, their consumption is not indiscriminate: zombies eat fresh meat (in other words, the flesh of the living or of recently dead corpses), preferably human. Flesh that has begun to putrefy is rejected, explaining why they do not attack each other. The third characteristic that defines zombies is uselessness. They are reanimated cadavers and hence have none of the functions of living organisms. Their respiratory and digestive systems are completely pointless: they continue to breathe and eat ceaselessly, yet this is of no physical benefit to them since their bodies are incapable of regenerating themselves.

We too are consumers. We live in a society that demands from all its members the capability and the will to consume. Consumerism has spread beyond the narrow confines of the shopping centre and has come to shape our entire lives. Accordingly, Bauman (2001) states that, whatever we do, we behave as full-time consumers. Our whole life is a constant choice between various seductive offers that promise to make us unique, genuine, happy. We are constantly constructing our identity through the wide range of options which, thanks to consumerism, are all open to us

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bar one: the option not to consume. This is, therefore, a compulsion no less voracious or absolute than that of the zombie.

This omnipresent choice of various consumer options must, moreover, be continuously renewed, since its driving force is not the satisfaction of particular needs but the desire for new experiences. The drive for the unknown or more intense experiences can never achieve a lasting state of rest, because all that is needed to set it in motion is for the options for consumption to be new. Thus, we demand of our commodities the same degree of freshness that the zombie seeks in its prey. The slightest sign of ageing makes these objects incapable of assuaging our compulsion to consume, just as any trace of putrefaction taints flesh in the eye of the zombie. If we are desperate in our search for newness, it is because we are equally desperate in our flight from ageing, which is, when all is said and done, the human condition. Zombies also flee from their condition, which is death, and shun in what they consume the signs of putrefaction that betray its presence.

Together with voracity and freshness, we pointed out a third trait of zombie consumption, its uselessness. The eating of flesh by zombies does not fulfil its natural purpose: to nourish. Neither does our consumption fulfil its intended purpose. However, this is not a flaw but the very manner in which consumerism operates. Consumer society legitimises itself by promising to satisfy human desires, but can only maintain itself by never fulfilling them entirely. The inability of consumption to truly lead to personal realisation is, as Bauman explains (2005), the very premise of its continuity.

The most typical quality of zombies ever since their Haitian origins is their lack of consciousness. In his radical transformation of zombies, George A. Romero respected this trait. How is it possible, then, to reconcile seemingly intentional behaviour—an attack—with a complete lack of consciousness? The *ZSG* explains this apparent mismatch on the grounds of instinct: the compulsion to consume human flesh is imprinted in zombies like an instinct that cannot be altered, qualified or denied in any way. Thus, this lack of consciousness seems to reveal another distinctive feature. In the first place, it indicates that the behaviour of zombies is not a product of their will (perverse or otherwise). Secondly, their actions are not the outcome of any kind of rational planning. The *ZSG*, for example, states that zombies hunt in a random manner.

Can it be said that the consumer's behaviour is involuntary? Is it not true that the shopping centre presents itself as the most convenient place to acquire anything we might desire? The consumer not only has access to an almost unlimited array of goods and services but can, moreover, in every instance choose from a wide range of companies that compete on price and quality. There is only one forbidden option and that is to quit this arena of free choice. In other

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words, one cannot choose not to choose. The incapability to consume, deliberate or otherwise, leads to a loss of the means required to construct your individual identity and to achieve social approval. The very act of consumption cannot, therefore, be regarded as the outcome of a conscious and voluntary decision on the part of the individual but instead as the expression of an internalised obligation, of a compulsion.

As to what to consume, the individual has, in principle, complete freedom of choice: nobody will try to prevent him from deciding on whatever *appeals* most to him. This very choice of words, however, reveals that the criteria on which his decision is based are loaded. The consumer is constantly on the receiving end of messages that attempt to influence his decision by giving precedence to certain factors over others. Swift, impulsive and thoughtless consumption is favoured over rational planning, which is thwarted in every possible way. It is a well-known fact that all material and symbolic resources of shopping centres combine to achieve this conditioning. Medium and long-term considerations and fixed, predetermined decision-making criteria are contrary to the ideal type of consumer; desire is expected to be the sole driving force of his behaviour.

At first sight, it would seem that any kind of desire is alien to zombie behaviour. However, if we accept Bauman's proposition (2004) that desire is an impulse to absorb otherness, appropriating it through consumption, thereby eradicating the affront of its very presence (which is simultaneously attractive and repulsive), it becomes apparent that this impression is mistaken. To zombies, this otherness is represented by the living, which they attempt to absorb through consumption marked by a lack of consciousness. In other words, consumption that is involuntary and unplanned. As for us, we run from ageing, a destiny we know to be inevitable, by consuming products that are always new (that is to say, they never age) in a continuous process of compulsive and capricious choice. Our hunting pattern, as described by the *ZSG*, is no less random than that of zombies, nor is our consumption any less destructive.

The analysis of the expression 'unconscious consumption', which sums up the specific traits of zombies, reveals a significant analogy to some of the central characteristics of our own way of life. Regardless of the specific intentions of film directors, comic artists and videogame programmers who have created and spread the figure of the zombie, it certainly presents an astoundingly effective metaphor for the current conditions of existence. The zombie embodies some of the deepest fears of our society as well as some of its most shameful fascinations. We are terrified by the raging chaos that we occasionally glimpse in the order of our lives, an order based on the—unceasing and unsatisfying—consumption of the new, an order that reproduces itself with the efficiency of the viral epidemics that structure the plot of the latest works in the zombie genre. The morbid attraction of extreme and gratuitous violence seems to respond to our search for

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an emotional thrill capable of jolting us out of the profound apathy that we have been plunged into by the consumerist apotheosis of uniformity, brought to us under the colourful banner of novelty. The zombie, a gratuitous butcher *par excellence*, offers us the immoral pleasure of this thrill, without the actual danger of real violence.

It is the monstrous projection of our selves that we contemplate with such morbid delight on the cinema screens. And it is not just 'monstrous' in the usual sense of the word, but also in the etymological sense, which goes back to the Latin *monstrare*. The zombie shows us what we are and dare not see, that part of us we do not wish to recognise as our own. If we listen to its macabre message, perhaps we can honour that most significant distinction between reality and metaphor: whereas the zombie pandemic is always presented with natural fatalism in film, the dizzying spread of our consumerist way of life is a social phenomenon. And what distinguishes the social from the natural, let us not forget, is its artifice, engendered by human beings and thus open to change by them.

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